

IN THE BELLY OF THE WHALE TO THE GOLDEN LAND  
The journey to South Africa 1880-1910

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**PART 1**

We smile when we hear the story Breakfast in London; Dinner in New York; Luggage in HongKong, but to our grandparents the idea that Boeings would follow boats would have been a far more unbelievable story. To them the terrors of the seas encountered en route to the goldene land were an unavoidable necessity .The way to Africa for all early immigrants was like Jonah, in the belly of an ocean going whale.

From 1881 when the gates to Eastern Europe were opened,a steadily increasing trickle of Jewish immigrants began to come down to South Africa. It is estimated that 40 000 Jews arrived in the Cape between 1880 and 1914.(<sup>1</sup>) The path from Lithuania to Cape Town involved a train journey through Europe, a voyage on a cargo boat to London , a stay in the Jews Temporary Shelter in Leman Street, London, and then a long journey by sea to Cape Town.

There is little in the literature about their epic journey.Official documents were not concerned with the prior travels of immigrants,and before the Immigrants Restriction Act of 1903, even their arrival at the docks were ignored by officials. Books on maritime history and archival records neglect them. Those early travellers were strangers, burdened by ignorance of the language and customs around them,and with traditions of worship and diet that made travel difficult.They have left few records,and memories are short. This article tries to fill in some of the details. Although anecdotal, the information fleshes out the bare bones of history. Material has been obtained from those informants in the Kaplan Centre Oral History Collection who had described journeys to the Cape prior to 1910, from published reminiscences whose authors had arrived in the period under review, from the unpublished minute book of the Cape Town Jewish Philanthropic Society from 1897- 1903 and from maritime history sources.

**CAPE TOWN'S JEWS AND THE HARBOUR**

Life in the small port city of Cape Town revolved around the activity in the harbour.In 1841 the first Jewish congregation was established in Cape Town.Among their members were the de Pass brothers, Aaron, an elder of the shul, and Elias, the honorary secretary, who. were shipowners, and built the first facilities for shipping repairs. They also bought the ship captured by the ALABAMA of DAAR KOM DIE ALABAMA fame.(<sup>2</sup>) Other members were merchants who were involved with supplying the boats with necessaries

The hazards of the sea were directly responsible for the establishment of the first Jewish organisation in the Cape, the Philanthropic Society of the Jewish Community of the Cape of Good Hope today's Jewish Board of Guardians. Solomon, who was secretary to the synagogue at the time, and who had already dealt with a few stranded or shipwrecked Jewish passengers, was incensed by the reports in the Cape Argus of the destruction of the barque JOSEPH SOMES in 1857. Apparently the passengers had seen the FLYING DUTCHMAN with its ghostly captain sail under their bows, had noticed his ghostly grin and had heard his ghostly chuckle. Soon after, someone dropped a lamp, but they were so demoralized by the ghostly experience that they were too scared to put the flames out properly thinking them the flames of hell.

( ) The Argus in their report stated that "no man except a Jew and an intermediate p

#### FROM LITHUANIA TO LONDON

The long journey to the land at the bottom of Africa was precipitated by poverty, pogroms, persecution and conscription. After reports filtered through to Eastern Europe, particularly Lithuania, of the gold lying in the streets of South Africa and the wealth to be picked up, an exodus began, especially by young men who were liable for military service. For these departure was illegal. Informant M.B. from the Kaplan Collection remembered that her uncle paid someone to take her father across the border during the Russo-Japanese War as he could not get a passport because he was in the army reserves. A.R. recalled his 12 year old uncle, being sent out using somebody else's name. (Later they themselves travelled with a friend's child posing as their daughter, who had died.)

In 1899 a newly arrived immigrant ( ) wrote to his wife to describe his journey from Birsztyn in Lithuania to Cape Town which

Max Sonnenberg wrote of the "journey across Europe in a rattling third class compartment, sitting up by day and night, the increasing grubbiness and the hasty meals on stations in the days before dining cars, ....before we went aboard a ship across the North Sea."

( ) The journey by cargo boat from Libau was shorter than that from Hamburg, but a

The journey by cargo boat from Libau was shorter than that from Hamburg, but as Libau was outside the Pale of Settlement, this could bring additional problems with the police. There were stories of people hiding in terror in coal berths in Libau while guards pierced the cargo with their bayonets, and of a victim who suffocated to death while hiding during a police raid.

( ) Hamburg was safer and Union intermediate steamers were sent there from London

What were the conditions like on these cargo boats? These varied but the voyage was no luxury cruise and sometimes had to be shared with ponies in the s h o a l m e .  
( ) Victor Barwin ( ) wrote a graphic description of the journey from Libau, in 1902 in

Many of the Kaplan Centre informants described their boat as a "cattleship." M.B said that there had been a pogrom the week before they left in 1907 in which all their possessions, including their clothes had been stolen. Their neighbour had hidden them in the cellar and had put them on a train. "It was like travelling like cattle all in a row, my mother and five children, until we got to Libau and from there we were put on a ship that was also like a cattle truck." S.F. described this as being a small boat where they were treated like "vilde chayas- ( wild animals), they put a barrel of salt herrings on the deck, the cooked potatoes, boiled potatoes, 'fress'(eat) -treated like animals." E.K.'s boat from Libau was also like a cattleship-"no cabins, all open and open decks...with pieces of sacking sort of separating. The food we had was just black bread, herring and cabbage." Bernard S a c k s  
( ) wrote of a five day voyage through the Baltic with "an undeviating menu of potato

If the food left much to be desired, the sleeping quarters were worse. Barwin's group had to sleep on the bare dung-covered floor. P.S. complained that the conditions were indescribable, with men, women and children having to lie huddled together on bare mattresses without any hygienic covering or sheets. R.I. remembered hammocks on his boat. M.I. recollected sleeping in some sort of bunk on the boat from Libau-"my head against somebody's feet and my feet against somebody's head and my mother and her cousin could not take it down there-they slept on the decks. That smell! All humanity crowded together."

Finally the immigrants reached London, where officials would meet them at the docks and march them to the Jews' Temporary Shelter in 84 Leaman Street, Whitechapel where they would remain until they could be put on the boats to South Africa. The immigrants seem to have uniformly good memories about the cleanliness, the caringness, and the good food they received there. M.B. described it in wonder as "a building with a kitchen and everything beautifully kept and we had two bedrooms and our food used to come up on a lift," R.A. who came out later was fussy and refused to drink her tea because the cup was cracked !

## **PART 2**

### **FROM LONDON TO CAPE TOWN**

From London, the immigrants would be put onto ships bound for Cape Town. The ships that plied that route were mainly from the two rival British companies- the Union fleet and Currie's Castle fleet, with the heavily subsidized German East Africa Company, the D.O.A.L. in competition after



( ) reports the journey of her mother on this voyage . A friend had asked her to go sh  
Four years later the SCOT was again in the news when Barney Barnato, who  
was one of the few to find gold lying on the streets, killed himself by jumping  
o v e r b o a r d .

( ) Others expressed dissatisfaction less dramatically. A passenger from the RAGLA  
Others expressed dissatisfaction less dramatically. A passenger from the  
RAGLAN CASTLE wrote to the Cape Times complaining that the 260 third class  
passengers had the use of one single bath and a request to be permitted to have  
the use of a second class bath during certain hours was refused, The ship took  
2 4 d a y s .

( ) One of the Kaplan Centre informants who travelled third class in the DOVER CA

One of the Kaplan Centre informants who travelled third class in the DOVER  
CASTLE in 1908 said that he was "put in a sort of a barn. They had three tier  
beds, one slept on the bottom, one in the middle and one on top."His younger  
brother aged 4 stayed with his mother and sister in a cabin which was much  
superior to his." For meals we used to sit down at long tables, ten or twelve of us"  
A n o t h e r

( ) remembered watching how the waiters would unroll the tablecloth for the long tab

Robert Louis Stevenson said that the difference between steerage and the other  
classes was that "in steerage there are males and females, but in the second  
cabin, passengers were regarded as ladies and  
g e n t l e m e n "

( ) The steerage conditions on the boats to America were so dreadful, that a congress

Memories of table manners seem to have been more vivid than those of  
accommodation.Many informants recoiled in horror at the table manners they  
saw among some of the Jews, which reflected a past of deprivation and  
hunger.R.A. complained "the food was not so bad, but the people! We were  
sitting down at the table to eat-herring, potatoes,- and a man took a herring, tore  
it in half and started eating it.I was ashamed to be Jewish the way they behaved  
at table.If you did not grab quickly, you did not get.One woman would take all the  
oranges.I asked the steward for a boiled egg for a sick friend, another woman  
grabbed it and said "Why must he have an egg , my husband is sick." . M.J.  
remarked that when they used to come to dinner they used to run and grab,but  
he learnt not to. A.R. said that the food would come around in bulk and those  
Jews who were gamblers would bribe the officials and get in first and take the  
best.

Their poverty was not the only problem the Jews would take to table with  
them.The observation of the commandment to eat Kosher food,made meals on a  
long voyage difficult-a condition,to which they and the boats tried to adapt in  
different ways. Some brought their own food. " Bread and tea we got on the boat,  
but the other food mother took along, in pecklach and bundles- we only lived on  
bread and potatoes.Six weeks on the water and a terrible boat and my mother

took along food for the whole time." ( ).Others would eat only those foods provided that were acceptable. H.R., who said

Religious Jewish men pray each morning wearing "tefillim" (phylacteries). S.W. remembered his older brother on board ship hiding behind a tarpaulin in embarrassment while laying tefillim. Another problem was in keeping the Sabbath.The same respondent remembered all the Jewish women lighting candles the first Friday night on board. His mother lit hers in the basin as the ship was unsteady.The steward, under orders,blew them all out. The following Shabbat only a few women tried to light candles. These were also blown out. The last Shabbat on board his mother was the only one who persevered and lit her candles.

The special requirements necessary for the week of Passover made eating on board very difficult. Some brought along matzos, others would be given matzos by the Shelter.One man who travelled third class on the DOVER CASTLE in 1908 remembered that on the first two days of Passover the Jewish passengers were allotted a section of the third class kitchen as well as new pots, new plates and new utensils They were also given matzos and kosher meat with the stamp of Dr. Adler, the Chief Rabbi of England. They were provided with trestle tables in a certain part of the hold of the ship which was empty and the approximately seventy Jews, men, women and children celebrated two seders. It is highly likely that they would have compared their flight from Eastern Europe with the exodus from slavery in Egypt to freedom over three thousand years before.

It is not known whether the treatment given on the DOVER CASTLE was customary or exceptional.Certainly the Jewish custom must have been of some importance to the shipping lines.There is a letter preserved among the Cape Town Jewish Philanthropic Society papers from Poppe. Schunhoff and Guttery, agents for the D . O . A . L ( ) which had enclosed letters of appreciation that had been sent to the captain of the

Apart from religious problems, the Jewish immigrants also had cultural problems caused by ignorance of the language and the way of life around them.In the mornings the waiter would ask J.T.if he had finished his porridge.He thought `finish' meant `fish' so he would sit and wait for his fish to arrive.He also remembered being given grapes and bananas at Madeira-the grapes he ate, but the bananas he threw overboard because he did not know they were edible. Twelve year old P.S. sat opposite a Yiddish man who was making his second journey to the Cape. He would watch him carefully at meal times, and when the waiter then approached him,would point to the identical item on the menu,which he was unable to read. Years later, travelling on a train to Kroonstad, he sat opposite an Englishman at breakfast, and for the first time realized that for breakfast each morning on the ship he had eaten bacon and eggs.

M.B. remembers being terrified during the 21 day journey.Her mother was

travelling with five children and they were the only Jewish family on the ship and could not communicate with anyone. They spent the journey too frightened to come down and would send M.B. who was small to "slip down the pole...wherever (she) could get in with (her) basin to get food -they used to dish up the food in big cartons, boiled potatoes, herring and all sorts of things"- which she would take up to her family. Fortunately a Jewish member of the ship's orchestra heard of their plight and would visit them daily and bring them nice things.

It is unlikely that their terror had any realistic foundation and was probably an anxiety state due to isolation at not being able to communicate, to ingrained timidity, and fear of the hazardous journey they were undertaking alone as other reports do not reveal similar feelings. Most seem to have been well cared for on the journey. Gershtater () wrote that there was at least one complaint of passengers being molested by an

There was certainly more than one complaint because the minute book of the Cape Town Jewish Philanthropic Society does record () complaints of ill treatment which they had reported to the Castle Steamship Lines

#### ARRIVING IN CAPE TOWN

What were the conditions like when they landed?

The Docks they saw were smaller and closer to the city than they are today, and familiar landmarks like the Adderley Street pier have disappeared under the giant land reclamation scheme. Foreshore skyscrapers stand where boats used to be moored before. The ships of the Union Line and the Castle Line would tie up in different areas of the Alfred Basin. () and passengers would crowd the sides eagerly for their first glimpse of Table Mou

After the Cape Immigration Restriction Act of 1902, the immigrants needed to possess five pounds before being allowed to land. This was increased to twenty pounds in 1904. Jewish individuals and organisations like the Philanthropic Society were actively involved in collecting this, and in assisting immigrants regarded as "prohibited" immigrants to land. () The writer's great grandmother was also involved. Her son wrote "The poor folks :

Not all the help offered was as well-intentioned as theirs. Officials of the London Shelter would have handed the new immigrants a circular in Yiddish, warning them of "sharks"-dishonest swindlers who would prey on these unsophisticated travellers. () M.S. recalls her mother being approached by two helpful Yiddish speaking men at

Other problems dealt with by the Society were with tickets, refunds and lost baggage all exacerbated by language problems. There was lost luggage from the S.S.GAIKA, and a joiner's lost tool box from the S.S.GUELPH, They interceded

for two stowaways- one from the GAIKA was fined twenty pounds or one month by the magistrate, the other got three months He had had a ticket for the DUNOLLY CASTLE, but, as that had been full, he had caught the BRAEMAR CASTLE instead. They gave advice on how to get refunds from the Union-Castle Line, and about tickets, but could not retrieve the effects of a man who had died a

s e a .  
 () The Wandering Jew is moving on. One day they will be collecting details of life in

The Wandering Jew is moving on. One day they will be collecting details of life in the nineteen eighties. Instead of boats to Cape Town, it is now Boeings to Brisbane. Instead of the passenger arriving on the S.S. GAIKA, with his luggage mislaid on the S.S. GHOORKA it is the passenger arriving in LONDON with his luggage mislaid in LISBON. History teaches us that the more things change, the more they stay the same.

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A.A. NOTE. The informant is probably mistaken in the time taken-"six weeks on the water" is too long for the voyage from London. She is possibly combining her memories of the time of the entire journey from Lithuania to Cape Town.

NOTE This organisation was still active in C.T. in 1963-Shorten,J.R. CAPE TOWN.A RECORD OF THE MOTHER CITY FROM THE EARLIEST DAYS TO THE PRESENT. Shorten and Smith, Cape Town, 1979p,518

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