

ADAPTING TO A NEW SOCIETY-THE ROLE OF THE CAPE TOWN JEWISH PHILANTHROPIC SOCIETY c.1900

GWYNNE SCHRIRE

When the Russian gates opened to the Jews in the 1880s, Jews began to come to South Africa first in a trickle, then, by the end of the century, in a flood. They arrived at the docks penniless, homeless, jobless, friendless. They could speak no English, read no Dutch and came from a country and a culture totally different to the one that greeted them. An ability to read and write Hebrew, Yiddish and possibly Russian was no qualification in the Cape, neither was a knowledge of the Torah and the Talmud. The existing Jewish population rallied around to assist the newcomers. Hoffman, (1) the Yiddish journalist, wrote in 1884 that "most of our brothers who come there by the skin of their teeth, naked as on the day of their birth, are shown mercy by the existing Jewish settlers the moment they put their foot on the shores of Africa."

The assistance given was motivated both by feelings of compassion and charity as well as by the fear that, if attendant problems associated with immigration came to the attention of the Gentile world, the latent anti-semitic or anti-alien feelings might rock the boat of their own comfortable existence. By 1904 two dozen Jewish organizations had sprung up in Cape Town to help the newcomer to adapt to the new society (2)

The oldest of these societies is the Cape Town Jewish Philanthropic Society which was founded in 1859 to "assist stranded and shipwrecked sailors and passengers and impecunious widows:" (3) but which now assisted the impecunious immigrants instead. It is fortunate that the minute book of the Society from November 1897 to June 1903 has survived. These handwritten minutes provide interesting information about the scope and extent of the philanthropic work done by this organization during a period which covers the Transvaal Aliens Act, the Boer War and the post-war rushed influx of immigrants wishing to avoid the pending Immigration Restriction Act.

The assistance was multi-faceted and was provided by a handful of public spirited gentlemen who would meet monthly to interview clients and decide what should be done. Membership was open to anyone who had paid an annual subscription of one guinea and the committee was of twelve elected members and the minister of the Cape Town Hebrew Congregation- Rev. Bender at this period, a man who was very involved in the plight of the poor. There were sub-committees for investigating cases, finding employment and collecting subscriptions and donations.

The Society would investigate cases referred to them and would decide what assistance to provide. If women or children were involved, they would refer the case to the Ladies Association of the Cape Town Hebrew Congregation telling them what they wanted done. Even in these early days women's lib emerged- the ladies got tired of being taken for granted and refused to pay out without being consulted first. The men climbed down, decided unanimously to apologize to the ladies and promised that in future they would refer cases to the ladies to be "left in their hands to dispose of as they think best.:"

There are records in the minute book of 1318 applicants for assistance- there should be more but during the Boer War the activities of the Society petered out and record keeping was scanty. The following figures are not accurate as some secretaries provided more details than others, sometimes there might just be a fragmentary note saying "poor man-no assistance." However, where details have been provided they have been analysed- see attached tables.

The majority of people approaching the society were people looking for employment (28%), followed by those requiring financial assistance (22%) or wanting help with transport (17%). Of these 69% wanted to go back home to Russia either because they were disillusioned with the Golden Land or because they were too ill to work. Illhealth accounted for 8% of the referrals. Of help actually given, a third received financial aid (33%), work was found for a fifth (18.9%)

money was advanced to start in business or for hawkers' licences for a few (4%), while others were referred to medical services (4.6%), or to the Ladies Association or given advice.

The help provided was practical, as funds were a constant problem, and at one stage dried up altogether. Wherever possible, they tried to help the applicant to help themselves- for example providing tools to enable the applicant to earn a living for himself by practising his own trade. They provided a diamond for a glazier, a barber got a razor, scissors, stick of soap, stone and shaving brush, tinsmiths, locksmiths and carpenters got tools, tailors got cloth and shoemakers got tools and leather, Some were sent to the Railways, the Tramways, the Cold Storage Company , to hotels. Others were provided with hawker's licences and goods. One man was set up in business with one hundred eggs, another with a supply of fruit, a third with a handcart and a stock of ginger beer, another with four pounds of jewelry. The usual expenditure recorded in the minute book is one pound- one pound to someone to drive a tram with empty bottles, to buy pictures, to deal in old clothes, or to start as a newsvendor. It is strange to think that one pound could be sufficient capital to start a small business venture, but it often sufficed. Great oaks from little acorns grow.

In these days before medical aid or workmen's compensation, when poverty and TB were rampant and most immigrants were single men without the support structure of a family to care for them, sickness was a disaster. The Society provided grants for people sick or injured until they could return to work, or for "more nourishing" food. Their clients could get free medical attention and a chemist dispensed medicines for them for only one shilling a bottle. The Society also struggled to arrange hospitalization at a time of chronic shortage of hospital beds. (4)

They took turns to visit the sick in hospitals and gave strawberries, fruit and wine to patients at Somerset Hospital. If the illness proved serious, the patient preferred to return to his family in Russia than rely on the meagre resources of the local community. Man can not live on strawberries alone!

Jewish organizations have sometimes been accused of shipping their fellows home through fears of antisemitism. It has been suggested (5) that the 50 000 Jews repatriated from England between 1880 and 1934 were part of a "vigorous campaign to remove the Jewish threat from the public eye."

However it is not realized that many greeners discovered that the grass was not always greener elsewhere and wanted to go back home. A newspaper correspondent in 1903 (6) wrote home "You will see people who but recently arrived plead and beg that they should be returned to their homeland." Poverty, sickness and homesickness contributed to this desire. As a result, re-emigration always forms part of a population movement. In America the re-emigration rate of Eastern European Jews in 1882 was 29%. Later these figures declined, but they were influenced by economic factors. (7)

The Cape Town Jewish Philanthropic Society was always inundated with requests for passage money. The minutes record 160 requests to return to Europe. The ticket to England cost nine to ten guineas, the English organizations being responsible for the rest of the journey. Usually the Society would buy the ticket once the applicant had collected a specified amount towards the cost.

There were often more demands on the Society than they had funds available. Help was refused to 14% of the applicants- of these 49% were refused assisted passages to Europe and 50% were refused financial help. One applicant, a presser in delicate health, had his boat ticket hastily cancelled when he was caught wasting money on "giving entertainments."

The Society also had a running battle with the Johannesburg Helping Hand Society who kept sending their would-be-returnees down to Cape Town expecting the Cape Town Jewish Philanthropic Society to bear the expense of shipping them home. Letters and telegrams were ignored as the Johannesburg organization was as keen as the Cape Town Society to save money. Finally the Society inserted an advertisement in the Johannesburg Jewish newspaper insisting that they would give no assistance whatsoever to anyone who arrived from Johannesburg on their way to Europe.

With similar feelings, the London Jewish Board of Guardians, felt that their own generosity was being imposed upon by the Cape Town Society and complained that some of the people who had been sent to them from Cape Town to be shipped to Russia looked very healthy and fit, two had only been in Cape Town a very short time, and none had come to the Cape via England.

They threatened the Society, much as the Society had threatened the Johannesburg organization that they would not assume the liability of paying the fares of such people to the Continent, and grumbled that when the Society assumed "the charitable obligation of returning these Russians to their native country (they) should do so direct from Cape Town to the continental port nearest to their home' not to London.

The Society also helped to reunite families, and to care for widows, orphans and the old and provided matzos and wine to the poor and prisoners at Passover, even buying Yiddish books for the Yiddish speaking prisoners at the infamous Breakwater Prison.

The RULES AND REGULATION which have been preserved lists the objects of the society as affording financial assistance to Jews in distress or sickness and to find work for those in want of employment." There was at this period no central body to represent the South African Jews. Rev Bender regarded himself as their representative and used the Cape Town Jewish Philanthropic Society to play a much larger role than just these objectives.

Complaints of antisemitism which were later the province of the Jewish Board of Deputies after it was founded in 1904 were brought to them. For example they wrote to a local firm that had criticised the Jewish community for neglecting their poor, and intervened when a magistrate was felt to have treated a Jewish stowaway unduly severely. They complained to the head office of the Castle Steamship Company about an "alleged outrage on two co-religionists on board the S.S.Arundle Castle." However, by the time an answer from them finally arrived six months later, the men concerned had gone to Johannesburg so the investigation had to be abandoned, but they asked the Castle Line "to make a very searching investigation because they had had previous complaints about the harsh treatment" of Jewish third class passengers.

When changes were made in the Transvaal Immigration laws in 1896, so that Jews were turned away at their borders, the unemployment already existing in the Cape Colony was exacerbated and the demands made on the Jewish community were increased. It was the Society, as its representative, that

wrote to the London Board of Guardians, the Rabbi of Kovno and the Russian paper "The Light", to warn the Jews of the changed circumstances. This letter was not a blanket warning against emigration but advice to the would-be immigrant of the new financial requirements of the Transvaal Government. (The shrewd publisher of The Light thinking that there was money to be made from the wealthy South Africans, wrote back asking to be paid.)

It has been suggested⁽⁸⁾ that motivation for inserting the letters may have been a fear of an emerging anti-Jewish sentiment. However, although such motives may have existed, these minutes make no mention whatever of such feelings being too absorbed in their own concerns about the present financial burdens that these immigrants were placing on them to worry about possible antagonistic attitudes in the future. They were not alone in these worries. The Port Elizabeth Helping Hand Society wrote to them complaining of the "heavy calls and great tax being made upon the philanthropic societies throughout the colony through the influx of foreign Jews" and the Kimberley Hebrew Congregation complained to them that they were totally unable to cope with the demands being made upon them. The former asked them to write to London, the latter suggested that the Society send cables to the British Chief Rabbi and the London Board of Guardians on behalf of the united congregations of South Africa "entreating then to stay the emigration to this country as far as in their power." A copy of a telegram survives. It reads GREAT DISTRESS PREVALENT HERE EMPLOYMENT UNOBTAINABLE BENDER. The concern of these philanthropic societies as shown in this telegram and letter to the Light appears more rooted in economic realities than in fear of anti-alien feelings

During the Anglo-Boer War Cape Town was unwilling host to many upcountry refugees. The Mayor's Rand Relief Committee was formed to handle refugee relief. A close liason probably existed between the two organizations. The Cape Town Jewish Philanthropic Society made a contribution of fifty pounds to a special fund to help Jewish refugees recommended by the Mayor's Relief Committee to return to Europe and the Society members probably served on this committee because reports of its meetings in contemporary newspapers ⁽⁹⁾ mention the attendance of Isaacs, Liberman and Bender, all of whom were on the Cape Town Jewish Philanthropic Society committee. Rev. Bender

suggested to the Annual General Meeting of the Cape Town Jewish Philanthropic Society in 1899 that they convey their thanks to the Accommodation Sub-Committee of the Mayor's Rand Relief Committee for their consideration in allowing kosher food to be provided to the Jewish refugees. The Cape Times (10) reporting on a meeting of the Mayor's Committee three days later mentioned that "Hebrews having religious scruples" were fed at a special boarding house, the meals coming to 5s 3d per head per week, and specifying that there were 90 such persons. A year later these numbers had dropped to 11 (11) There were never many Jewish refugees maintained by the Mayor's Committee as they were "apparently maintained partly by independent Jewish relief."(12) The minutes do mention three cases that were being handled jointly with the Mayor's Committee but it is difficult to find out what this Society was doing because unfortunately at this period in history the minutes fail us. In 1897 the minutes mention 146 new cases, in 1898 106, in 1899 7, in 1900 6, in 1901 only 2!

There are detailed monthly reports until 12th February 1899. Next entry on 28th May is a cursory note that "since the last meeting less money had been expended on relief than ever before owing no doubt to the fact that applicants knowing that their cases would be investigated, were reluctant to come before the society." After that the minutes just fizzled out. Meetings were irregular and no details were given of cases, just the expenditure noted, indication that there MUST have been applicants for relief.

In April 1900 the president made the surprising comment that "nothing of importance had occurred since our last meeting" but that they should still meet from time to time (Nothing of importance- and a war going on and refugees pouring in!) This statement appears remarkable considering that two months later the president was discussing the "absolute necessity" of preventing the influx of poor Jews into the Colony and letters to the Chief Rabbi and the Jewish Board of Guardians were again dispatched. Here too economic factors rather than antisemitic fears were behind the problem because the president of the Board of Guardians in his reply informing them that he had advertised in the London Jewish papers, pointed out that the Colonial Government and the Home Government had issued similar warnings WITHOUT REGARD TO CREED , and ending that they appreciated the severe

strain to which the Society had been under because of the war and hoped that " as hostilities seem to be approaching their end you will soon perceive the dawn of a brighter state of things."

The inappropriateness of the President's statement is all the more amazing considering the cry for help the committee received six months later from Rev. Bender saying that he just could not cope with all the cases that were coming to him and that the committee must find some way of improving the methods of relief. The letter was probably also an indication that all was not well with the Society. No new blood was attracted and the same tired committee were re-elected virtually unchanged throughout the war years, despite regular appeals by the President at annual general meetings for more support, more funds, more regular meetings, better bookkeeping. The Annual General Meeting at the end of 1901 marked more than the end of war. A new committee came in, with a new secretary, the energetic, idealistic lawyer, who was later to challenge the supremacy of the Rev. Bender, Morris Alexander.

As things began to return to normal, the refugees began to filter back home, but under martial law, permits were necessary to travel. Some refugees approached the Society to help them get this permit. As permits were allocated on a quota system, and there were more Russian Jews than Russian quotas⁽¹³⁾ the Society even tried to get permits through the Russian consul. In September 1902 Lord Milner appointed the Zionist Federation to be responsible for recommending the issue of permits.⁽¹⁴⁾ After that the Society would refer the applicants to the Dorshei Zion, the Cape Town Branch.

The end of the war was like the release of a cork from a bottle. There was an explosion of pent up Jews in Europe who had left as refugees and wished to return as well as those who had been held up or prevented by the war from joining their families and who wished to go to South Africa. Between November 1902 and October 1903 3592 Jews stayed at the Jews Temporary Shelter in London en route to South Africa as compared to 832 in the same period the previous year.⁽¹⁵⁾

As the newcomers poured into Cape Town, the increase in welfare applications strained the capabilities of the Jewish welfare organizations, and

at the Society's meeting in December 1902 it was decided to approach other organizations with a view to amalgamation and the Bikkur Cholim Society and the Ponnewitzer Sick Benefit Society agreed to join with them. Representatives from these societies joined the committee of the Philanthropic Society and took an active part in assisting applicants and finding employment.

This increase in immigration at a time of post-war unemployment alarmed the gentile South African population who feared the flood of unwelcome aliens, and the Cape Immigration Restrictions Act was hastily passed. This act covered their racist and anti-semitic intentions with a liberal veneer by discriminating on the grounds of language rather than race or religion and came into force on 30.1.1903.(16) It created chaos because neither the shipping companies nor the immigrants had been given warning and the Prime Minister agreed to allow passengers to land on condition that suitable employment could be guaranteed for six months (17)

As there were now more applications for jobs than the committee could handle personally, they printed one thousand cards for the work-seeker to take with him to the prospective employer. They canvassed the various Jewish communities upcountry for jobs, and had circulars printed and distributed asking for information as to the kind of employees needed in these communities. It is to their credit that "all Jewish passengers had work found for them immediately."(18) The Society also printed one thousand circulars in Yiddish setting out the regulations under the Immigration Act for distribution in Europe and cabled the Chief Rabbi.

However, these urgent demands strained the society to the utmost. In December 1902 they had 27 new cases, compared to 15 the previous year, in January 1903 115 as compared to 11 in 1902, In February 1903 125 compared to 21, in March 1903 158 as compared to 4. Instead of monthly meetings, the committee now met three times a week to interview cases. Alexander co-opted Goldblatt, the Yiddish journalist, to serve on the committee as well.

When Jewish refugees were refused permission to disembark from the Harlech Castle, the Galeka and the Norman, the Society intervened. The Cape

Times of the 11th February 1903 reported that "the Rev. Bender and other leading local members of the Hebrew faith had immediately interested themselves in the matter" and falsely stated that they had raised the enormous sum of six thousand pounds within a very short space of time. This story carried with it antisemitic undertones of the fabled secret wealth of the Jews. The Philanthropic Society were incensed by the report and it was decided that Alexander, as secretary, was to write to the paper to contradict the report. This false report was still cabled abroad and published in London. When the Society learnt about this two months later. they wrote to London as well.

The Immigration Act finally caused an open split between Alexander and Bender about action to have Yiddish declared an European language in terms of the Act.(19) Bender trusted the goodwill of the British. Alexander did not. A typewritten letter dated 13th May 1903 has survived advising that, at the Society's committee meeting on the 18th, the writer was going to move a resolution endorsing a proposal to send a deputation to the Cape Government to ask them to amend the Act and to appoint a delegate to serve on this committee. That meeting had an unusually large turnout. The excitement considering the undercurrents in the community must have been intense. The minutes state that "there was heated discussion." It is significant that Rev. Bender was absent from that meeting. Alexander was appointed delegate.

The deputation was successful and, at the next meeting, it must have been with some degree of satisfaction that Alexander, the secretary, wrote that "Alexander reported the result of the recent deputation to the Government regarding the proposed amendment to the Immigration Act. Goldblatt proposed hearty vote of thanks to Mr Alexander for his efforts. This was unanimously agreed to." Even by Rev. Bender.

Soon after the minute book ends. Subsequent books have disappeared in the refuse of the past. It is very fortunate that this particular volume survived. It acts as a microcosm of the problems and the life of Cape Town Jewry at the turn of the century and shows that there has not been adequate recognition of the role of this society in assisting the newcomers to adapt to this new world and in acting as the representative of the Jewish community before the

birth of the Board of Deputies.

The Cape Town Jewish Philanthropic Society still exists and is the oldest Jewish welfare organisation in South Africa. Today it is called the Jewish Board of Guardians.

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All other information comes from the Minute Book of the Cape Town Jewish Philanthropic Society and related papers. My thanks go to the Archives of the University of Cape Town for allowing access, and to the ever helpful librarians.

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