

CHAPTER 7
THE RISE OF AFRIKANER NATIONALISM
AND THE ‘JEWISH QUESTION’
1920-1929

The end of the second decade of the twentieth century South Africa was characterized by mounting Afrikaner nationalism and anti-Semitism. The Jewish community in Johannesburg had begun to close in on itself and had formed two main Jewish areas in east and north-east of Johannesburg, a pattern which, for the most part, continued into the 1920s. These Jewish enclaves catered for the full range of religious, social, and cultural needs that the population required. In the 1920s these spatial forms were further entrenched by the continued north-eastward movement of the community and most of the Jews in the far southern suburbs of Johannesburg joined the main migratory thrust to the north-east (the red arrows on Fig. 7.1 indicate the main direction of movement from the south to the north-east). The continued social and physical contraction and consolidation of the community within a small number of townships and suburbs was due to a variety of factors. The progressively more hostile environment and sense of insecurity that began to infuse Jewish life in Johannesburg influenced the form of the residential, commercial, and institutional patterns of the Jewish community. Furthermore the continued external pressure acted as a unifying force on the Jewish community. The old Eastern/Western European opposition within the Jewish ranks was eroded and with it the spatial separation that had marked previous generations began to fall away as more important, and more threatening events, took place around them. It is also during this decade, 1920-1929, that many Eastern European Jews, having attained some degree of success, moved away from the traditional values and dress of their homelands and increasingly began to take on the culture, dress, and rituals of their more assimilated anglicized co-religionists. In so doing they created a new South African Jewish identity (Krut, 1987).

The Fight for Power

Jan Smuts and the South African Party (SAP) maintained control of the government until 1920 when the general election saw the fall of SAP from power. The party only won 41 seats in parliament (Lacour-Gayet, 1977). The election results, however, were contested and declared null and void. Thus a new general election was called for the following year in which the SAP won 79 seats in parliament all that they needed to maintain control (Lacour-Gayet, 1977). Nevertheless, Smuts knew his power-base was under threat and the various decisions and actions that he had made over the last ten years were coming back to haunt him. In particular it was his support of the British during the First World War and his treatment of

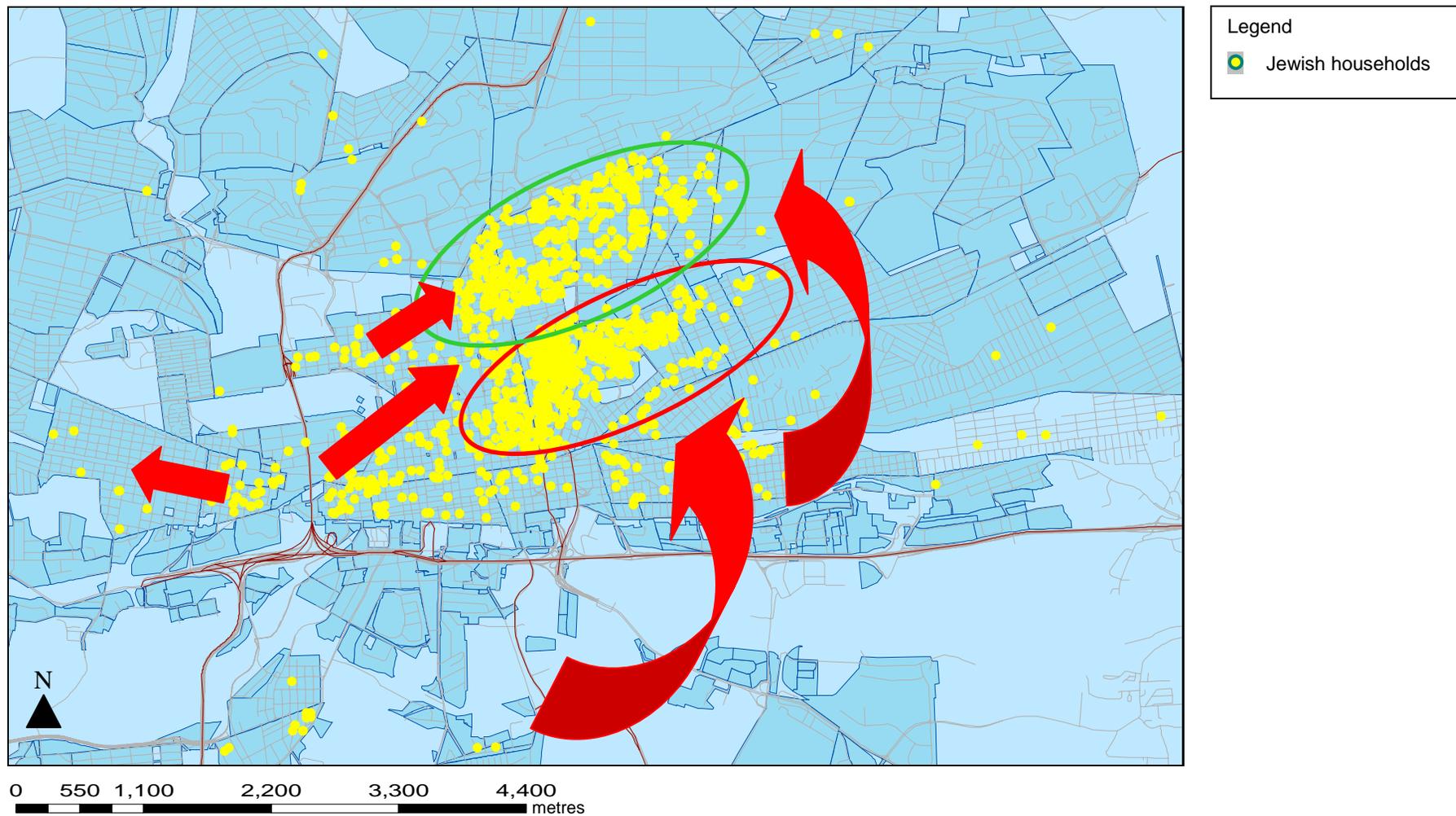


Figure 7.1: Jewish households in Johannesburg, 1920-1929.
(Source: Appendix XV)

the mining industry, and the strikers, that conspired to make him an undesirable leader for the majority of Afrikaans-speaking South Africans.

The National Party (NP) led by Hertzog and Malan, and which had seceded from the SAP in 1912, was the SAP's official opposition in parliament. Noting the antagonism that Smuts had triggered in the Afrikaans-speaking populace, Hertzog and Malan built an election platform around a particular formulation of Afrikaner nationalism. Their new 'South Africanism' proved to be a vote-winner and was the main reason why they 'won' the contested 1920 general election (Lacour-Gayet, 1977). The Hertzog-Malan construction of Afrikaner nationalism was far more sophisticated than simply that of putting Afrikaners first. It revolved around creating an acceptance or a belief among the electorate that Afrikaners, and other White South Africans of European extraction, were the 'founders of civilization' in South Africa. Furthermore due to their unique contribution it was White South Africans who could claim to be the 'rightful' rulers of South Africa. The NP leaders extended their argument by saying that true South Africans were not just Whites who were 'innately superior' but White South Africans whose first allegiance was to South Africa (Keppel-Jones, 1975). Even though all Whites were 'granted' a privileged position within the NP's discourse Afrikaners held a higher status than any other White ethnic group.

The Jewish population in the main supported Smuts for two main reasons; his close association with Britain, which had provided Jews in South Africa with their political enfranchisement after the *Anglo-Boer* War, and his involvement in the endorsement of the Balfour Declaration in 1917. Indeed Smuts was considered by many South African Jews to have been "chiefly responsible" for the signing of the Declaration¹, which established the Jewish nation's right to a homeland in Palestine.

The Nationalists, however, attempted to woo the Jewish vote away from the SAP and went on an aggressive campaign spearheaded by Tielman Roos,² Hertzog's second in command (Shimoni, 1980). In almost caricature fashion the Jews were perceived as being in control of the banks and having a large interest in the mining industry, both of which the NP wanted under their control. The local press picked up on the Nationalist's move to court the Jewish community, acknowledging, that "special appeals to the Jewish vote also form a feature of Nationalist activities nowadays".³ Roos constantly referred to the apparent similarities that existed between the Jews and Afrikaners of the late nineteenth century, namely that both Jews and *Boers* were 'People of the Book' and both had been led through the 'wilderness' to the 'Promised Land'. Roos extended the metaphor and argued that there should be a great deal of empathy between the two groups as the Jews, of all people, should

be able to identify with the need to preserve a cultural and ideological identity. As seen in a circular published and written by Roos in the early 1920s:

“There is no question that on sentimental grounds alone, our ideals of nationalism should make the strongest appeal to all true Jews, since it was the Jews more perhaps than any other race who have demonstrated to the world that it is possible by sheer tenacity of purpose for a people under the most adverse conditions to preserve its traditions, its religion even its language. Our struggle is the same in principle as yours. All we desire is to establish . . . and to preserve our nationality in South Africa”.

(Quoted in Shimoni, 1980: 91)

Although the Nationalist campaign did meet with a great deal of approval by the Jewish community there was still a degree of scepticism. It was justified when a comment that Tielman Roos had made during an earlier session of the House of Assembly came to light in the local press.⁴ Roos, apparently, had vociferously supported the proposed prohibition of Russian Jewish immigration, a stance that made the Jewish community cautious about supporting him and his party.

The question of Jewish immigration and naturalization

The comment made by Tielman Roos in 1919 probably received no attention whatsoever at the time but at the beginning of the 1920s Eastern European Jewish immigration had become a serious bone of contention between the Jewish community and the SAP government. The 1903 Immigration Restriction Act and the 1913 Immigration Act both defined a suitable immigrant to South Africa as an individual that could speak and write any European language. Yiddish, although not explicitly stated in the original Acts had been accepted in practice. By the early 1920s this situation began to change and reports filtered in to the South African Board of Jewish Deputies (SABJD) that fewer and fewer Jewish immigrants were being allowed to enter the country (Abrahams, 2002). The SABJD asked Smuts to amend the immigration Acts to reflect the *de facto* acceptance of Yiddish. He refused and claimed that it was simply not the right time to adjust the immigration laws. Smuts correctly read the broader political climate and realized that any encouragement to White groups other than the Afrikaners could quite possibly be the final nail in his political coffin. In contrast the Nationalists saw it as an opportunity to gain Jewish support and circulated another pamphlet stating that, “We [the National Party] are opposed to any measures contemplating the prohibition or hampering of Jewish immigration” (quoted in Rochlin, 1949a: 4).

Although supposedly being opposed to the limitation of Jewish immigration, the new Minister of the Interior Dr Malan (later leader of the NP), raised the naturalization fee from

£5 in 1905, to £11 in 1921.⁵ Since almost 80 per cent of the people applying for naturalization at the time of the amendment were Jewish, it certainly looked as if the increased fee was directed specifically at Jewish immigrants.⁶ There were further instances reported to the SABJD that naturalization was being refused on the grounds that applicants did not speak either English or Dutch. Since knowledge of these languages was not a legal requirement there was a great deal of suspicion raised concerning the real motives behind the refusals.⁷

The Workers' Strike of 1922

The economic conditions in South Africa reached a critical point in 1920 when Britain went off the gold standard and created unmitigated panic in the mining industry. The First World War had created a situation in which America and Britain were printing more money but they did not actually have the necessary gold reserves to support their increase of paper within the economy, as a result the inflation rate in Britain after the war was intolerable. In order to regulate the economy, the British government took the country, temporarily, off the international gold standard. The direct result for South Africa was a decrease in the demand for gold, and thus drove the South African economy down as less gold was sold as less gold was in demand (Rothbard, 1980).



FIGURE 7.2: Strikers and sympathizers, Library Gardens, 1922. (Source: Davie, 2002: no page number)

Already faced with high labour costs and protectionist policies the mining industry felt that the actions taken by the British might be their death knell (Gayet-Lacour, 1977). White miners demanded that their jobs be protected from the threat of cheap Black labour. The Chamber of Mines refused and the miners began to protest (Fig. 7.2). Over 30 000 miners went on strike. They divided themselves into commando units and ran the strike as a military operation (Abrahams, 2002). The strikers took over the mines and barred 'scab' labourers and Black workers from entering their places of work (Callinicos, 1980).

Tension between the strikers and the police finally erupted into open warfare and buildings were burnt down, innocent people were killed, and shops looted. Johannesburg was soon isolated from the rest of the country and under threat from desperate workers who claimed that they would win, "even if it meant razing the city to the ground", which is very nearly what happened (Lacour-Gayet, 1977: 264).

Smuts, remembering the workers' strikes of 1913 and 1914, wasted no time in negotiation but sent in the army and thereby escalated the strike from a skirmish to a pitched battle. The army treated the strikers as an enemy force and war planes bombed those parts of Johannesburg in which the strikers were based in an attempt to subdue them and end the strike (Fig. 7.3). The Chamber of Mines aggravated the situation by arrogantly declaring that they would not negotiate with people of such low intellectual ability. The statement added fuel to a fire that was already out of control (Gayet-Lacour, 1977).

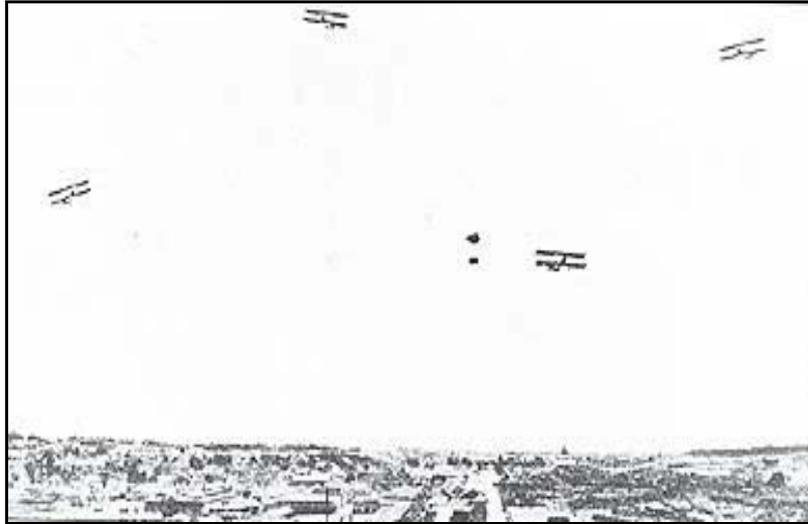


FIGURE 7.3: Bomber aircraft flying over the working-class suburb of Fordsburg, 1922. (Source: Callinicos, 1980: 5).

When the dust eventually settled and the battle ended on the 18th March 1922, three months after it had begun, 153 people were dead, over 500 were injured, and 5 000 people had been arrested (Abrahams, 2002; Davie, 2002). The outcome of the strike was exactly the opposite of the desired effect. The mineowners realized that they had the government's and thus the military's, support and dropped miners' wages further and kept them artificially low for the next five years. Wages for White miners that had averaged at about £485 per year in 1920 dropped to £375 per year and stayed at that level until 1925 (Callinicos, 1980).

The political ramifications of the Workers' Strike

Hertzog could not have asked for a better opportunity to garner the electoral support of the White miners. Smuts had played right into his hand by supporting the mineowners against the miners. Hertzog seized the moment and his publicity machine went into overdrive. In a series of speeches and articles he emphasized the lack of support and flagrant disregard that Smuts had shown for the White working class. It was as much a result of Smuts' actions, as of Hertzog's propaganda that Smuts lost the White Afrikaner vote (Lacour-Gayet, 1977).

The violence that Smuts had unleashed in putting down the rebellion, and the lives that were taken meant that the White middle and upper socio-economic classes began to seriously doubt whether the SAP could serve as a suitable government. There was a sense of a trust being broken, if Smuts had been willing to use military force against civil society, not once but on three separate occasions, then it was questionable about whose best interests he had at heart, the people's or the financial welfare of the mining houses (Callinicos, 1980).

The Jews fared little better than the SAP when the accusations rang throughout South Africa, and in Johannesburg it was openly reported in the press that the Jews had led and facilitated the rebellion (Abrahams, 2002). Claims that this had been a 'Bolshevist revolution' led by 'Russian' Jews were heaped on the local Jewish community and in direct contradiction to the facts. A grand total of only two Jewish strikers had been arrested and in reality there were more Jews in the Defence Forces which had put the strike down than among the protesters.⁸ The SABJD appealed to Smuts to disabuse the South African public of the rumours and he responded by making speeches in parliament praising the role that the Jewish community had played in South Africa. It was, however, not enough and Smuts could not really protect the community at all. Depictions of 'Hoggenheimers' and Bolshevist Jews flooded the press and a general anti-Semitic sentiment could be clearly felt in Johannesburg (Abrahams, 2002).

The loss of White confidence in Smuts and his government because of his actions over the last few years meant that by 1924, the National Party and the Labour Party between them had the majority of support. When they amalgamated in 1924 to form the PACT government the South Africa Party did not stand a chance. Many Jews voted for the PACT, not because they particularly supported either the nationalists or the labour movement but rather because they were dissatisfied with the SAP's policies of the time (Rochlin, 1949b). The constant threats to Jewish immigration, growing anti-Semitism and Smuts' inability to do anything about it led many Jews to a feeling of disillusionment with Smuts and his government.

Jews under a National Party Government

The Jewish community met the news of the Nationalist-Labour alliance in government with a great deal of ambivalence. On the one hand the Nationalists supported Jewish immigration and Jews had a long association with the labour movement but on the other hand the Jewish community was nervous about the special status that the Afrikaans-speaking community held in South Africa (Adams and Giliomee, 1979). The relationship between the Jewish community and the PACT government started off well enough, which

may have been due to the fact that by 1925 the gold standard in Britain had been restored and South Africa was enjoying greater economic success than it had seen in the previous 20 years (Lacour-Gayet, 1977). The demand for gold had gone up and the industrial sector had been stimulated by the import substitution initiatives that the PACT government instituted (Arkin, 1984). The Jewish communities' stereotypical business acumen was now seen as something that could further encourage the South African economy and many Jewish firms found themselves supported by the government (Rochlin, 1949b).

With the economy flourishing the PACT government then introduced two more policies that met with widespread approval. The first was the acceptance of Afrikaans as a national language on an equal footing with English and taking the place of Dutch. The second was the Class Areas Act which stated that certain parts of the city would be put aside as "reservation[s] of residential and trading areas in urban areas for persons other than natives [and] having racial characteristics in common".⁹ The Act was actually meant to enforce control over the Asian population, whose numbers and share of certain markets, such as small trading, was rapidly increasing.

The Jewish community, however, nervously interpreted the Class Areas Act as having possible negative implications for them, as they could just as easily be described as an urban group with common racial characteristics.¹⁰ The SABJD wrote to the Minister of the Interior in protest. They stated that their concerns were 'obviously' not with the present government but rather with how the Act could be used by future governments, who may not be as sympathetic to the Jews as the present administration.¹¹ The Class Areas Act was amended and the SABJD received a letter from the secretary of the Interior that included an amended draft of the Act incorporating a clause that the term "racial characteristics in common" could only be applied to "non-Europeans".¹²

The Class Areas Act was an omen of more discrimination to come. The assurances that the Nationalists had given to the Jewish community regarding Eastern European Jewish immigration was basically discarded within a year of the PACT government coming to power. The 1925 census of immigrants revealed that over 66 per cent of all immigrants to South Africa were of Eastern European extraction (Abrahams, 2002). Dr Holloway, the convenor of the census, argued in his report that the Eastern Europeans were undesirable immigrants as they were poverty-stricken and unable to contribute to South Africa's development (Abrahams, 2002: 117). Holloway's 1927 report further commented on the disadvantages of allowing Jewish immigrants into South Africa by saying that the country was losing Western European immigrants to its neighbouring states, and it was Western Europeans who were considered to be desirable immigrants. The press, once again, took up

the charge and publicly objected to Jewish immigration. When the SABJD approached the government with their concerns, they were re-assured that although quotas might be put in place they would not be directed at any one group or nationality (Abrahams, 2002).

Johannesburg in Context

Johannesburg, during the 1920s, was a site on which a series of racial and cultural tensions played themselves out. The 1922 Workers' Strike was as much a clash of cultural-linguistic factions as it was a conflict between class and wealth. It was not, however, the only racial issue that existed within Johannesburg's city limits. At the time Johannesburg had slum areas stretching throughout the central suburbs and south into the zones surrounding the mines (Fig. 5.6) (Dugmore, 1993). Although Locations and townships had been established for the Black communities, with separate areas supposedly dedicated to particular racial groupings, even prior to formal segregation and apartheid, the reality was that in the poorer areas Blacks, Whites, Coloureds, and Indians, very often lived side-by-side (Koch, 1983a). The formal Locations could accommodate less than half of the Black labourers permitted to live in Johannesburg and the rest found lodgings where they could. The need for shelter was so great that by 1921 there was a backlog of just over 400 applications for houses in Western Native Township (Kagan, 1978).

Housing shortages were not unique to the Black population of Johannesburg. Working-class White Johannesburgers were also short of accommodation. The lack of adequate living quarters was due to a number of factors, namely; the disruption of society by the First World War meant that very little housing had been built in the previous decade. The scarcity of White labour, who controlled the construction industry at the time, and the high price of building materials meant that housing stock had not increased significantly in the previous ten years (Trump, 1979). Not only were new houses not built but older buildings were generally allowed to become dilapidated. Alternatively stands were sub-divided and large numbers of corrugated iron shacks were squeezed onto them. The reason was simply the profit that could be made from letting out cheap lodgings. Rooms and shacks were rented out to whoever wanted and could afford them, and maintenance was kept to the bare minimum. The deterioration of the quality of 'housing' stock and the influx of slumlords, and other associated vices, resulted in Johannesburg's slums becoming worse and worse over the preceding years. Accommodation was extremely limited both in quantity and type, which meant that a large number of people were forced to accept poor quality shelter if they wanted to stay in Johannesburg (Kagan, 1978).

Municipal policy had maintained the non-enfranchised state of the Black residents but it was only with the promulgation of the Native (Urban Areas) Act, Number 21 of 1923, that an official method of racial segregation came into existence (Trump, 1979). The Act was intended as a piece of enabling legislation and devolved responsibility for Black urban housing to the municipal level. The Act further legislated that Blacks could not own land or houses in South African cities. Johannesburg adopted this legislation with alacrity. Many White residents of Johannesburg had demanded that Blacks should only be able to reside in the town, “. . . in so far as their presence [was] demanded by the wants of the White population.” (quoted in Koch, 1983a: 184). The Act was seen to be in many ways the answer to Johannesburg Town Council’s prayers.

Johannesburg was suffering from overcrowding, an increase in slums, and the fear that different racial groups were living in unacceptably close proximity to each other (Trump, 1979). It seemed, in Johannesburg’s case, as if the Act would solve all of their perceived problems, ‘excess’ Blacks could be sent back to the rural areas, Blacks living in White areas could be relocated to designated Locations, and low rental areas could be reclaimed for poor Whites. In simplified terms¹³, residents of slums and non-designated areas were given one month’s notice of the intention of relocation and then moved at the appropriate time. Property owners were made liable for any ‘Native’ living on their premises without a permit and were threatened with fines if they did not aid with the forced removals. Strangely enough though relocation was threatened it did not actually take place. In 1925 the Johannesburg City Council, primarily the architects of the Act, learnt the meaning of the phrase ‘hoist with your own petard’ and hoist they certainly were, later in the year when they discovered that the Act could not be used as they had intended (Trump, 1979).

In 1925 it was brought to the city council’s attention that the Act stated that people could only be relocated and/or removed from their homes only if there was appropriate alternative accommodation available for them. Johannesburg could not provide this accommodation and in 1925 the courts declared that the city council could not legally remove people from their homes. By 1926 the Urban Areas Act had effectively been nullified pending an amendment in 1930 and the slums and backyard shacks remained despite racial propaganda and local government intentions (Trump, 1979).

Johannesburg’s Jewish geography

The racial concerns of both Johannesburg’s Black residents and White officials had very little effect on the Jewish community of the city. The Jewish community maintained its distance and fought battles on somewhat different fronts. Unlike other immigrant communities the Jews did not “fade into the background” and were disproportionately over-

represented in many of the professions (Gitlin, 1926: 177). The combination of the Jewish community's insularity and their professional successes left them in a difficult position, in the South Africa of the 1920s.

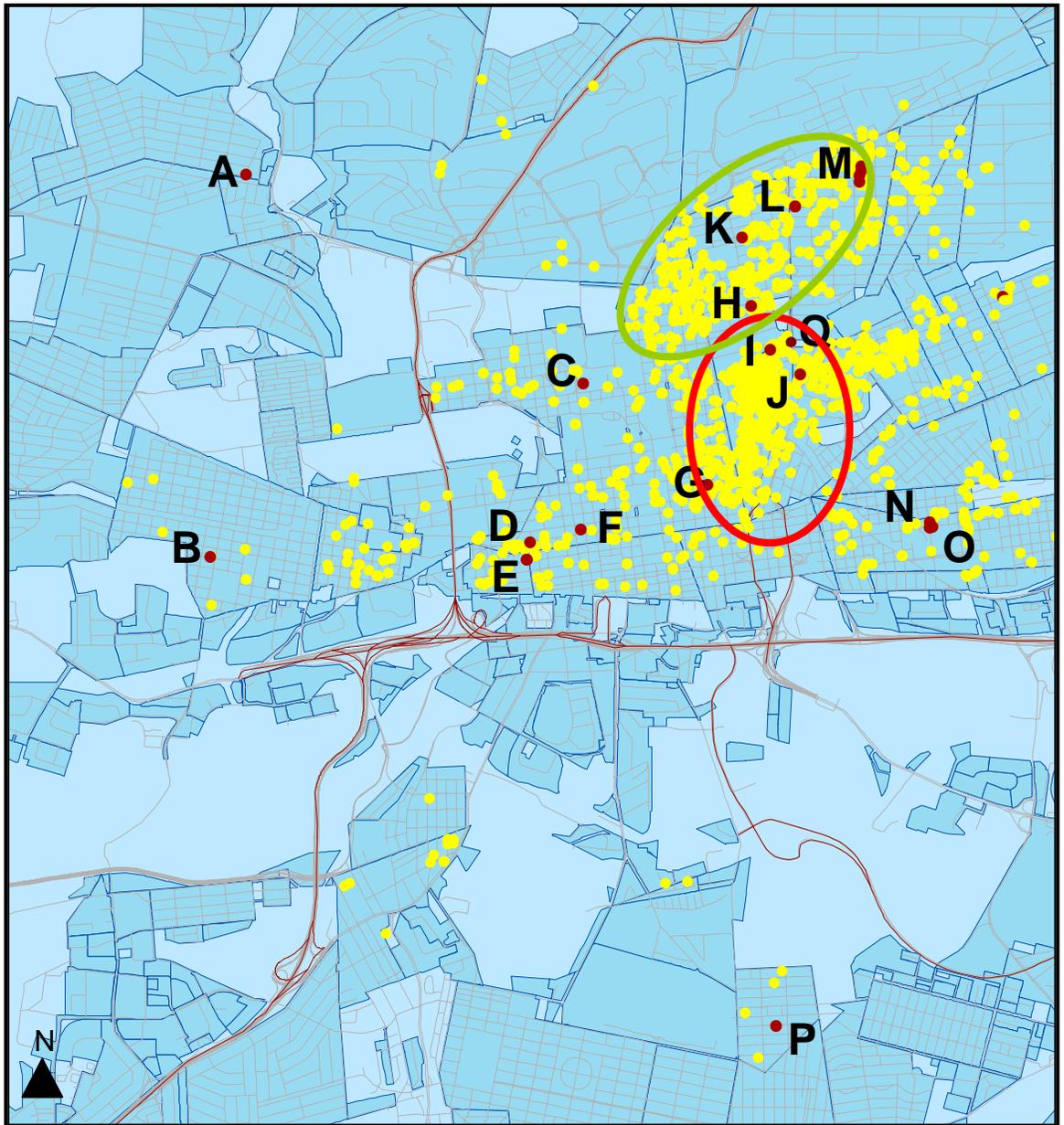
Sarah Gertrude Millin, a notable social commentator of the time, exposed the gentile, particularly the Afrikaner, attitude towards the Jews in Johannesburg in her book, *The South Africans* (Millin, 1926). She described how the Jews went from being the *Boers'* "...long lost older brother..." to the suspicion and discomfit that followed the Jewish community in South Africa and particularly Johannesburg (Millin, 1926: 175). In her book she wrote,

"The Jew on the whole is happier in Johannesburg than anywhere else in the world. Perhaps because not so long ago Johannesburg was a primitive mining town, there is still something fraternal and tolerant about its spirit. It bears its Jews, on the whole, amiably. And when big Jewish festivals come round and there are columns in paper filled with advertised goods 'for the Jewish holidays' and the Stock Exchange is shut, and the streets and cafes and places of amusement look suddenly very quiet, Johannesburg thinks again what a peculiar people the Jews are, and goes, without too much rancour, along its way"

(Millin, 1926: 179)

Observers of the time argued that any non-Jewish society can only be home to a certain number of Jews before the host culture becomes irritated by their presence. In Johannesburg and South Africa in 1926 they argued that the 'saturation' point had already been reached (Millin put the figure at one out of every fifteen people in Johannesburg was a Jew). Not only were there supposedly too many Jews but it was contended that they refused to assimilate into the mainstream culture and were highly visible in the professions (Gitlin, 1926). Given this lack of assimilation and the sheer numbers of Jews in the city casual observers did not find it in the least surprising that legislation to curtail Jewish immigration was in the pipeline.

There were a number of reported anti-Semitic incidents ranging from simple acts of ignorance and lack of cultural sensitivity, such as the proposal to hold extra lessons on Saturday at some of the local high schools, to a sign in a shop window in La Rochelle, reading, "Why support Jews, Indians and Natives?".¹⁴ The most violent attack came from a totally unexpected quarter, the Anglican Synod of 1924. Reverend H.G. White addressed the gathering, and voiced his concerns over the Jews as being, "a subversive element" and stating that "... the logical outcome of segregation would be to place the lions in Johannesburg, the cockatrices . . . in India, and the wolves in Palestine".¹⁵ These incidents were, however, mild in comparison to the anti-Semitism and abuse that Johannesburg and world Jewry would experience in the coming decade.



0 370 740 1,480 2,220 2,960 metres

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|--|---|
| ● Jewish households | J Doornfontein Synagogue Talmud Torah |
| ● Jewish schools and synagogues | K Hillel College (secular and Jewish education) |
| A Melville-Auckland Park Synagogue | L Rev. Woolf's private Hebrew school |
| B Mayfair Hebrew Congregation | M Yeoville Synagogue |
| C Braamfontein/Wanderer's View Synagogue | N Jeppestown Synagogue |
| D L.M. Lifschitz Cheder | O Jeppestown Synagogue Talmud Torah |
| E Ferreirastown Talmud Torah | P La Rochelle Talmud Torah |
| F Union College (secular and Jewish Education) | Q Jewish Aged Home |
| G Poswohl Synagogue | |
| H Berea North Hebrew Synagogue | |
| I Jewish Hostel for Boys | |

Figure 7.4: Jewish schools and synagogues in Johannesburg, 1920-1929.
(Source: Appendix XV and Appendix XVI)

In the 1920s the Jewish community consolidated its position in certain areas and reinforced the spaces as Jewish enclaves (Fig. 7.1). The movement of Jews into these locales may be attributed to the insecurity that the community felt, firstly after the strike when Jews were seen as the instigators and later because of the increasingly severe immigration regulations and comments by the census board and the press. More and more Jewish families crowded into the townships on the north-eastern side of Johannesburg's CBD, buttressed by synagogues, Hebrew schools, two new formal day schools opened that offered both Hebrew and secular education (Fig. 7.4, points F and K), illustrating the need for Jewish children to be able to traverse through both the secular and the Jewish worlds. Yiddish¹⁶, the language of Eastern European Jewry, was the language that the new generation spoke only at home to their parents and grandparents, whereas at work and school, they spoke English and/or Afrikaans.¹⁷ Eastern European Jewry was slowly changing into the Anglo-Jewish form that had already become privileged in South Africa. Yiddish and Eastern European practises declined as Jews moved into wealthier areas and the distinction between Eastern and Western European Jews was no longer as marked, either geographically or culturally, as it had been in the previous decades.

Doornfontein and New Doornfontein

There had been a large agglomeration of Jewish families in Doornfontein and New Doornfontein in the previous 20 years (*cf.* Figs. 5.3 and 6.2), and this was a trend that continued in the 1920s (the townships are indicated in red on Fig. 7.4). In fact the Jewish community in Doornfontein and New Doornfontein flourished as evidenced by the addition of another *Talmud Torah* at the Doornfontein Synagogue (Fig. 7.4, point J) and the opening of a Jewish Hostel for Boys (Fig. 7.4, point I), which served Hillel College (Fig. 7.4, point K) that had opened in 1920 in Yeoville.¹⁸ The Doornfontein Ladies Benevolent Society (Fig. 7.5, point P) was also established at the Doornfontein Synagogue to facilitate charitable and philanthropic functions. The Jewish community built the Hebrew Communal Hall (Fig. 7.5, point Q) in New Doornfontein for community activities, meetings, and events. The Jewish Home for the Aged had expanded over the preceding few years and by 1927 could boast its own hospital wing and synagogue dedicated for the residents' use (Fig. 7.4, point Q). The funding for the additions to the Home had been generously donated by I.W. Schlesinger, a wealthy member of the community.¹⁹

The Jewish community had grown and with it the demand for *Kosher* provisions. As a result five new *Kosher* butcheries opened in Doornfontein and New Doornfontein (Fig. 7.6, points P, Q, R, S, and T) and most of the butcheries that had been established in the last decade were still in operation in the 1920s. The two townships were mainly populated by

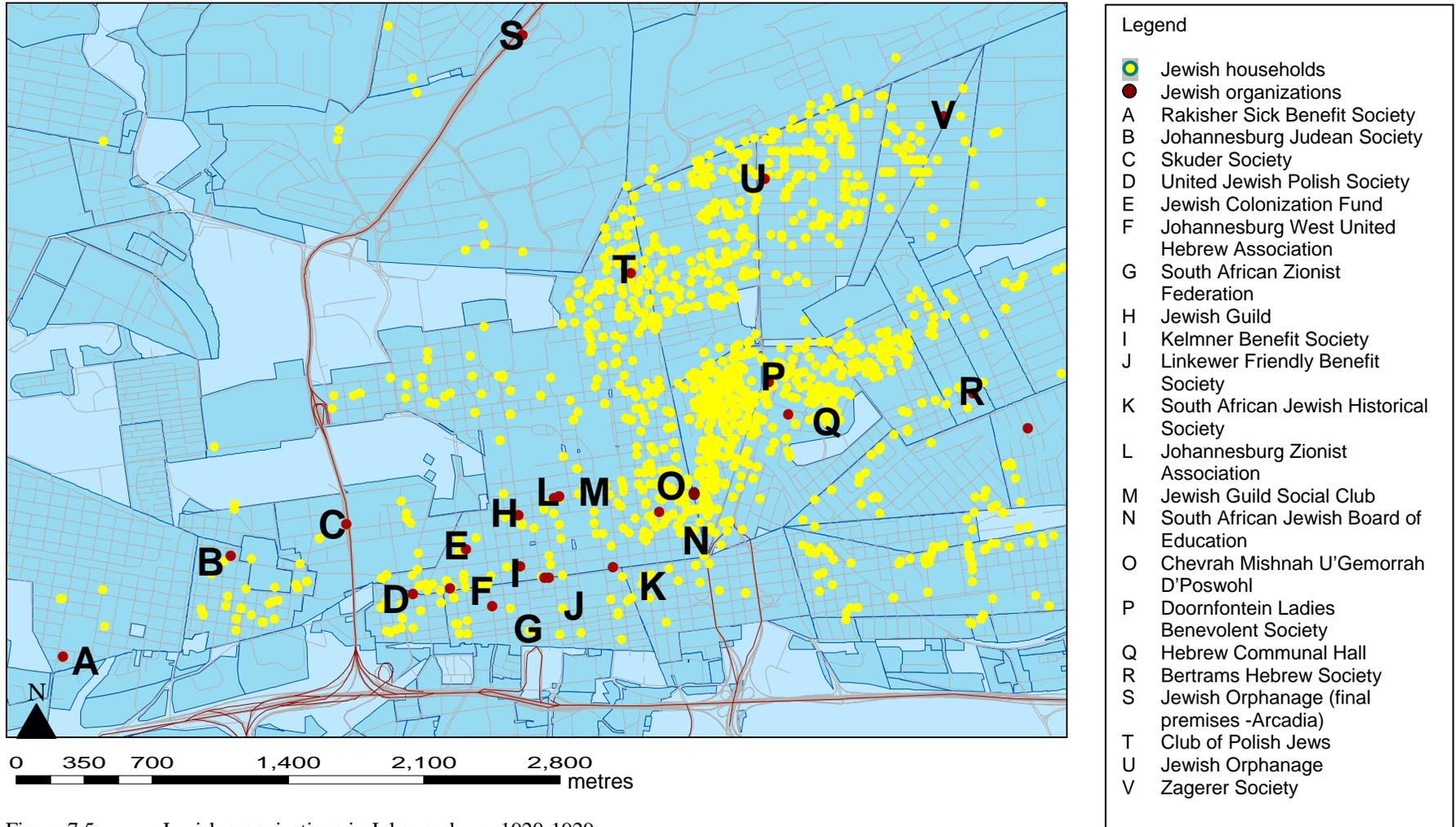


Figure 7.5: Jewish organizations in Johannesburg, 1920-1929. (Source: Appendix XV and Appendix XVII)

Jewish families and a resident described how when walking through Doornfontein on a Sabbath evening, “twinkling lights [of the Sabbath candles] were seen through the net curtains in every house” (Levy, 1978:2). The suburb was consistently referred to as a *shtetl*, and comparisons were made between the community’s home in Eastern Europe and the place that they had carved out for themselves on the cityscape (Berger, 1982). The truth is that any resemblance between the old *shtetls* of the Pale of Settlement of the nineteenth century and Doornfontein only existed in the ‘memories’ of the Jewish residents of the area.

Jews were, however, not the *only* people who lived in Doornfontein and New Doornfontein. As discussed earlier in this chapter there were a number of Black inhabitants in these suburbs, people who had ‘decided’ to thwart attempts to force them to reside in the Locations that had been reserved for ‘non-White’ Johannesburgers by the city council²⁰ (SAHO, 2004). The demand for housing or shelter amongst the labouring classes, at the time was so great that subdivided tin shacks were erected on the large stands that had once been the homes of Johannesburg’s elite. Landlords, more appropriately termed slumlords packed in as many people as possible into the Doornfontein and New Doornfontein yards. In part the demand was high due to the fact of their proximity to the light industries and factories just to the south.

Doornfontein was not the only enclave to expand during the 1920s, Braamfontein - Wanderers View had enlarged and grown in the previous decade, and the older community that had lived close to the Great/Park Synagogue (Fig. 4.4, point A) had moved north and settled around Wolmarans Street, where they had constructed a new synagogue. Although plans had been afoot to build a synagogue since 1917, the Braamfontein Hebrew Congregation, which was mainly composed of Eastern European Jews, only constructed the Braamfontein–Wanderers View Synagogue (Fig. 7.4, point C) in 1920.²¹ The Jewish families in Braamfontein, generally, worked and lived in the area but the community did not remain long and the residents soon joined their co-religionists in the more eastern part of the city. There are, however, a number of nostalgic remembrances of the neighbourhood and early residents remember processions parading through the streets on Jewish festivals, which were occasions when the whole neighbourhood would join in (Abelman, 1987).

North-eastwards expansion of the Jewish community

The city of Johannesburg experienced significant northward expansion during the late 1920s and early 1930s with the “aspirant bourgeoisie” moving into the larger and more pleasant suburbs to the north and east of the city centre (Beavon, 2000: 1). Yeoville and Berea (bordered in green on Fig. 7.4) catered for the emerging upper-middle class of Jews, and was

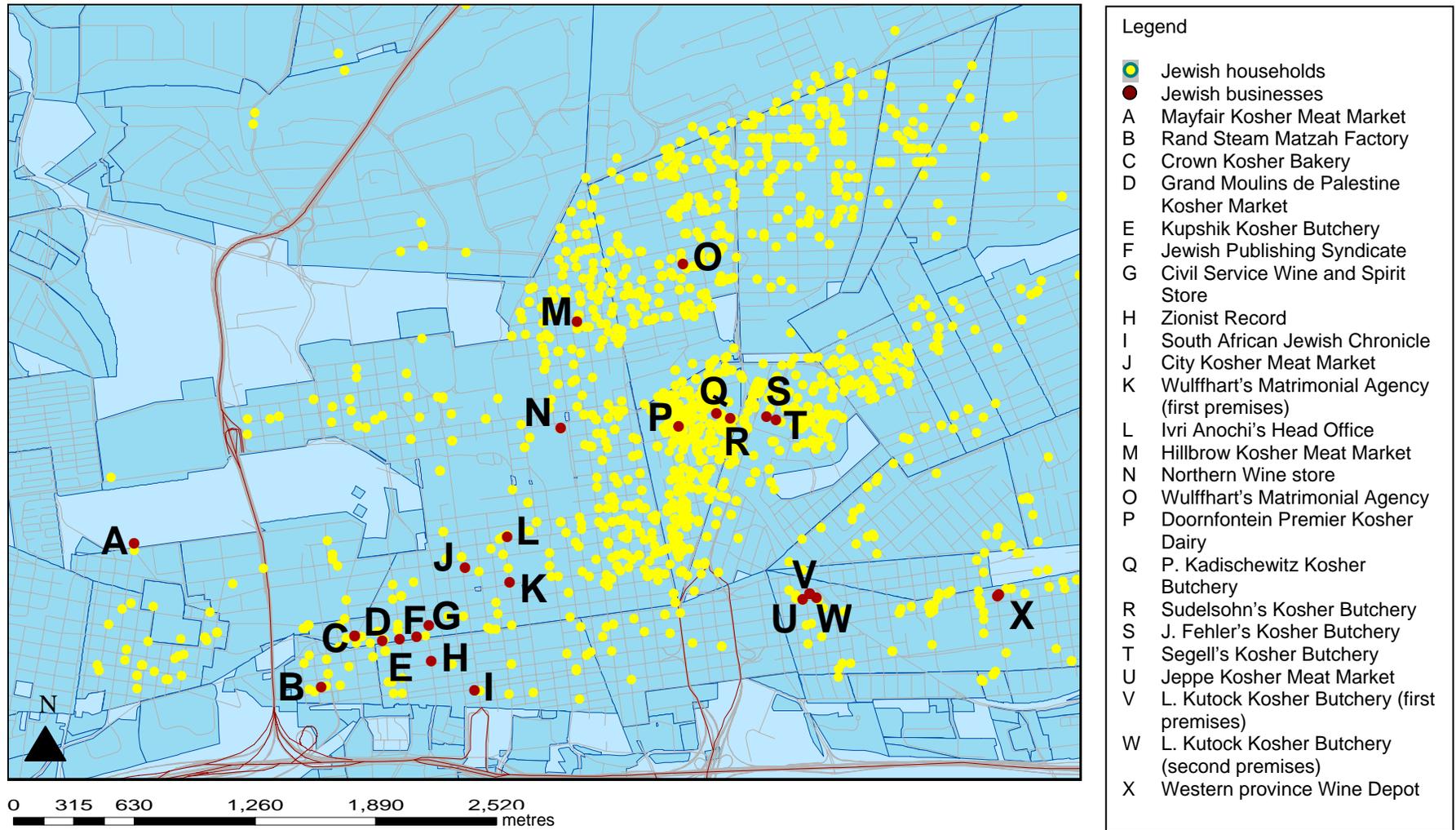


Figure 7.6: Jewish businesses in Johannesburg, 1920-1929. (Source Appendix XV and Appendix XVIII)

generally characterized by detached or semi-detached houses that were on slightly bigger stands than in Doornfontein and New Doornfontein (Hindson, 1987). Berea's Jewish community was mainly comprised of Eastern European Jews who had been able to elevate their status and move out and away from the slums of Ferreirastown. As such the Beth Hamedrash (Fig. 6.2, point E) was too far away to walk to on the Sabbath and on the various Jewish festivals. Consequently the Berea North Synagogue (Fig. 7.4, point H) was erected in 1923 to facilitate the religious obligations of the Jews in the neighbourhood. It could seat 614 people and by 1924 the synagogue offered Bible studies classes and in 1929 there was enough of a demand to start a Hebrew school for the Jewish children of the area.²¹

The congregation of the Berea North Synagogue was generally comprised of Eastern European Jews raised in the Lithuanian traditions but when setting up their synagogue they modelled their services after the United Synagogue in England (Norwich, 1988). It can therefore be inferred that with the movement out of the extremely closely knit Jewish community in the south of the city and the rise in socio-economic status, the Eastern European Jews began to discard some of their more traditional practises and assimilate into the more accepted anglicized form of Judaism. Yiddish along with the traditional dress and practises of Judaism were signifiers of poverty and immigration and the Jews of the 1920s, having moved past that, did not want to be reminded of the past (Feldman, 1960).

Berea was not the only northerly suburb experiencing a growth spurt. Yeoville's Jewish population increased a great deal over the period 1917 to 1923, to the extent that the original plans for the synagogue had to be revised and the seating capacity augmented to accommodate the fast growing community.²² Interestingly a number of the new congregants were not only Eastern European Jews who had moved, in the now familiar pattern, from the south but some of the congregants were from the Wolmarans Street Synagogue (Fig. 6.2, point L) and had moved north and eastward to join the main enclaves of Jews in Johannesburg (Fig. 7.1). The congregants employed a British Rabbi in the Yeoville Synagogue (Fig. 7.4, point M) who did not speak any Yiddish, indicating that the congregation served by the synagogue had 'moved' a significant way from their immigrant roots. They were fluent in English and had adapted to their new environment (Norwich, 1988).

Once again the physical move away from the heart of the 'Litvak' community seems to have been accompanied by a cultural shift to a more assimilated way of life. Hillel College (Fig. 7.4, point K) provided a Jewish and secular education to the Jewish children of the area who needed to be able to move in both Jewish and secular circles.²³ There were other *chederim* in Yeoville purely dedicated to the Jewish education of Jewish children. One such

Hebrew school was Reverend Woolf's Private Hebrew School.²⁴ Although the Jewish population was quite large and expanding all the time, Yeoville and its surrounding suburbs did not have any butcheries or other *Kosher* provisioning facilities even as late as the end of the 1930s. The sum total of businesses that could be found was Wulffhart's Matrimonial Agency (Fig. 7.6, point O), which had moved out of the CBD (Fig. 7.6, point K) and into the new 'Jewish' suburb. Other Jewish organizations, in general, were also slow to move into the area and only two *landsmanschaften* moved from the centre of Johannesburg, viz. the Club of Polish Jews (Fig. 7.5, point T), and the Zagerer Society (Fig. 7.5, point V).

The Jewish Orphanage moved twice; once into new premises and eventually found a permanent home for the next 40 years at Arcadia in Parktown. (Fig. 7.5, point S) (Kaplan and Robertson, 1991).

Although the main thrust of Jewish migration had been north and eastward there was a small community of Jews living on the opposite side of the city in the Auckland Park, Melville, and Richmond area. From what little information that can be found it appears that the Melville-Auckland Park Synagogue (Fig. 7.4, point A) was built to accommodate the small number of Jews who were living in the area. Not much is known of this community other than they stayed there but it stagnated and eventually disappeared altogether from the Johannesburg landscape some 25 years later (Norwich, 1988).

Jewish enclaves in the southern and western suburbs

Johannesburg had been the stage for one of the greatest events during the period, the Workers' Strike of 1922, and it was the general population of Johannesburg, including the city's Jewish community, who suffered both during and after the strike. The area of Fordsburg which had been one of the main centres for the Jewish community of Johannesburg, and where the strikers had made a militant and desperate stand had practically been destroyed during the strike (Lacour-Gayet, 1977). As a result the latter part of the 1920s saw the Jews moving out of Fordsburg and into the adjoining suburb of Mayfair (Fig. 7.1). As the community moved westward, the Fordsburg Synagogue became too inconvenient for the community to get to, thus a new synagogue was built in Mayfair (the Mayfair Synagogue, point B on Fig. 7.4).

The Mayfair community grew rapidly and at its peak, there were 600 families living in the township (Norwich, 1988; Sachs, 1971). The Rakisher Benefit Society (Fig. 7.5, point A) and the Johannesburg Judean Society (Fig. 7.5, point B), which were, a *landlseit* and a cultural preservation organization, respectively, moved in to Mayfair so that they were close to their members. The labour and socialist movements, which had focused their activities in

the working-class suburbs of Fordsburg and Ferreirastown, were very quiet during this period, and there are no records of labour organizations in operation in either of these areas; hardly surprising considering the violent reaction that they had received a few years earlier. A single *Kosher* butchery is recorded in Mayfair, during the 1920s, the Mayfair *Kosher* Meat Market (Fig. 7.6, point A). It can be supposed that the majority of Jewish Mayfair residents travelled in to the commercial districts in the centre of town to get their *Kosher* provisions and visit the *Kosher* shops of which there was hardly a shortage. The electric tram went through the centre of the area and provided more than adequate transportation (Fig. 7.7).

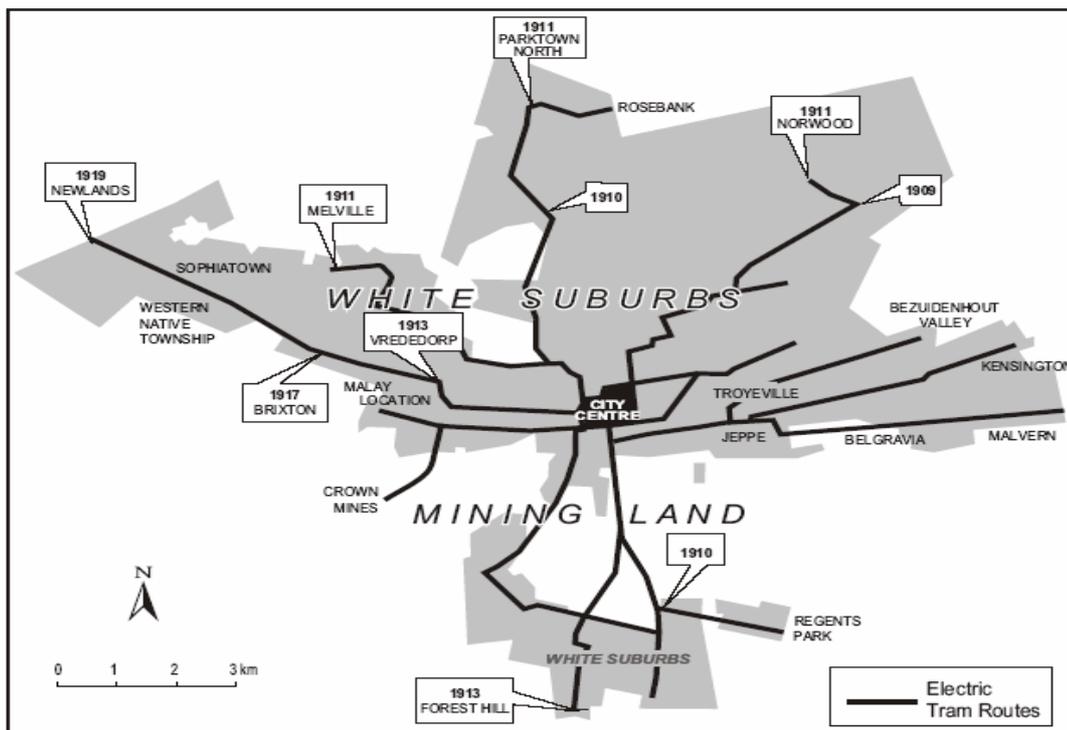


FIGURE 7.7: Electric Tram routes in Johannesburg, 1906-1939. (Beavon, 2004: 90; redrawn from Spit, 1976)

The *Kosher* shops also served the Jewish community in the southern part of the city. Although the majority of the population moved north and east, there were still remnants of the very orthodox Eastern European Jews living in Ferreirastown and Marshallstown. Their presence is indicated by the two *chederim* which functioned throughout this period (Fig. 7.4, points D and E) and there were still significant numbers of *Kosher* provisioning stores in this area, supplying everything from *Kosher* meat to the yearly necessity of *matzah* (unleavened bread) for the Passover Festival (Fig. 7.6, points, B, C, D, E, and G). Jewish organizations for the most part had stayed in the centre of Johannesburg, where they were convenient to get to for both those in need and those who worked and volunteered for them. The *landsmanschaften* (Fig. 7.5, points D, I, and J) that were intimately connected to the well-being and cultural life of the Eastern European community stayed close to the most traditional

Jews those living in Ferreirastown and Marshallstown. The Zionist organizations (Fig.7.5, E, G, and L), the South African Jewish Board of Education (Fig. 7.5, point N), the Jewish Social Club, Jewish Guild, and South African Jewish Historical Club (Fig.7.5, points M, H, and K) that catered for both traditional and more assimilated Jews were located in the CBD.

In the CBD a new synagogue had been built for the Eastern European Jews of the Poswohl Friendly Benefit Society. The *landsleit* assisted its members in their medical and financial needs and by the 1920s decided to aid its members with their formal religious needs as well (SAJYB, 1929). The Poswohl Synagogue (Fig. 7.4, point G) served the community living in the southern and eastern part of Johannesburg who still maintained traditional Eastern European orthodox form of Judaism. The synagogue was also used for studying the Biblical texts and religious education, which was in keeping with the way that the Litvak Jews used their synagogues (Fig. 7.5, point O). The synagogue was located very conveniently, close to the CBD and its associated commercial activities, and near to the new enclaves in Doornfontein, but was out of the worst of the slums of Marshallstown and Ferreirastown.

Towards the south of the city, Jeppestown, Wolhuter, and Fairview had been quietly developing over the last twenty years and by the mid 1920s were host to a thriving community of Jews – smaller than its sister communities in Doornfontein and Yeoville but fully functional with its own synagogues, *Talmud Torahs* and *Kosher* stores. The original Jeppestown Synagogue, built in 1903, was too small for the burgeoning community and in 1927 a new Jeppestown Synagogue with a *Talmud Torah* (Fig. 7.4, points N and O, respectively) were constructed (Jewish Affairs, 1963). Jeppestown was a “young and active community” (Norwich, 1988: 215) and a number of *Kosher* shops opened to provision the Jewish community of the surrounding areas (Fig.7.6, points U, V, W and X).

* * *

During the 1920s the Jewish community faced rising Afrikaner nationalism and a disquieting increase in anti-Jewish sentiment. The Jews of Johannesburg responded in two ways; the first was by assimilating, at least in language and dress, into mainstream South African society, while at the same time moving into even closer proximity to each other and creating areas that had large concentrations of Jews. These townships were packed with accoutrements necessary for Jewish life and the Jewish community conglomerated in the urban spaces that had been settled in the previous few decades. Jews had become more and more economically mobile and as a result they had moved into better areas, away from the slums of Ferreirastown and Marshallstown and into the north-east of the city. These Jewish enclaves provided not only a measure of security for the Jewish community but they became

sites that held religious and cultural significance for them. The sense of identification, the need for safe spaces, and the intensity of the Jewish atmosphere meant that the Jews who lived in the areas later remembered them, in the minds eye, as replicas of the *shtetls* of Eastern Europe. The anti-Semitism in the forms of public press and immigration difficulties were early signs of the prejudice and hatred that was going to mark the social history and the geography of the Jews in Johannesburg in the decade that lay ahead.

Notes for Chapter Seven

¹ The Star, 1920: Smuts and the Jews, *The Star* (daily newspaper) 7th December 1920, SABJD Archives.

² The Star, 1920: Nationalists and Jews, *The Star* (daily newspaper) 2nd March 1920, Johannesburg, SABJD Archives.

³ Rand Daily Mail, 1920: Editorial, *Rand Daily Mail*, (daily newspaper) 6th February 1920, Johannesburg, SABJD Archives.

⁴ Rand Daily Mail, 1920: More Nationalist Tactics, *Rand Daily Mail*, (daily newspaper) 6th March 1920, Johannesburg, SABJD Archives.

⁵ Minutes of the Fourth Congress of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies, Johannesburg, 31st July 1921, SABJD Archives.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ The Zionist Record, 1922: Report back of the South African Board of Jewish Deputies meeting held, *The Zionist Record*, (weekly newspaper 31st May 1922, Johannesburg, SABJD Archives.

⁹ The Zionist Record, 1925: Naturalization, *The Zionist Record*, (weekly newspaper) 31st July 1925, Johannesburg, SABJD Archives.

¹⁰ Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, SABJD, Johannesburg, 27th January 1924, SABJD Archives.

¹¹ Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting , SABJD, Johannesburg, 17th January 1924, SABJD Archives.

¹² Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, SABJD, Johannesburg, 4th March 1924, SABJD Archives.

¹³ For a more complete discussion on the slums and the Johannesburg municipality's reaction to them see, Trump, M., 1979: The clearance of the Doornfontein Yards and racial segregation, *Africa Perspective*, 12, 40-56; Parnell, S, 1987: Council Housing Provision for Whites In Johannesburg: 1920-1955, unpublished M.A. dissertation, Department of Geography and Environmental Studies, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, Johannesburg; Dugmore, H.L., 1993: "Becoming coloured": Class, culture and segregation in Johannesburg's Malay Location, 1918 – 1939, unpublished PhD thesis, Department of History, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, Johannesburg; du Toit, M., 2003: The general view and beyond: social documentary photography, slum clearance and state social welfare programmes, circa 1934-1948, Workshop on South Africa in the 1940s, Southern African Research Centre, Kingston, September 2003.

¹⁴ Minutes of the Executive Committee Meeting, SABJD, 17th April 1924, Johannesburg, SABJD Archives.

¹⁵ Minutes of a Special Meeting of the Executive Committee, SABJD, 18th May 1925, SABJD Archives.

¹⁶ Yiddish is a language which used German grammar, Aramaic, and Hebrew words, and borrowed a number of expressions from the Slavic languages. The exact origins of the language remain slightly obscure, however there is evidence to suggest that it developed in Bavaria and Slavic countries and

moved with the Jewish population when they took up residence in what was later the Pale of Settlement. By the end of the nineteenth century it was the vernacular of most Jews living in Eastern Europe and was spoken by the majority of Jewish immigrants who came to South Africa (Johnson, 1996).

- ¹⁷ South African Jewish Chronicle, 1922: The Failure of Yiddish, *South African Jewish Chronicle*, (weekly magazine) 20th October 1922, Johannesburg, SABJD Library.
- ¹⁸ The Zionist Record, 1920: No title, *The Zionist Record*, (weekly newspaper) 21st April 1920, Johannesburg, SABJD Library.
- ¹⁹ The Zionist Record, 1927: Editorial, *The Zionist Record*, (weekly newspaper) 13th May 1927, Johannesburg, SABJD Library.
- ²⁰ When the 1923 Native (Urban Areas) Act was taken by the Johannesburg City council it was a group of residents from the Doornfontein area who contested the removals that led to the finding that Black residents could not be removed without the municipality supplying them with alternate accommodation (Doucakis, 1991). There is a great deal more to this story but the influence of these events on the Jewish community was negligible and thus has not been dealt with in a great deal of detail within this dissertation. In 1927 the Native Administration Act was approved, one of its aims was the provision of more housing for the Black population within Johannesburg's locations (SAHO, 2004). The Doornfontein residents resisted moving for as long as they could and managed to hold onto their 'homes' and the burgeoning Marabi culture until the next decade when new legislation came into affect that allowed for the forced removal and resettlement of the Black population living in Johannesburg (Doucakis, 1991).

Further information on this period and the various acts and responses can be found in Parnell, S.M, 1987, Council Housing Provision for Whites in Johannesburg: 1920-1955, unpublished M.A. dissertation, Department of Geography and Environmental Studies, University of the Witwatersrand; Parnell, S.M., 1993: Johannesburg slums and racial segregation in South African cities, 1910-1937, unpublished PhD thesis, Department of Geography and Environmental Studies, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg; and Koch, E., 1983: Doornfontein and its African working class, 1914 to 1935: a Study of Popular Culture in Johannesburg, unpublished M.A. dissertation, Department of History, University of the Witwatersrand.

- ²¹ Berea Synagogue, 1967: The Story of the Berea Synagogue, 1923-1967, Brochure on the 44th Anniversary of the Berea Synagogue, SABJD Archives.
- ²² Susser, B., 1973: Yeoville Synagogue, 50th Anniversary Brochure, Yeoville Congregation, SABJD Archives.
- ²³ The Zionist Record, 1920: No Title, *The Zionist Record*, (weekly newspaper) 21st April 1920, Johannesburg, SABJD Library.
- ²⁴ Ivri Onouchi , 1924: Editorial, *Ivri Onouchi* (The Journal of the Jewish Guild, monthly publication) 1st October 1924, Johannesburg, SABJD Library.