

“When we arrived in South Africa we moved into the suburb of Doornfontein, which was the lowest rung of the Jewish residential ladder. Those upon whom fortune smiled trekked northwards via Hillbrow and Yeoville, Bellevue and parts of Observatory. The great leap forward from lower to middle class was symbolised by Orange Grove and Highlands North. In these suburbs screamingly vulgar wrought-iron burglar proofing appeared to cover every square inch of access to the house . . . . Beyond Orange Grove, suburbs like Park Town, Lower Houghton and Dunkeld were legends in the mind of a Doornfontein lad”.

(Slovo, 1995: 14)

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Over four million Jews left Eastern Europe and the Pale of Settlement from the middle of the nineteenth century until the end of the Second World War (Lestchinsky, 1944). They left to escape the grinding poverty and innumerable degradations of their lives in Russia and dispersed and settled wherever they could find safety and opportunities for themselves and their families (Beth Hafuthsot, 1983). Jewish communities developed in South America, Australia, and South Africa and augmented the existing Jewish communities in Western Europe and North America (Medding and Elazar, 1983). The majority, over 75 per cent, settled in the United States and Canada between 1870 and 1930 (Wischinitzer, 1948). Yet only 70 – 80 000 Jews came to South Africa over the same time period. What is striking about this particular Jewish community is that over 80 per cent of the Jews who settled here are of Lithuanian extraction (Beth Hafutsoth, 1983). Such a degree of homogeneity is highly unusual and has led to there being less differentiation, in cultural and religious practices, amongst the Jews in South Africa, than in other Jewish communities (Hellig, 1986). Within South Africa the largest community has always been in Johannesburg, with almost two thirds of the entire South African Jewish community living there (Kosmin, *et al*, 1999).

The history of Johannesburg and the story of the discovery of gold is an oft told and well researched subject. The people and institutions who were involved in the development of Johannesburg ‘from mining camp to metropolis’ have been immortalised in any number of journal articles, books, and commemorative pamphlets (Gray and Gray, 1937; Wentzel, 1975; Appelgryn, 1984; Musiker, 1987; Cammack, 1990; Beavon, 2004). The political histories of Johannesburg as a ‘divided city’ or as a landscape manifesting the policies of the apartheid regime are well documented. Johannesburg’s many townships and informal settlements the history, geography, and sociology of the Black community in Johannesburg has received significant academic attention (van Onselen, 2002; Hart and Pirie, 1984; Jeeves, 1985), however the same cannot be said for other elements of Johannesburg’s society. The purpose here is to redress the paucity of geographic information that exists for one of them namely the Jewish community of Johannesburg.

Much has been written on the history (Gershater, 1955; Stein, 1971; Norwich, 1976; Beth Hafutsoth, 1983; Kaplan and Robertson, 1991; Weiner, 2002), sociology (Sachs, 1949; Sowden, 1955; Sachs, 1972; Herman, 1977; Krut, 1987; Issroff, 1999), demography (Sonnabend, 1936; Dubb, Della Pergola, and Tal, 1978; Dubb, 1991), architecture (Hindson, 1987; Norwich, 1988; Chipkin, 1993), and religious development (Rochlin, 1947; Rochlin, 1956; Levy, 1978; Berger, 1982) of this particular community but there is a severe lack of geographical research pertaining to the founding, growth, and development of the Jewish community within the city.

In order to add to the greater literature that exists on Johannesburg in general and its component communities in particular, an attempt has been made to gain an understanding of where the Jewish community started from, how they lived, and moved within Johannesburg's urban framework. The work is a spatial study that focuses on the historical geography of the Jewish community. Historical geography, as a part of the larger discourse of human geography, aspires to accomplishing some kind of understanding of individual's, households', and communities' experience of the spaces in which and through which they live and move (Tuan, 1975). The history that is presented and discussed in this work, is used as a backdrop or contextualisation against which the changing shape of the community took place and is part of the method by which to gain insight into the lived experiences of the Jewish community and their interactions with the cityscape of Johannesburg.

The narrative describes events that occurred during each of the time periods discussed but it is the geography, the movement, migration, and settlement patterns of the Jewish community of Johannesburg that forms the focal point of the project. To that end a series of maps, covering the period 1886-1939, have been constructed. These maps and their accompanying text are used to explain the Jewish communities' place on the cityscape over time, and to reflect the national and international political and social events of the era, as well as the meaning/s that these spaces had for the community that lived in them. Each chapter pays particular attention to a specific time period, and contains debates concerned with why the community structure and settlement pattern looked as it did at certain times.

In the first substantial chapter of this study, Chapter 2, Jews around the World, themes common to the literature on urban Jewish communities in a range of countries, and the *shtetl* from which many Jews originated are highlighted. The reasons for the examination of Jewish communities in various countries is presented in order to place this work in its academic context and to afford a greater understanding of the motifs and issues that arise in the research presented here. Furthermore, the political and social conditions within the Pale of

Settlement and the motivation for the mass migration of Jews from Eastern Europe during the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century is considered in some detail.

Chapter 3, *In the Beginning . . .*, commences with an examination of South Africa and Johannesburg and the role that the Jews played in the founding and development of both *Boer* and British states within southern Africa. Thereafter early Johannesburg, its declaration as a township, and the physical layout of its streets and suburbs is described in general, and more particularly, in relation to the newly formed Jewish community. The politics and economics, which began to drive the development of Johannesburg, will also be examined and clarified. It was against the backdrop of a burgeoning mining town that the fundamentals of a Jewish community were established; examining the locations of their homes, businesses, and institutions for communal life of the same period creates a picture of Johannesburg Jewry's infancy in Johannesburg.

The period 1890 until the beginning of the Boer War in 1899 is the time frame investigated in Chapter 4, *Jews - reformers, rebels, or just Uitlanders?* It is during this period that the early Jewish community was consolidated by the large influx of Eastern European Jews. The world they entered was rife with political disharmony and economic uncertainty and was at the mercy of the unpredictable gold mining industry and Britain's empire-building project.

Chapter 5 explores the Anglo-Boer War, 1899 – 1902 during which the British and the *Boers* fought for control of the Witwatersrand with both parties claiming the moral high ground and stating that the war was over the issue of citizens' rights. The truth, however, is more pragmatic, the two sides really battled for control of the richest gold mines in the world (Saron, 1955a). The effect of the Boer War on the Jewish community is also considered and the part that Jews played, either as supporters of Kruger or the British. The chapter continues with an investigation into the problems that faced the Jews who returned to the Transvaal after the war. These impediments along with rising anti-Semitism and the Quota Act of 1903, which represented an attempt to curtail Jewish emigration into South Africa form a second focal point in the chapter. The communal response to these threats is exposed in order to contextualise the Jewish community within the wider South African society. The theme of anti-Semitism is continued into the next chapter, *Snakes in Paradise*, where specific reference is made to World War I and the perception of the Jewish population by the wider community in wartime South Africa.

Chapter 7, The Rise of Afrikaner Nationalism and the ‘Jewish Question’, contains an outline of the revolt on the Rand and the part that Jews were imagined to have played in it. The rise of Afrikaner nationalism, its neo-Nazi leanings and the relationship between the escalation of anti-Semitism and economic uncertainty in South Africa is another area of interest in the chapter. Furthermore the increased anti-Semitism clearly affected the Jewish community and it will be suggested that much of the physical and institutional consolidation of the Jewish community on the Johannesburg landscape is related to the upsurge of anti-Semitism at the time.

The period, 1930-1939 comes under the spotlight in Chapter 8, entitled Out of the Frying Pan. The 1930s were troubling times for Jews. In Germany anti-Jewish laws were being put in place, and Jewish refugees were streaming out of Western Europe with the inevitability of war looming on the horizon. Many of them came to South Africa but, as has just been mentioned, this country had its own share of anti-Semitism. Anti-Jewish sentiment took a number of forms, such as the Anti-Alien’s Act, which established greater immigration control, and the neo-Nazi Grey Shirt movement, which became an extremely powerful social lobby with a great deal of political influence. Ironically it is precisely this period that is remembered most fondly by many Jews and is the moment when the idea of the Jewish community re-establishing the *shtetl* in Johannesburg really comes to the fore.

In Chapter 9, Revelations, the overall migration of the Jewish community within Johannesburg is examined. The Jewish community contributed to the cityscape of Johannesburg from its earliest times. Commercial activities, institutional structures, and Jewish neighbourhoods formed a part of this colourful and often turbulent city. There are a number of reasons for the settlement and commercial patterns to appear as they did, and the reasons are discussed and summarized in the final chapter.

It is appropriate, before continuing with the main body of the text, to mention the methodology employed in the construction of the maps discussed in the text. Data was collected from a wide variety of sources; death registers, school attendance records, magazines, newspapers, and general correspondence from the South African Jewish Board of Deputies (SABJD) archives. Very strict criteria were applied when deciding what data was acceptable; the household, organisation, or business in question had to be undeniably Jewish and had to be linked to a physical address that could be mapped. In all some 8 500 addresses were retrieved and used in the mapping process just described.

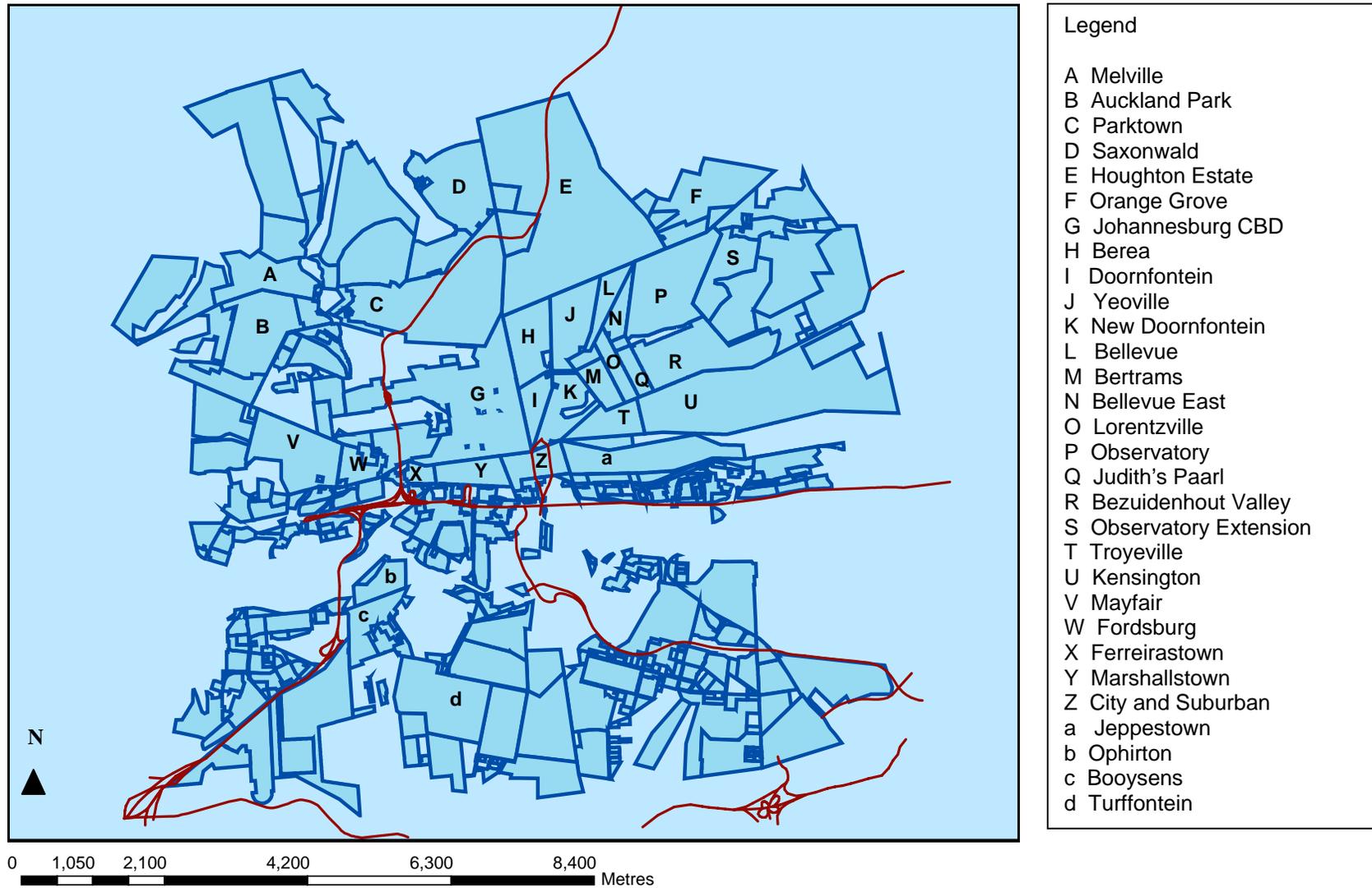


Figure 1.1: Johannesburg suburbs by 1939. For ease of interpretation the present-day freeway systems is shown here as in other maps of the series. (Source: Johannesburg City Council, 2002)

The next step in the process was to convert physical addresses (street names and numbers) into longitudinal and latitudinal co-ordinates in a procedure known as geo-coding. The information was geo-coded so that it could be mapped using a Geographic Information System, called ArcGIS. The end result has been a series of chronological maps depicting the movements and settlements of the Jewish community of Johannesburg from 1886-1939. It is these maps that are used to tell the 'story' of Johannesburg and the Jewish community.

The underlying street plan on the maps is the modern street map, much of which has not changed over the last hundred years. The relevant suburb and township boundaries still remain very much as they did in the early part of the last century (Fig. 1.1). The households, organisations, synagogues, and other features are represented by a series of points with letters or numbers used to provide further detail in the accompanying legend and are referred to in the text by the figure number of the map and their number or letter of reference. The maps give a good idea of the organisations, settlement patterns, and major attributes of the Jewish community. The maps of Johannesburg have also been divided into a set of hypothetical quadrants purely for ease of discussion within the text (Fig. 1.2). The mapping process has been long and complicated but what has been produced here is, if not a complete picture, than at least a highly accurate representation of the distribution of Jews and the various businesses and institutions of the community from 1886-1939. When reading the maps it must be remembered that the data is only being shown in a two-dimensional format. Thus an individual 'dot' might represent a single person, family, or a business but could also represent several persons, families, or businesses. Unfortunately the scale of the maps and the restrictions of adequately using three-dimensional formats have made it impossible to render the maps in any other meaningful manner. The scale of the maps changes depending on what is trying to be illustrated on each of the maps, and the maps themselves may cover smaller or larger areas of Johannesburg. It is hoped that the research is just part of a continuing and constantly evolving geographical project on the diverse and divergent minority communities that have played a part in the spatial development of the city of Johannesburg.

Before continuing with the text it is first necessary to emphasise two other important points. Namely that what is being attempted here is primarily to present a geographical picture, or facet, that will add to a fuller appreciation of what might be termed the history, or historical geography, of Johannesburg's Jewish community. In this context it must also be remembered that notwithstanding the finding and use of 8 500 addresses they constitute only a proportion of the whole. Furthermore the size of the proportion cannot be exactly established. In a sense then what is being presented in geographical terms is a set of views

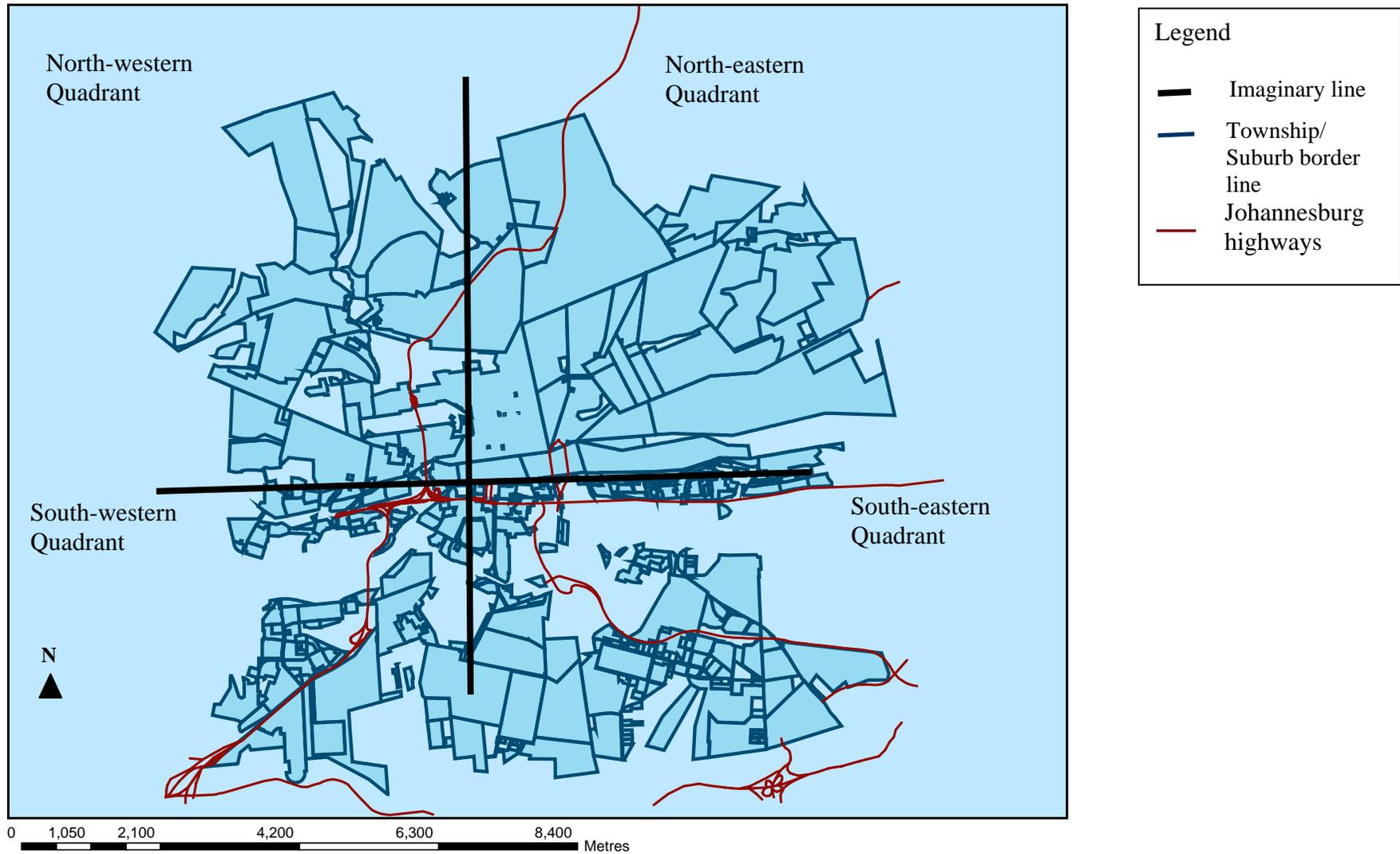


Figure 1.2: Johannesburg divided into four imaginary quadrants: the north-south axis runs along the edge of the CBD and the east-west axis follows the line of the mines in Johannesburg. (Source: City of Johannesburg, 2002)

where the geographical and temporal parameters associated with the 'pieces' of data are now known but where 'interstitial' data may or may not be outstanding. Consequently caution has been, and must be, exercised when drawing inferences from the data now available. As such the contribution of this study, if judged successful, must be seen as a starting point for something more complete in the future. The second point is that to date, and notwithstanding many references and vignettes that deal with Jewish life in Johannesburg, there is as yet no 'history' of Jewish Johannesburg for the complete time-period under discussion in this work. Consequently it has been necessary to provide a synthesis, drawn from a variety of both primary and secondary sources, that creates not only some semblance of the history of the Jews in Johannesburg but sets that backdrop against the broader and less detailed national and even international scene.