

CHAPTER FOUR
JEWS – REFORMERS, REBELS, OR JUST *UITLANDERS*?
1890 - 1899

The 1890s closed with the mining industry unsure of its future and in desperate need of improved extraction techniques and increased capital if there was to be any hope of its survival (van Onselen, 2002). New technology was needed to remove gold from the unweathered sulphide ores and international investment was required to pay for the necessary labour and equipment that had become requisite for deep-level mining. In 1890 neither looked to be forthcoming and the banks and lending houses began the agonizing process of calling in loans and foreclosing on properties (van Onselen, 2002). It was into this milieu that thousands of Eastern European Jews immigrated. At the beginning of the decade the Jewish population in Johannesburg was said to be just over 2 000 and by its end Johannesburg it was home to an estimated 12 000 Jews. There were, in fact, too many Jews for the synagogue to cope with during the Sabbath services and Jewish festivals (United Hebrew Congregation of Johannesburg, 1947; Kaplan and Robertson, 1991). Given the declining economic climate there were fewer opportunities for the new immigrants and life was far more difficult for the new arrivals, at this time, than it had been for their co-religionists who had preceded them a scant year or two earlier (Krut, 1987).

Johannesburg and its surrounding townships, however, had grown significantly in size, if not in quality, from its humble mining camp days. Dennis Edwards in his Johannesburg Directory of 1890 describes Johannesburg as a town with the “severe monotony of . . . galvanised iron roofing” and having “many little shanties and mud huts” (Edwards, 1890: 5). The city had developed, to the extent that a train line existed between Johannesburg and Boksburg, bringing with the coal, so necessary for the production of gold on the Rand (Maud, 1938). Even though the town had evolved a great deal, it was still situated on a wild frontier and was plagued by a lack of water, and regular outbreaks of disease and pestilence (Leigh, 1993). At the beginning of the 1890s the city hovered on the brink, but whether it was to be of disaster or greatness could not have been predicted at this point, thus its citizens waited, uncertain of their future and desperately hoping that the promise of a new ‘El Dorado’ would become a reality. What followed was a decade of substantial economic fluctuations, the highs and lows that Johannesburg experienced during this period are diagrammatically shown on a generalized graph (Fig. 4.1).

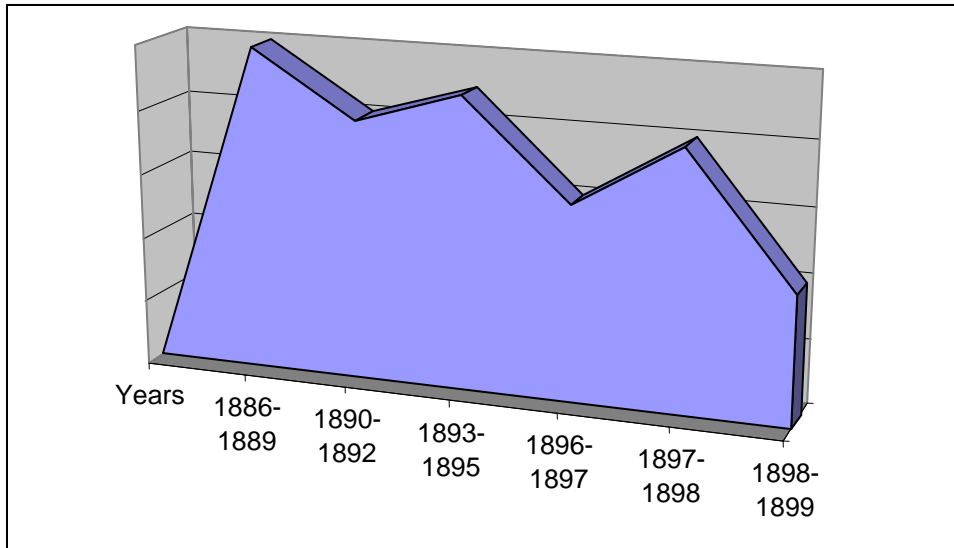


FIGURE 4.1: Generalized graph of the economic fortune of Johannesburg, 1886-1899.

Political and Economic Conditions in Johannesburg

The depression of the early 1890s was finally relieved by the adoption of the MacArthur-Forrester Cyanide Process, which was able to remove the gold from the crushed sulphide impregnated ore of the deeper levels. The process required two types of labour, highly skilled and largely unskilled. The skilled labour was required to actually manage the process, which was fairly sophisticated chemical engineering for its time. Unskilled labour was needed for the back-breaking work of drilling into the rock and hauling the ore to the surface (van Onselen, 2002). Both the new engineering techniques and the increased need for labour created a situation in which intensive capital investment was required.

The investment did finally arrive but only due to some clever financial arrangements pioneered by Wernher, Beit & Co (Richardson and Van-Helten, 1980). The system they created was called the group system, and worked by rationalizing the mining process and reinvesting capital gained from the surface mines into the new deeper-levels mines. The scheme involved creating a stock portfolio in which investors could spread their risk across the proven surface mines and the potentially profitable, but riskier, deep-level mines (van Onselen, 2002). The group system appealed to the international investors and created what Dennis Edwards called, “a mania...for stocks and shares” (Edwards, 1890: 5). By the beginning of 1894 shares in Rand mining houses were trading well, allowing many to regain their earlier fortunes. Unfortunately, by late 1895, the bottom fell out of the Johannesburg gold market when someone ‘dumped’ a large, but unspecified, number of shares on the London stock exchange causing panic amongst investors. The share prices plummeted and

forced the Rand into another economic slump (Johannesburg Stock Exchange, 1948) (Fig. 4.1).

Johannesburg may have been able to weather the economic downturn if it had not been for the actions of a few impatient men. Towards the end of 1895, a number of wealthy mineowners, often referred to as Randlords, and men with their own political agendas planned to bring down the *Boer* government. Their excuse was the disenfranchisement of the *uitlander* population. The truth was that the elite were tired of the high taxes and obstructive policies of the *Boer* government towards the mining industry. They felt that if a profit was really going to be made in the country it would not be with Kruger at the helm and thought that with a British government in charge, better dividends could be made (van Onselen, 2002). Politics and economics, however, are inextricably tied and there were men, like Cecil John Rhodes, who used the ruse to incite unrest intended to pave the way for British control. The *coup d'état* failed badly and the general populace could not believe the ridiculous daring of this small group and led a Johannesburg resident of the time to comment that “No one took the Jameson Raid seriously. It seemed like a joke that the Rhodesians wanted to conquer the country...”¹

The Raid was not only unsuccessful in achieving its aim of deposing the government but resulted in further economic crisis and pushed the Transvaal deeper into a depression that lasted until the end of 1899. The Raid, however, did have one positive outcome, it forced Kruger's government to acknowledge the fact that the mining industry was a permanent feature on the Transvaal landscape and urgently needed the government's support. Thus the *Volksraad* promulgated policies that were intended to aid and encourage the neophyte mining industry. New labour laws controlled the wages of Black labourers and the government subsidized transport systems for the movement of mining goods and equipment. Unfortunately, by the time these policies were really effective, it was too late and the Z.A.R. was facing war (van Onselen, 2002).

Johannesburg's Early Internal Geography

Johannesburg had developed around a few key points: the mines in the south, which drove the city's economy; the Market Square in the centre of the town, where ox-wagons outspanned and most of the city's trade took place (Fig. 4.2), and the townships over the ridge, away from the noise and the smoke where the elite resided. It is estimated that between 1890 and 1896 the population of Johannesburg tripled, and almost half of which lived in the central area of town, in what can only be considered slum conditions (Koch 1983a). The Z.A.R. government had already started the process of forced racial segregation as early as 1891 when the 'Malay', 'Coolie', and 'Kaffir' locations were set up to the west and the south of the

Braamfontein cemetery (Fig. 4.3). Adjacent to the Coolie and Malay locations was the Brickfields home to poor White Afrikaners. The impoverished Afrikaners, most of whom had been *bywooners* (a particular kind of sharecropper) on the farms, were streaming in from the surrounding countryside where they could no longer make a living. They settled in the Brickfields/Burgersdorp, east of the ‘Coolie’ Location (Fig. 4.3). Kruger’s government encouraged them to use the clay found in the area and their skills garnered on their farms to join the brick-making industry as a way of entering the urban economy (Kagan, 1978).



FIGURE 4.2: A typical day in Market Square, Johannesburg, *circa early 1890s*. (Source: Davie, 2004: no page number)

The racial segregation so clearly outlined on the maps and in the minds of the White planners did not actually exist on the ground. There was a great deal of racial ‘mixing’ within these locations, and very little control over who lived where. There were Jews, for example, living in Vrededorp and the ‘Coolie’ and ‘Kaffir’ locations even though they had been set aside for other ‘racial’ groups (Fig. 4.4). The lack of ‘control’ and segregation in these locations may be explained by the fact that it was not until 1897, when Johannesburg’s prospects had improved and the central government realised that Johannesburg was a permanent feature that they sanctioned an official Town Council (Kagan, 1978). Although the Town Council was only really in existence to provide infrastructure, services, and goods to the White population, and ignored the needs and demands of all other residents. They did not invest in infrastructure or housing in any of the Black² Locations.³ The municipal contribution to the Black population consisted, almost entirely, of trying to enforce a type of ‘influx control’, and seeking to limit the number of Blacks, ‘Coloureds’, and Indians who migrated to the city (Kagan, 1978).

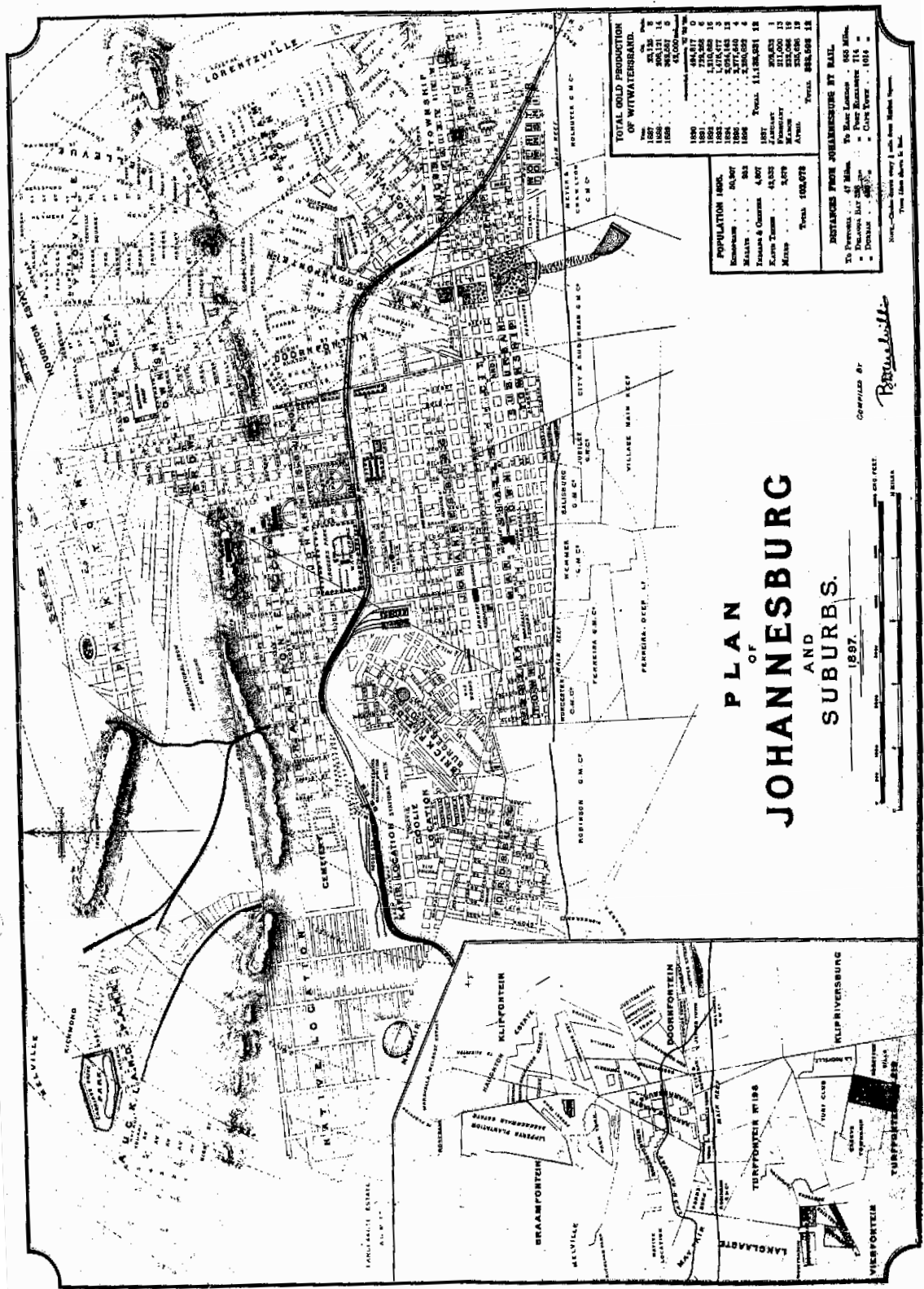


FIGURE 4.3: Jeppé's Map of Johannesburg, 1897. (Source: Appelgryn, 1984: 61).

The lack of formal housing provision for Blacks resulted in a number of enterprising land-owners, realizing that there was profit to be made, selling freehold properties to Black, 'Coloured', and Indian residents (Kagan, 1978). Although government-owned land could only be sold to Whites, privately owned land could be sold to anyone, irrespective of colour (Koch, 1983a). Men who owned land took advantage of the legal loophole and developed various freehold townships, the most famous of which was Sophiatown, established in 1897 but soon followed by Newclare and Martindale (Norwich, 1991). In these townships the inhabitants were allowed to gain secure tenure and thus a foothold in the urban economy.

The spatial dimensions of the Jewish community in Johannesburg

Although wealthier Western European Jews had settled and established themselves in Johannesburg, the new Eastern European immigrants had yet to entrench themselves on the urban landscape. It was during the 1890s that the new immigrants set about making a place for themselves within the economy and cityscape. Two main enclaves of Jewish settlement came into existence during this period, one in the north and the other in the southern part of the city as it then existed, these have been outlined in green and red respectively on Fig. 4.4 in order to make their spatial dimensions clearer. The majority of Eastern European Jews lived in Ferreirastown and Marshallstown (outlined in red on Fig. 4.4) and it was in this area that immigrant Jewish life played itself out and Eastern European Jews learnt to adapt to their new environment. The fairly well-off, mainly western-European Jews, lived in the 'posh' suburbs of Doornfontein and new Doornfontein, whereas the elite moved even further north and settled in Parktown and Braamfontein (areas outlined in green on Fig. 4.4) (Appelgryn, 1984).

There were also smaller groups in the far southern parts of Johannesburg, south of the line of mines, but they remained fairly insignificant in terms of the overall geography of the Jewish community until the next decade and will be discussed in the following chapter. There was also a growing community in the west of the city, in Vrededorp and Fordsburg, where there were sufficient numbers to need a range of temporary synagogues in the early 1890s (Fig. 4.4, points G and M). By 1895, the Fordsburg Jewish community was large enough and wealthy enough to be able to construct a permanent synagogue (Fig. 4.4, point N). Fordsburg was an area that would play an interesting and essential role in the development of Johannesburg's labour movement in the next century.

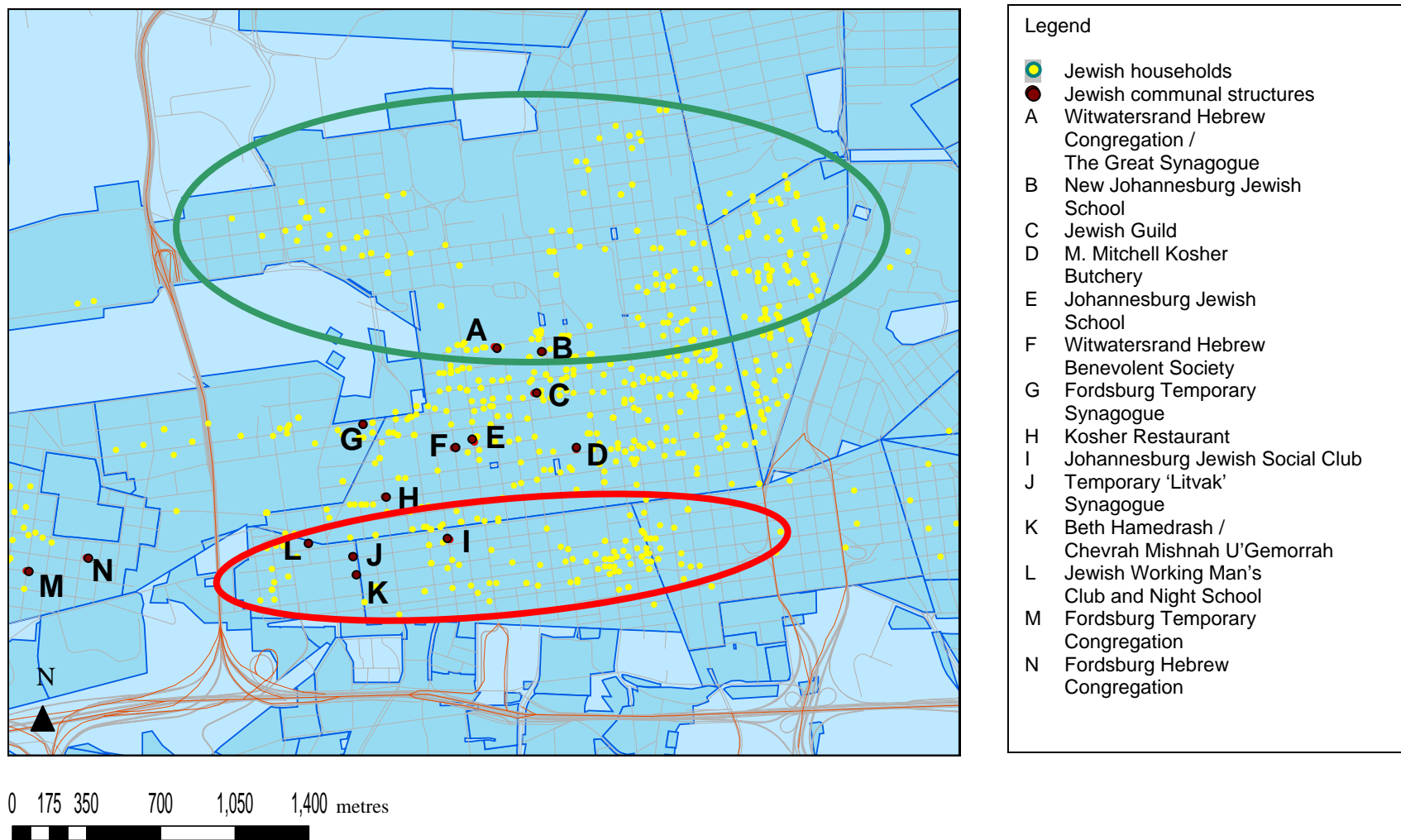


Figure 4.4: The Jewish Community of Johannesburg, 1890-1899.
(Source: Appendix II)

The spatial separation of the Eastern and Western European Jews was in fact only a physical manifestation of the huge cultural, ideological, and religious differences between the two sub-sects of the Jewish community. The two groups also existed in very different socio-economic strata of society. The Anglo-German Jews were predominantly involved in the professions; as stockbrokers, businessmen, and financiers (Hersch, 1958; Krut, 1987). Eastern European Jews were, in general, artisans, craftsmen, and wholesalers. Each faction needs to be analysed separately in order to demonstrate just how different their lives were within the cityscape of Johannesburg. They lived, worked, and entertained in divergent parts of the city. The charitable organizations, to a large extent, were the only real meeting points between the two groups. They were co-religionists, who shared a history but in every other way were strangers to each other.

The Western European Jews in Johannesburg

The Anglo-German Jews for the most part lived in the better areas of Johannesburg. Doornfontein had the advantage of its own water reservoir, which was considered a luxury for a city with limited natural water resources (Manoim, 2003). Braamfontein was also very appealing for those who could afford it. The township was laid out over a 1.6 km (1 mile) away from the mines in the southern part of the city (Fig. 1.1) (Hart, 1974). Its location cut out both the dust and the noise that was endemic in Johannesburg at the time. Some of the most notable Jewish figures during the period, such as Mendelsohn, Phillips, the Joel Brothers, and Beit, to name but a few, lived in the then genteel suburbs of Doornfontein and Braamfontein (Krut, 1987). Barney Barnato and his nephews invested in property in Belgravia removed from the noise and the bustle of central Johannesburg in the early 1890s (Meiring, 1985).

By 1896 Lionel Phillips had built the palatial *Hohenheim* on Parktown Ridge, inspiring many of his colleagues to move out of central Johannesburg and into the newly created suburb (Wentzel, 1975). Parktown at that point was actually a part of the Saxonwald estate, which was owned by Edward Lippert a German Jew who bought the parcel of land in the 1890s. He created a massive timber plantation on the area, and called it Saschenwald, after the forest in his native country (Chipkin, 1993). The wood from the plantation was used for shoring up the tunnels and shafts of the mines in the south of the city. Some of the wealthiest and most respected people of the time, both Jewish and gentile, lived a life of privilege in this township, just a few kilometres away from some of the worst slum conditions and poverty ever seen in Johannesburg (Wentzel, 1975). One of the major selling points of properties in Parktown was that the suburb would not be erecting any Locations (Hart, 1974).

Living in these northern townships, was made possible, convenient even by the combination of horse-drawn trams which went as far north as De Korte Street by 1896 and the private carriage system that had been set up for the residents of Parktown allowed for easy access into the city centre (Fig. 4.5) (Spit, 1976).

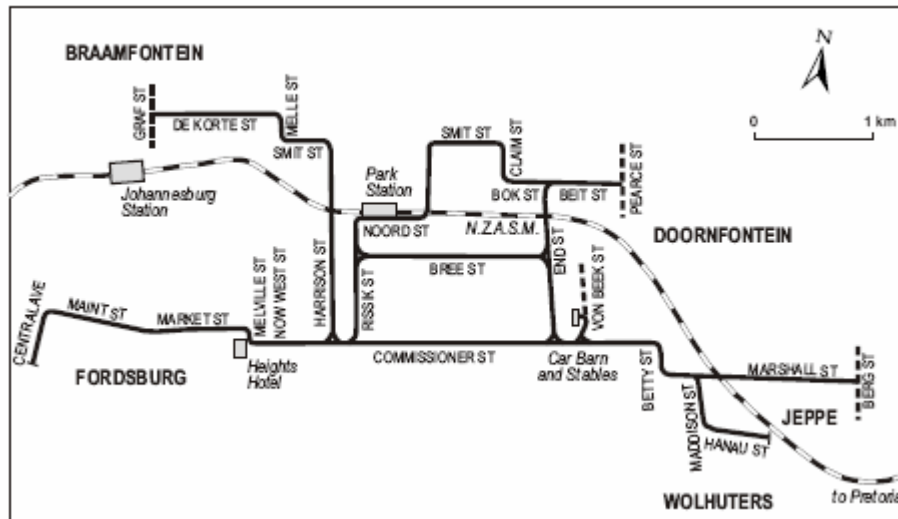


FIGURE 4.5: The extent of the horse and buggy system in Johannesburg by 1890. (Source: Beavon, 2004: 211)

The transport system also explains why a number of the organizations and institutions set up for the wealthier Jews were in the centre of the city rather than farther north. It was a simple matter for those living in Braamfontein, Doornfontein, and even Parktown, to utilize the efficient network that was in place. The Johannesburg Jewish School and the Witwatersrand Hebrew Benevolent Society (Fig. 4.4, points B and F, respectively) would have been easily accessible. The Jewish Guild (Fig. 4.4, point C) and the Johannesburg Jewish Social Club, (Fig. 4.4, point I) established in 1894, hosted refined entertainment for their assimilated members, in the form of talks, concerts, and political rallies (Sowden, 1976; Kaplan and Robertson, 1991). Dramatic societies and overseas performers appeared at these venues to entertain the Jews who had integrated into mainstream gentile society and enjoyed the finest of Western traditions (Krut, 1987).

The location of the synagogue was influenced by slightly different factors. The first synagogue in Johannesburg, as previously mentioned was the original Witwatersrand Hebrew Congregation, established in President Street. It had faced two secessions in the preceding years (Abrahams, 2001). The first to leave were the Eastern European Jews who felt alienated within the ‘anglicized’ synagogue and set up their own House of Prayer, the details of which will be sketched later in the chapter. The second secession occurred when a splinter group within the congregation felt that Rabbi Harris, was too much of a reformer and too modernist

in his views (Abrahams, 2002). Abrahams (2002) maintained that the real dispute was over the issue of Jewish education in Johannesburg. The President Street Synagogue had established schools adjacent to the main building but this was merely for the teaching of Hebrew and Jewish Studies (Peltz, 1984). Other *chederim* (or afternoon Hebrew lessons) were available for the teaching of young Jewish boys' up to the age of 13 and a day-school had been established in Kerk Street in 1890 (Peltz, 1984). It was, however, still felt that these institutions were insufficient. The secessionists thus created their own congregation called the Johannesburg Hebrew Congregation and established a new synagogue in Park Street which was generally known as the Great Synagogue (Fig. 4.4, point A) and eventually established the Johannesburg Jewish School (Fig. 4.4, point E).

The Johannesburg Jewish School was completely funded by the community until 1902 when the municipality took over responsibility for its administration and funding.⁴ The location of the synagogue is important, as congregants had to be able to walk to the synagogue on the Sabbath and the Jewish festivals, using other forms of transportation is strictly prohibited by Jewish law. The inference can thus be drawn that the community that the synagogue serviced was comfortably settled no more than a few kilometres away at most, added to which there were only three formal synagogues in Johannesburg at the time, thus it is most likely that the early Jewish community attended services at the synagogue closest to their homes. The secular accoutrements of daily Jewish life could be easily accessed via public transport, or for the wealthy who had the means, using private transport, the religious life and thus the geographical location of the various synagogues was constrained by the traditional tenets of their religion.

The 'Peruvians'

The second main enclave, and one that is particularly geographically interesting, was situated in the slums of Ferreirastown (the more southern area outlined in red on Fig. 4.4). It was home to an immigrant Eastern European Jewish population who were generally poor and quite distinct in their manner and dress from their Westernised co-religionists. Unfortunately the Eastern European Jews became stereotyped and were given the appellation 'Peruvian'⁵. They were seen as a "slovenly, unkempt, and [a] generally unwashed edition . . . of the wandering Jew" (Shain, 1994:27). They were considered thieves and *boerverneukers* by the general populace. In point of fact these Jews were generally very devout and primarily involved in artisan and trade work, using the skills they had garnered in the Pale and putting them to good use in the mushrooming Johannesburg economy (Hersch, 1958). One commentator of the time points out that these immigrants had to be flexible and pick up new skills in order to find work in the highly competitive environment (Krut, 1987). The lack of

jobs forced many 'Peruvian' Jews into the liquor selling and distilling business, of which they had some previous experience in the Pale of Settlement.

It would be true to say that a number of Jews were involved in vice and corruption in Johannesburg. Illicit liquor dealing, racketeering, prostitution, and gambling were all run by various gangs. Some of the most notorious pimps and crime bosses were Jews who had left New York's lower East Side and London's East End for the potential market and greater freedom from the law that Johannesburg afforded (van Onselen, 2000). One of the main sources of income for these organized crime syndicates were the brothels that serviced both White and Black miners where the pimps and madams were more concerned with the colour of a miner's money than his skin. The brothels and gambling dens, which catered to these needs, had to be located close enough to the mines to allow for easy access but at the same time needed to be fairly cheap to rent and to have neighbours who could be easily intimidated. The areas of Johannesburg that filled these requirements were the slums of Ferreirstown and Marshallstown (van Onselen, 2002). Johannesburg's very own 'red light' district was given the popular tag; 'Frenchfontein' (the area outlined in red on Fig 4.6). A number of immigrant Jewish families lived in this district, they were generally poor and did not have the political or social clout to complain about the illegal activities taking place in their neighbourhood. A number of other immigrants, however, entered into these activities as livelihood strategies.

With the advent of deep-level mining on the Reef, a law had come into existence, which forbade the sale and provision of alcohol to Black South Africans. The new legislation was in direct contrast to the situation which had existed a few years earlier where liquor had been used as a method of social control on the mines (Jeeves, 1985). Obviously after years of creating a demand, and in many cases, a dependence on alcohol, and then imposing a 'drought' on the Black workers, there was a ready-made market eager for someone to supply it. Eastern European Jews were not the only people involved in the illicit liquor trade, although they were often accused of being the ring-leaders of liquor cartels. The law took an extremely dim view of these activities and in 1890, the courts meted out severe judgements to Jews who had been caught selling alcohol to the Black workers.⁶ Letters poured into the press, criticising the government for not doing anything about the 'Peruvian Pest'.⁷ In 1894, the Chamber of Mines came out in violent opposition to the Jewish liquor sellers, accusing them of being the main causes of liquor abuse and the subsequent crimes committed under its influence in Johannesburg (Shain, 1994). Meetings were held in protest describing the Jewish liquor sellers as "low class" and having "very little mental development and ...absolutely no moral principles".⁸ By 1897 the situation had reached a head and there were calls in the press for "ridding the country of its Peruvians".⁹

The popular press persecuted the ‘Peruvians’ and gave the impression that they were the only ethnic group involved in Johannesburg’s underworld. There were half-hearted attempts by the Anglo-German Jews to defend their co-religionists reputation, and incidentally their own, but the letters to the press only served to disassociate them from their Eastern European brethren¹⁰ and widened the cleft that already existed within the broader Jewish community.

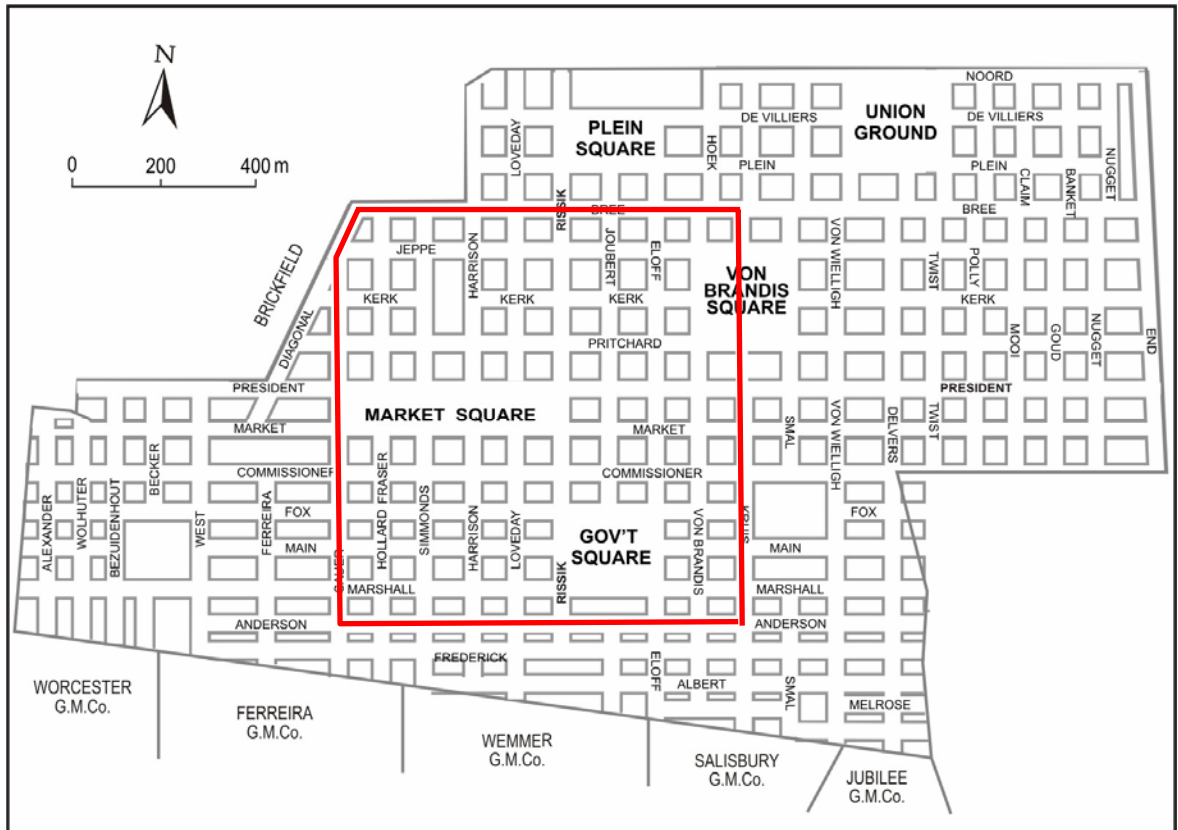


FIGURE 4.6: The location of ‘Frenchfontein’ in Johannesburg, in the 1890s. (Adapted from: van Onselen, 2002 and Beavon, 2004)

The Beth Hamedrash centre of the Eastern European Jewish community

The Jewish Eastern European population was not solely composed of pimps, prostitutes, and arbitrary members of Johannesburg’s criminal underclass, in fact the majority were very devout, and highly orthodox and they were devoted to matters of the spirit. Given the importance of religion and spirituality in their lives it was not long before they built their own synagogue (Abrahams, 2001). As has already been mentioned the Eastern European Jews left the Witwatersrand Hebrew Congregation in favour of establishing a synagogue of their own. They felt that the services in the President Street Synagogue were too unfamiliar and too ‘gentile’ for their liking and wanted to carry on the traditions of their homeland, in which the synagogue was not merely used a place of prayer but also as a communal meeting hall and a house of study that could be visited at all times of the day or night (Nathan, 1944;

Abrahams, 2001). They established their own congregation, initially holding services in a number of temporary sites such as point J on Figure 4.4, until finally in 1893 they converted a house in Fox Street into a synagogue known as the Beth Hamedrash (House of Learning) (Fig. 4.4, point K) (Norwich, 1988; Abrahams, 2002).

The Beth Hamedrash served as the focal point for the entire community. It was a place of prayer, a communal meeting hall, and a house of study all rolled into one and was busy from morning to night with the comings and goings of the community. The practise of Judaism was a particularly important part of Eastern European Jewish life and the customs, rituals, traditions, and dress were faithfully kept in the new environment (Fig. 4.7). The community settled around the synagogue, as it was, "...the centre of attraction, the place observed of all Yiddisher observers. They swarmed like bees in a hive round this centre, but it must be admitted that there were no drones in their midst" (Abrahams, 2001: 11).



FIGURE 4.7: Rev. Kaplan *circa* 1890, South Africa, still in his traditional Eastern European clothing. (Source: Rubin Family Archive)

The area surrounding the 'Litvak' synagogue (Fig. 4.4, point K) had a distinctly Eastern European flavour and was often called a 'ghetto' or a '*shtetl*'¹¹ (Abrahams, 2001). The lower end of Commissioner Street was dominated by the Jewish residents and was described by one of its inhabitants in the following terms,

"What is it that gave Commissioner Street its special character at the turn of the century? It was the cafes and penny drinkshops and *Kosher* restaurants through which there moved by day and night a colourful pageant made up of the denizens of the underworld and the 'alte Afrikaners' [Yiddish term for Jewish immigrants who had been in South Africa for a long time]. Day and night in summer and winter, these 'alte Afrikaners' would while away their hours playing casino, klaberjas and dominoes. Meanwhile their wives were probably toiling away in some Lithuanian village, waiting to rejoin their men . . .".

(Sachs, 1971:40)

It was not only the Beth Hamedrash that attracted the Eastern Europeans to the southern part of Johannesburg, and Ferreirastown and Marshallstown particularly, turning it into a Jewish Quarter (Gershater, 1931; Leveson, 1996). Cheap rent in what were essentially slums suited the impoverished community just as much as the fact that their homes were

located close to the Market Square, which was the commercial centre of the city and allowed Jews ready access to the urban economy. Most of the Eastern European Jews are reported to have lived within a five kilometre radius of the Market Square, which makes sense considering many Jews were traders and wholesalers and it was the Square from which virtually all business and commercial activity flowed in the early days (Shain, 1994).

The Eastern European Jews lived in close proximity to each other, fixing their location against the points of the cheapest rent, the Market Square, and the Beth Hamedrash (Fig. 4.4, point K). As a result they created an intensely Jewish space that satisfied all of their religious needs as well as creating a social and cultural environment that perpetuated their particular brand of Judaism in isolation away from either the Western European Jews and the non-Jewish White population.¹² There were even reports of people growing up within these areas and not learning either English or Afrikaans until their early teens.¹³ The situation is reminiscent of Samuel Rawet's experience of growing up in the Jewish district in Rio de Janeiro (as mentioned in Chapter Two). Unfortunately given the limitations of the data, not all of the Jewish households in this particular area are represented on Figure 4.4. As such the high density and overcrowding that existed in these areas has, to a large degree, been deduced from literary extracts and personal accounts of the time.

Jewish Organizations in Johannesburg

There were points of connection between the Eastern and Western Jewish community that were for the most part, given the economic conditions of the time, charitable organizations and upliftment projects. The boom and bust nature of Johannesburg's economy must surely have affected the Jewish community as much as any other as indicated by the sources cited below. The economic depression combined with the large influx of Eastern European Jews into the Transvaal resulted in large-scale unemployment within the community. N.D. Hoffman in a letter to the Yiddish newspaper *Hatzfirah* in 1891, wrote, "In my last letter I described a prosperous Johannesburg. Since then a drastic change has taken place. The mines are petering out and a great exodus is taking place...people have lost their money. Many Jews were included among them..."¹⁴ Jews have always responded to the need for mutual assistance and the Jewish community of Johannesburg was no exception (Rappaport, 1950). Various charitable organizations were established to support the destitute and the unemployed immigrants. Aside from the Jewish Helping Hand and Burial Society, which had been established in 1887, another charity was set up in 1891 under the name of Gemilut Chesed (literally translated as 'Acts of Kindness') (Aronstam, 1967). They had a mandate to help those in need, through loans, donations, or material goods.

There are records that in 1893 five charitable organizations were established; the Ladies Society, Jewish Women's Benevolent Society, Bikkur Cholim, Young Men's Friendly Association, and the Young Men's Association, the last two were as much charitable organizations as they were types of *landsmanschaften*, which will be discussed below. There was also the Chevrah Mischna U'Gemorra (or the Society for the Study of the Oral Law) that had been set up by and for the 'Litvak' community (Fig. 4.4, point K) (Aronstam, 1967; Leibowitz, 1967; Goldman, 1990; Kaplan and Robertson, 1991). These organizations sought to provide for the needy in whatever way they could and were located in the most southern portion of the northern quadrants of Johannesburg as that was where they were most needed. It was in the densely populated slums of Ferreirastown and Marshallstown that the philanthropic activities of the wealthy could do the most good. It was in these spaces that the Western and Eastern European Jews met and interacted. The women's societies and the Bikkur Cholim, visited the sick and provided attention and care, as well as food and clothing, while the young men's association provided English lessons, meeting places, and both financial and emotional support for men who were without family or friends in Johannesburg.

Landsmanschaften – homes away from home

Johannesburg, despite its growth and development, remained a mining town with its curse of associated vices, as has already been mentioned. Of the 2 000 Jews in Johannesburg by the beginning of the 1890s - 80 per cent were men, either bachelors or men who had left their wives and families at home (these men were known as 'grass bachelors') (Krut, 1987). The town was filled with the unsavoury delights so common to mining towns. Olive Schreiner, who was living in Johannesburg at the time, commented, that she had never seen anything "...so appalling, so decayed, . . . The whole moral fibre relaxed" (quoted in Krut, 1987: 73). The Jewish community tried to ensure that the young Jewish men did not fall into this trap and attempted to take care of the social and cultural wants of the immigrant community. There were night classes, lectures, concerts, and plays but most of these activities took place in the company of other men. The numbers of Jewish women, in the still unsophisticated mining town of Johannesburg, were still quite low. The shortage of Jewish women was so great that the second meeting of the Witwatersrand Hebrew Congregation was forced to discuss the issue of the conversions of non-Jewish women of marriageable age.¹⁵ It was felt that married men would be more settled and would contribute to a more stable Jewish community, which would be more in keeping with traditional Jewish values.

Landsmanschaften, associations of men who came from the same town, area or province, were established. The first was the Schadowa Sick Benefit Society, established in

1892, by Benjamin Grolman. The society was devised to help all those from the town of Schadowa in Lithuania who had come to Johannesburg.¹⁶ The Young Men's Friendly Association and the Young Men's Working Club and Night School (Fig. 4.4, point L) provided places for the 'bachelor' population to go that were not the gambling dens or brothels, which were so prevalent in Johannesburg at the time (Aronstam, 1967). In 1896 a *Landsleits* (which is a synonym for *Landsmanschaften*) was created called the Ponewez Sick Benefit and Benevolent Society that has proven to be one the longest running *landsmanschaften* ever established, and still exists today (Simonowitz, 1960). In 1895 the only Polish fraternity ever to be launched in Johannesburg was created with the Hebrew-Polish Alliance (Kaplan and Robertson, 1991). All of these societies attempted to make the transition from the *shtetls* of Eastern Europe to the burgeoning town of Johannesburg easier. Language classes, loans, meeting places, and job centres were just some of the functions that these organizations undertook.

The *landsmanschaften* were located in the slums of Ferreirastown and Marshallstown as would be expected considering that these townships were where the majority of Eastern European Jews lived, and where there was the greatest temptation given the close proximity of 'Frenchfontein'. The value of the *landsleits* should not be under-estimated as in an alien environment filled with strange and new experiences the societies provided a sense of home, and a place where immigrants could learn to adapt to their new surroundings.

Enfranchisement for Jews in the *Boer* Republic

Although the community had begun the long process of entrenching itself in this new and uncertain environment and even though many Jews had been in Johannesburg from its inception they were still considered *uitlanders* or foreigners. The issue of enfranchisement was hotly debated within the community and in 1890 members of the Jewish community had sent a petition to the *Volksraad* (Fig. 4.8) requesting full enfranchisement for Jews in the Transvaal.¹⁷ This petition was politely ignored and the issue remained for the most part unresolved. After the farcical Jameson Raid, there was greater resentment towards the *uitlander* community and Kruger's government passed a Memorial, in July 1896, to prevent undesirable immigrants into the Transvaal (Saron, 1955a). The Memorial required all immigrants to the Transvaal to be in possession of a certificate of good conduct, and a £100 or if they did not have the money then necessary proof that they were tradesman of some description.¹⁸ The regulation would obviously have affected Jewish immigration as many of the immigrants left the Pale illegally, and most certainly would not have been able to readily afford a £100. Fortunately, for the Jewish immigrants, the Memorial was repealed because of

complaints from the Transvaal's neighbouring territories that were being forced to assimilate the large numbers of immigrants that had been turned away from the Transvaal by the dictates of the Memorial (Saron, 1955a).

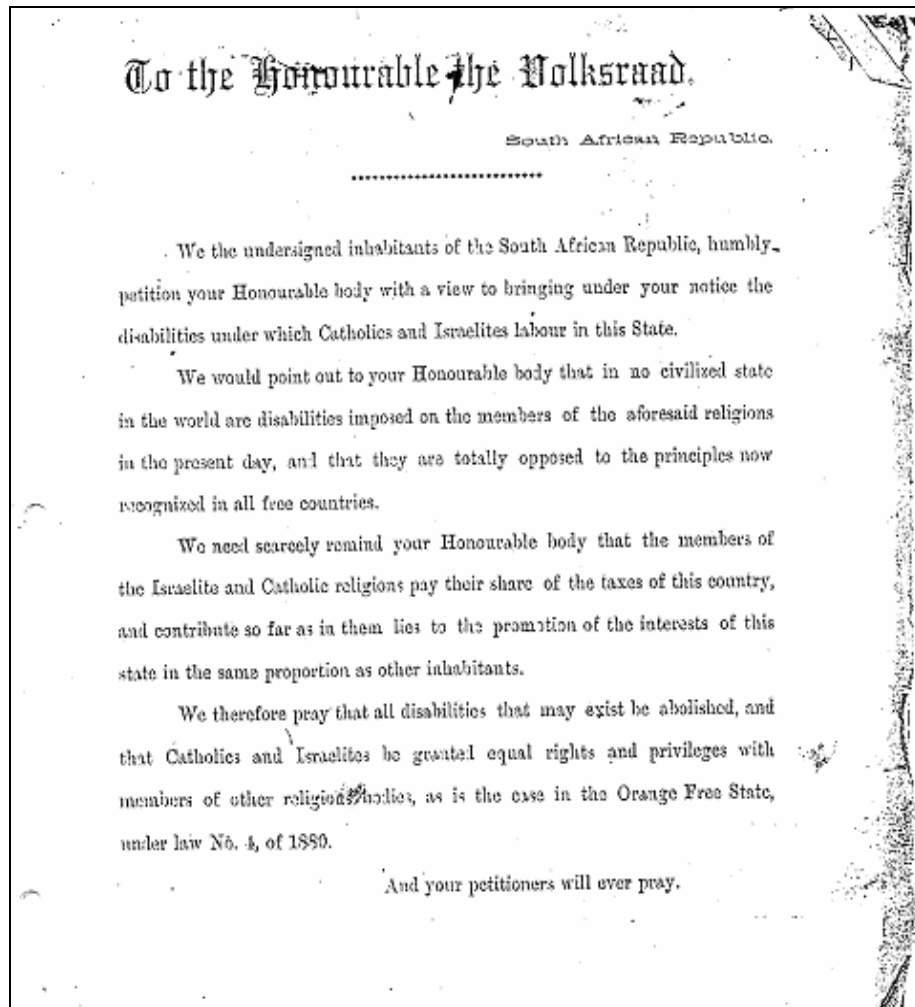


FIGURE 4.8: Petition against *uitlander* disabilities circa 1890. (Source: SABJD Archives)

The implied threat of the Memorial caused a great deal of insecurity in the Jewish community. It was exacerbated by rumours that the *Volksraad* was considering enfranchisement for all Transvaal residents as long as they could prove that they had full rights in their countries of origin. Once again such legislation would have been problematic for the Jewish immigrants as Polish and Russian Jews had been thoroughly disenfranchised in their native countries and had never been able to vote.¹⁸ The Jewish community responded with outrage and demanded full rights for all of its members irrespective of their origin. In a series of articles and mass meetings¹⁹, Rabbi Hertz berated Kruger's government arguing that the Jewish community had always been involved in the growth and development of the Transvaal and pleading for the removal of the disabilities, "It is a new country where errors

have not yet had time to ossify into institutions with the halo of antiquity about them, why should such prejudices be allowed to transmit themselves like diseases, from generation to generation?”²⁰

The government argued that full rights within the Republic were only given to full *burgers* so as to ensure that the country could not be snatched away from them by foreigners (Saron, 1971). Kruger was given further justification for his actions when a petition from twenty-three thousand *uitlanders*, “. . . assuring Kruger of their satisfaction with the existing state of affairs”²¹ was presented to him in the middle of 1899. The stand-off, however, between those who demanded the removal of the disabilities and the adamant Kruger did not last and later in the same year the Transvaal and Britain went to war to settle the matter of rights and enfranchisement once and for all.

* * *

The Johannesburg cityscape was the backdrop against which the social, religious, and cultural differences in the Jewish community were played out. It was the evolving geography of the Jewish community that demonstrates the disjunctures between the different factions within Johannesburg Jewry. The Western European Jews, generally lived in the more expensive, middle-and upper- class suburbs of Johannesburg in the north and travelled into town for business, entertainment, and to take care of their philanthropic and charitable duties. The immigrant Eastern European Jews, who were generally looked down upon, lived in the impoverished slums in the southern parts of the city, shared with a myriad of other racial and ethnic groups. The Eastern Europeans were a tightly-knit community, with the heart at the Beth Hamedrash. Their social cohesion was re-enforced by the living conditions and the ability of the various institutions and organizations to provide for their needs. The pattern of spatial proximity and social cohesion is one which becomes a common theme in the historical geography of the Jewish community of Johannesburg and will be consistently discussed and drawn to the attention of the reader throughout the text.

Notes for Chapter Four

¹ Extract from a transcript of an interview with Wolf Sulsky by Dora Sowden, for the South African Jewish Sociological and Historical Society interview series, 28th June 1951, SABJD Archives

² Black in the context of the text refers to all ‘racial groups’ other than White i.e. Black Africans, ‘Coloureds’, and Indians.

³ The term ‘Location’ in South Africa has a very specific historical connotation, which is one of a space of racial separation away from areas that were held to be reserved for Whites. The Locations were generally situated a fair distance from the central parts of the cities, and were characterized by poor quality housing and lack of infrastructure.

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- ⁴ London Jewish Chronicle, 1902: Transference of Jewish School to govt, *London Jewish Chronicle*, (weekly magazine) 2nd May 1902, SABJD Library.
- ⁵ The etymology of the word ‘Peruvian’ remains obscure and highly contentious. It has been suggested that the term originated on the Kimberley diamond fields where apparently a Jewish club called the Polish Russian Union was established, and the abbreviation P.R.U. would have provided the derivation of the word Peruvian. There is, however no proof of the club ever having existed, thus it does not appear to be the correct answer. An alternative suggestion is that the word was a corruption of the Yiddish, ‘pruvn’ which means ‘to try’. A ‘trier’ was in common Yiddish parlance a person who would attempt to do anything to make a living. Thus, it may be supposed, if one stretched the imagination, that ‘pruvnik’ became Peruvian at some point but why it would have such negative overtones if it was Yiddish in origin does not make a great deal of sense. It would thus seem that there is no definitive etymology and it must, for the moment anyway, remain a mystery (Belling, 2002; Sherman, 2002).
- ⁶ Danzig, E.Y., 1890: Letter to the Editor, *Hamelitz*, (weekly newspaper) 28th January 1890, SABJD Archives.
- ⁷ The Star, 1897: The Peruvian Pest, *The Star*, (daily newspaper) 24th July 1897, Johannesburg, JPL Newspaper Archive.
- ⁸ Standard and Diggers News, 1896: Report, *Standard and Diggers News*, (daily newspaper) 16th April 1896, Johannesburg, SABJD Archive.
- ⁹ The Star, 1897: The Peruvians, *The Star*, (daily newspaper) 22nd July 1897, Johannesburg, JPL Newspaper Archive.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ South African Jewish Times, 1975: Early Johannesburg Days Recalled, *South African Jewish Times* (weekly publication) 5th December 1975, Johannesburg, SABJD Library.
- ¹² The London Jewish Chronicle, 1902: The Russian Jews of Johannesburg and Jewish Education, *The London Jewish Chronicle*, (weekly publication) 25th July 1902, London, SABJD Archives.
- ¹³ Extract from a transcript of interview with Israel Kuper by Dora Sowden, for the South African Jewish Sociological and Historical Society interview series, 1952, SABJD Archives.
- ¹⁴ Hatzfirah, 1891: Letter to the editor from N.D. Hoffman, *Hatzfirah*, (monthly magazine) 24th April 1891, SABJD Archives.
- ¹⁵ Eastern Star, 1889: Minutes of the 2nd Annual Meeting of the Witwatersrand Hebrew Congregation, *Eastern Star*, (daily newspaper) 30th September 1889, Johannesburg, SABJD Archive.
- ¹⁶ Extract from a transcript of an interview with Benjamin Grolman by Dora Sowden, for the South African Jewish Sociological and Historical Society interview series, 7th September 1954, SABJD Archives.
- ¹⁷ Petition of the Jewish Community to the Volksraad, *circa* 1890, SABJD Archives.
- ¹⁸ The Johannesburg Times, 1896: Undesirable Immigrants, *The Johannesburg Times*, (daily newspaper) 20th July 1896, Johannesburg, JPL Strange Collection.
- ¹⁸ The Jewish Chronicle, 1899: Jewish ‘uitlanders’ and the Transvaal Crisis, *The Jewish Chronicle*, (weekly publication) 30th June 1899, Johannesburg, SABJD Archives.
- ¹⁹ The Jewish Chronicle, 1899: Jewish ‘uitlanders’ and the Transvaal Crisis, Mass Meeting at Johannesburg, *The Jewish Chronicle*, (weekly publication) 28th July 1899, Johannesburg, SABJD Archives; The Star, 1899: The Vices of Johannesburg, A Diabolical Fraternity, *The Star*, (daily newspaper) 17th February 1899, Johannesburg, JPL Newspaper Archive; and, The Standard and Diggers News, 1899: The Birth of Moses, *The Standard and Diggers News*, (daily newspaper) 18th February 1899, Johannesburg, JPL Newspaper Archive.
- ²⁰ The Standard and Diggers News, 1898: The Banner of Judah under the subheading, The Jew as a Patriot, *The Standard and Diggers News*, (daily newspaper) 12th November 1898, Johannesburg, JPL Newspaper Archive.

²¹ The Standard and Diggers News, 1899: The birth of Moses, *The Standard and Diggers News*, (daily newspaper) 18th February 1899, Johannesburg, JPL Newspaper Archive.