

CHAPTER 9 REVELATIONS

The Jewish community of South Africa, for the most part, has its origins in the Pale of Settlement of Eastern Europe. They had lived there relatively peacefully for almost five hundred years when the political climate changed in Russia and with it the status of the Jews. Many Jews left, driven by the economic and social inequity that became part of the legislated system, and the increasing levels of violence aimed at the Jews. They immigrated to a number of different countries and South Africa was one such option. The worsening of the conditions in Russia and the Pale occurred contemporaneously with the discovery of gold in the area that was to become known as Johannesburg. The desire to leave Russia was thus matched by the attraction of gold and all of its associated economic opportunities, and so by the mid-1880s there was already a small Jewish community living in the mining camps and shanties of Johannesburg. This small band of Jews was soon joined by their co-religionists and settled in Ferreirastown and Marshallstown, where the poorer elements of the Jewish community stayed for the next few decades, only abandoning their homes when war broke out. After the war Jews returned to the area south of the Johannesburg CBD and established a number of other small conglomerations of Jewish communities on the Johannesburg cityscape. Over the next few decades there was a gradual but general movement north-east into the suburbs of Doornfontein and New Doornfontein until a thriving Jewish community was firmly entrenched on the landscape in these two suburbs. Jews, however, were not the only inhabitants of this area, and the relationship between the Jews and the Blacks who lived in the Yards has already been cited as a theme that requires further research. The hub of the community, which had traditionally been located in Ferreirastown and Marshallstown moved into Doornfontein and its adjoining suburbs in the 1920s. Doornfontein is generally fondly remembered by those who lived or frequented the district. By the 1930s the Jewish community had moved north-east and had settled in two parallel lines that stretched across the inner north-eastern quadrant of Johannesburg (Fig. 8.4).

The Jewish community's migration across the landscape between 1886-1939 was generally accompanied by the establishment of a host of Jewish organizations, schools, shops, institutions, and synagogues. All of which serviced the communal, traditional, and religious needs of the Jews. The proximity of the synagogues, as discussed earlier in the dissertation, was also determined by the religious imperative that it needed to be within walking distance of its congregation as other methods of transportation are strictly forbidden on Jewish holy days. The

synagogues performed a number of other functions as well, in that they hosted charitable organizations, social events, and many had *Talmud Torahs*, and *chederim*, attached to them.

The charitable and communal organizations followed a slightly different pattern. The organizations can be roughly divided into two categories; care facilities and communal institutions. Care facilities consisted of those activities that ensured the welfare of the more vulnerable members of the Jewish community, generally the aged or orphaned. These types of activities were usually located close to or within the heart of the Jewish districts, to allow for easy access by the friends and relatives of the people housed and cared for within the institutions. The communal organizations, such as the South African Board of Jewish Deputies and the South African Board of Jewish Education, were originally located in the CBD and it is in the CBD that they stayed. Initially because most of their charitable work was situated in the slums of Marshallstown and Ferreirastown and the central location was convenient for petitioners and board members alike. Later on with the migration of most of the Jewish population north-east of the CBD, the institutions stayed in the city as they were still accessible by the trams, buses, and roads. The central area of the city also added a degree of status and respectability to the image of the organizations, as the CBD at that time was the centre of all major trade, business, and decision-making in Johannesburg.

The north-east movement of the Jewish community can partly be explained by the fact that the immigrant Jewish population, which arrived as peasants and lived in the poorest sections of Johannesburg, gradually worked their way into the middle socio-economic income bracket. By the 1930s the vast majority of Jews in Johannesburg were in professional and managerial positions (Sonnabend, 1936). They accordingly migrated to areas that were more expensive and had better housing and facilities.

No matter the actual location of these clusters of Jews they were constantly described in similar ways and that is as living spaces that supposedly *closely* resembled the *shtetls* of Eastern Europe. Early descriptions of Johannesburg mention that Jews lived very close to one another and created areas that were almost exclusively Jewish and in which only Yiddish was spoken.¹ Authors who have written about Ferreirastown and Marshallstown remark that life centered around the Beth Hamedrash and the streets surrounding it and apparently had more than a passing resemblance to the *shtetls* (Sachs, 1971; Abrahams, 2001). As the majority of Jews in Johannesburg moved north-east of the CBD the areas that were compared to *shtetls* were Doornfontein and New Doornfontein. They were called “Little Lithuanias” and “translocated

shtetls” (Wedcliffe, 1979: 9; Berger, 1982: 42). Even later generations when describing the areas that their parents and grandparents lived in called them *shtetls* (The Citizen, 1980; Sunday Times, 1994). The recurring theme of Jewish areas as replicated or translocated *shtetls* requires a degree of interrogation in order to see if it was actually the case or not.

The ‘Translocation’ of the *Shtetl* onto the Johannesburg Landscape

As outlined in the earliest chapters of the dissertation, *shtetls* were little towns and villages that existed within the Pale of Settlement for less than a hundred years. They were specific to a place and time in history. Their very establishment was subject to political and social forces of the time and their manifestations were not a uniform geographical reality (Rothenberg, 1981). They differed in shape, size, and the composition of the population. The *shtetls* were also situated within rural environments and the ratio of Jews to non-Jews varied considerably. Some of these spaces were industrialized and fairly sophisticated whereas others were simply rude pastoral villages. Even the Jewish populations were not necessarily the same, or even very similar, and the inhabitants followed any number of different forms of Judaism. In short no two *shtetls* were the same. Their homogenization by later generations into an idealized form has already been explained. The formulation of the *shtetl* into its later ‘Disneyfied’ version was constructed for a diasporic Jewish community living far away from the reality of the hardships and squalor of Eastern Europe. As such the enclaves and the conglomerations of the Jews in Johannesburg cannot in any type of geographical sense be called *shtetls*.

The Jewish enclaves in Johannesburg were enclosed within the urban environment of Johannesburg and were a part of the Johannesburg cityscape. In truth, aside from religion, the small farming villages in the interior of South Africa probably bore a greater physical and functional resemblance to *shtetls* than any of the Jewish enclaves found in Johannesburg. The *shtetls*, and the small towns in South Africa were both located away from the cities and in the heart of the countryside and serviced the local farming communities. Although the comparison cannot be taken much further without a great deal more research to establish the similarities and differences that may have existed. The *shtetls* also ranged in technological advancement and were, for the most part, pre-industrial with only limited infrastructure and technology. The Jewish community of Johannesburg was at the same level of advancement as the other White citizens of Johannesburg. The Jewish districts did not lack facilities or infrastructure and by the 1920s were, if not wealthy, certainly not poverty stricken like so many of the *shtetls* in the Pale. The Jewish

community had reached levels of economic comfort that were far removed from the experiences of their grandparents and great-grandparents. The Jewish immigrants and particularly their offspring by 1920, or even earlier, were better educated, wealthier, and more acculturated and in touch with their non-Jewish compatriots than their families of Eastern Europe.

Another important factor when comparing the *shtetls* of Eastern Europe with the enclaves on the Johannesburg cityscape is the understanding that Jews of the Pale were forced into living within the confines of the *shtetls*. Their lives and destinies were controlled and limited by the fact that they were Jewish and the Russian government dedicated time and legislation to controlling where and how the Jews lived. That is not true of the situation in South Africa. At no point in the history of this country were Jews ever forced to live in any specific area or location, which becomes an important fact when understanding the nature of the enclaves and the reasons for their shape and existence in Johannesburg. Jews chose to live close together, chose to inhabit certain spaces – that if nothing else provides a serious point of departure between a *shtetl* existing on the Eastern European landscape and the enclaves and small conglomerations within Johannesburg's boundaries.

The question arises as to whether the intention of using the term *shtetl* was perhaps intended in a more metaphorical than a factual sense. One in which the 'spirit' of the *shtetl* described was to be found rather than simply the bricks, mortar, and physical form. If that was the intended formulation then such an idea may have greater credence. A conglomeration of people living in close proximity with others who share a set of values and ideas *may* very well be interpreted in some way as a replication of the way of life that provided for the needs of the Jewish community. If so then a range of things would be required for a space to be a metaphorical *shtetl*. The language spoken in the *shtetl* that could express the intricacies and the daily experience of life was Yiddish. The importance of giving to charity and providing for those less fortunate and the pre-occupation with Judaism and the studying of *Torah*, would also be important aspects of the *shtetl*. The central place of the family, and kinship relations, formed another vital facet of Jewish life in the Pale of Settlement. The significance of education and betterment, and bringing pride to both the family and the community, should also not be underestimated (Gittleman, 1978).

The enclaves in Johannesburg certainly shared some of the features enumerated above and there was a great deal of emphasis placed on the giving of charity and looking after those in need. Education was also of central importance to the Jewish community of Johannesburg and

was even cited as a reason for the early cessation of a group of Jews from the Witwatersrand Hebrew Congregation. The city, over the 50 years that have been discussed, was not short of *Talmud Torahs* and *chederim*. Other factors such as the dress and the speaking of Yiddish were also in evidence within the enclaves in Johannesburg.

The ‘replication’ or ‘translocation’ of the *shtetl* may provide an explanation for these characteristics but, to apply Occam’s Razor for a moment, surely there are far simpler explanations. Judaism, which is the underlying commonality of the community under discussion, brings with it a host of cultural practises that were certainly not unique to the *shtetls* of Eastern Europe. The Jewish community also bears close resemblances to many other non-Jewish immigrant communities. The importance of charity, for example, is one of the foundation stones of the religion and not a translocated practice. Education is similarly a religious injunction and not specific to the Jews of Eastern Europe. The importance of family and kin can just as likely be ascribed to the sense of foreignness within a new land than to a *shtetl*-like characteristic. The establishment of institutions and organizations, of social and cultural frameworks, have been interpreted as the translocation of the *shtetls* characteristics into a new space but they can just as easily be argued to be a combination of the impact of a highly structured religion with a vast set of laws and practises and the typical behaviour of an immigrant group in a new and daunting environment.

Practical Considerations of Immigrant Communities

There are a number of reasons why an ethnic minority would choose to settle in close proximity to people of a similar background and culture in what is known geographically as ‘ethnic cohesion’ (Gans, 1967; Hart, 1974). The reasons are many; living close to friends and family; having access to places of worship; stores which stock ethnic food; educational facilities; and care institutions. These features would make certain places more attractive than areas, which lack these facilities. There are other reasons that should also be considered such as congregating together as a form of self-protection and having areas in which Jews could comfortably express their cultural and religious identities. It is also through a conglomerating in specific enclaves that Jews were able to maintain and reproduce their identity.

Fear and loathing in Johannesburg

Anti-Semitism has always been a very real consideration for Jews living in non-Jewish societies and countries, and Johannesburg was unfortunately no exception. Early Jewish settlement in Johannesburg was not met with universal acceptance and some of the anti-Jewish sentiment that existed within Johannesburg society has been detailed in Chapters 3 and 4. Regrettably these feelings grew stronger over time and the blatancy of the anti-Jewish lobby by the 1930s was something the Jewish community was only too well aware of. As such clustering in the various enclaves can also be seen as a method of 'self-defense'. Living in insular environments was a measure taken against the threats extant in wider South Africa society.² In these enclaves Jews could feel safe and secure, away from anti-Semitic remarks and attacks. It would seem to be no coincidence that the 1920s and 1930s, when anti-Semitism was climbing towards its zenith in Johannesburg, that the community consolidated into two densely settled parallel lines in the north-eastern quadrant of the city (Fig. 8.4). These areas were predominated by a Jewish atmosphere and had large numbers of Jewish families living in them. The reality remains that they were probably no safer living within the enclaves than anywhere else in the city but it was the perception that these were places where Judaism reigned and could not be touched by the politics of the day that gave these enclaves and the people who lived in them at the time a sense that they were safe and secure (Lammas, 1993).

A sense of place

Furthermore the people who lived in these areas had a sense of the place in which they lived, which had meaning beyond the practical considerations of daily life (Hart, 1984). The Jewish suburbs of Doornfontein and New Doornfontein, and the other Jewish districts that have been discussed, were spaces which were 'Jewish'. The old adage of being a being a Jew anywhere and at any time within these spaces was a lived experience that was of paramount importance to the community. The areas were given meaning beyond the everyday practicalities or commercial and communal life or the sense of security and safety. They were areas which held personal significance for the Jews living there, one which allowed and encouraged Jewish identity.

The fascinating part of the existence of these enclaves is their persistence on the Johannesburg cityscape. Over the 50 years period that is discussed in the dissertation the pattern is repeated over and over again and the practical considerations only explain part of the reason for

their existence. The underlying motives have to do with the fear of assimilation and the desire to survive as a community with a specific cultural identity over time. It is the relationship that existed between the spaces of the Jewish enclaves and the cultural practices and beliefs that led to the recurring pattern and to the continued existence of the Jewish community of Johannesburg.

The Recursive Relationship between Space and Culture: Defeating Assimilation

Jews, up until 1948 and the establishment of the State of Israel, generally lived in non-Jewish countries and environments. The threat of losing their identity, as Jews, has thus been a consideration in the lives of Jewish communities the world over. Assimilation in these terms means the loss of a Jewish identity and an integration into the wider national or cultural identity. The fear is that either there will be a complete loss of identity or “the norms of the Jewish group [will] lose their specific Jewish quality when they are submerged in the dominant culture” (Herman, 1977: 52). A range of mechanisms and techniques have been used to ensure the endurance of Jews as a people including, and especially, the use of space.

The only way for a specific religious or cultural identity to endure is to make certain that future generations categorize themselves in the same way as their parents and grandparents and that their children do the same thing. There are two main ways by which such an identity can be cast off: through inter-marriage and through modernization.

Inter-marriage can be considered the easiest way of entering or leaving a cultural group. Essentially it, “. . . breaks down ethnic exclusiveness and mixes the various ethnic populations” (quoted in Giorgas, 2002: 1). It is often the case that people who marry ‘out of their faith’ may choose to ignore or submerge their particular cultural or ethnic identity and in such a way they ‘leave’ the community in which they grew up. These actions are strongly discouraged because of the loss it causes the community – not only the individual *per se* but potentially the children of such a union as well. Marriage within an ethnic community is highly influenced by its residential patterns. In communities that are concentrated into smaller areas the chances of meeting and marrying a partner of the same ethnic background is a great deal higher (Giorgas, 2002).

The second process, which is a threat to any cultural identity, including Judaism, is that of modernization, “. . . [the] erosion of religion in modern societies was long held, across the spectrum of sociological thought, to be an unavoidable feature of modernity itself and even to be

a condition of modernization” (Hervieu-Leger, 2003: 1). In such terms modernization is meant to be the opening up to different modes of thought and behaviour, especially those which embrace rationality, science, and technological advancement and give it a higher status over tradition, religion, and faith. The Jews who came to Johannesburg were faced with a modernizing world that many of them soon joined and became active participants thereof and in doing so many Jews lost or discarded their Eastern European Jewish identity to share in this brave new world on the highveld.

The Jews of Johannesburg continued to survive, grow, and develop as a community, thus they must have in some way been able to ensure that they and their children did not assimilate but maintained their identity. It will be argued that the very geography of the Jewish community of Johannesburg (and indeed other South African cities) was the mechanism and the tool by which a particular conservative, Lithuanian flavoured Judaism was maintained and reproduced to ensure the continuity of this particular brand of faith and culture.

The process of maintaining the Jewish community

The movement from the Pale of Settlement to Johannesburg brought with it a variety of changes and freedoms for the Jews who immigrated. Within the Russian context Jews were constantly made aware of their Judaism, initially confined to the *shtetls* and later to the ghettos. There were certain laws that pertained to Jews and Jews alone. The result was that there were constant external forces separating Jews and non-Jews. The consequence of which was the creation of an insular highly developed Eastern European Jewish way of life, which was maintained both by the external forces at work and by the internal processes of living by the laws and traditions of Judaism. When the Jews arrived in Johannesburg no such external compulsions existed, the process of maintaining a Jewish identity was reliant on internal (within the Jewish community) processes and mechanisms. Thus the Jews erected borders and boundaries between themselves and other groups, in a process that is referred to as “marking off” (Herman, 1977: 40). Certain areas and spaces were demarcated as Jewish and certain spaces were not. The intention by the Jewish community was to separate Jews and non-Jews and to fight the threat of assimilation.

It was not only the demarcation of ringed-off areas that aided in the survival of the Jewish community but also what happened inside these spaces that helped in the entrenchment of the Jewish identity in the minds of the Jews who lived in these areas. Locating Jewish schools, synagogues, social organizations, religious, and cultural institutions within small fairly well-

defined areas meant that Jews did not need to go outside of the spaces in which they lived to satisfy their needs. Although many of the *Kosher* shops and communal organizations were located in the CBD, the Jewish community did not have to go there. Their needs were well met in the suburbs of their residence and the areas were well-serviced by the complete range of practical, communal, and religious institutions. Friends, teachers, and even employment, to a certain degree could all be found within a specified, ‘marked-off’ district. The result was a constant reinforcement of Judaism and more particularly of a specific kind of Judaism. Values were entrenched not only by the family structures but also by extension by the very space in which people lived. The norms and standards of the community could thus be experienced and learnt and re-learned on a daily basis merely by going to work or school and back again.

The process then became a cycle by which the institutions, organizations and features of daily life had to be established or re-established if and when the community moved to another area because the individuals within the community saw them as being necessary features and attributes of their daily existence. It is in such way that the community maintains and reproduces itself over time. It is the dynamic relationship between the underlying cultural hegemony and the physical environment that gives the space meaning. The very existence of these physical features satisfies and entrenches the position of the cultural markers. That in turn allows a community to ensure that it survives in a specific formulation. The one without the other becomes meaningless. A community that believes in certain ideals but has nowhere to practise them will soon lose its cohesion and the very ideas will fall into disuse. Just as a synagogue, or other institution, without adherents who give the space meaning and function becomes merely an empty shell no different to a warehouse or a barbershop. It is the constant re-enforcement that exists between the physical world and the cultural that allows, or in some cases, demands the existence, maintenance, and reproduction of certain ways of thinking, believing, and behaving.

The Jewish enclaves of Johannesburg are exactly the kinds of spaces referred to above, the physical manifestations of the hegemony of a particular form of Judaism. They are certainly not relocated *shtetls*, although they do share some individual characteristics of the *shtetls*. They are not spaces of social and commercial convenience alone, although that is an important part of the process and nor were they merely cordoned off areas defining safe spaces for Johannesburg Jewry, although that was a secondary function. The enclaves of Johannesburg Jewry over the 50 year period discussed here functioned time and again as a way of ensuring that the Jewish community of Johannesburg would continue to exist and flourish. It was a way of guaranteeing its continuation and survival. The reality of the Jewish community of Johannesburg may not be as

glamorous or as interesting as its imagined form, which hearkens back to a geographical mythology full of Eastern European charm and conforms to a whole range of Jewish folklore.

The actuality of the inter-relationship between the Jewish culture and religion and the geography is the true story of the Jewish community of Johannesburg. It was the constant enforcement and reinforcement of the tangible and the intangible that has allowed and encouraged the continuation of a specific culture through time and space. The reality of the enclaves and conglomerations of the Jews on the cityscape of Johannesburg is a powerful example of how geography and culture interacted to create spaces of meaning that ensured the continued survival and success of the Jewish community of Johannesburg, not only for its first 50 years but more than likely into the future.

Notes for Chapter Nine

¹ 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.

² A pattern that can be seen repeated in a number of other cities and times, the example of the Chinese community of Vancouver is an excellent exemplar of how such processes have worked (Pile, *et al*, 1999).