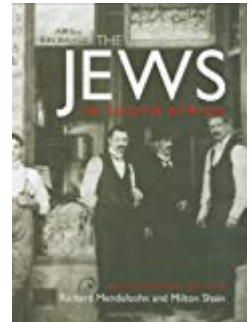


**Richard Mendelsohn, Milton Shain.** *The Jews in South Africa: An Illustrated History.* Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2008. x + 234 pp. \$31.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-86842-281-4.



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While the first Jews to officially settle in South Africa did so in the early nineteenth century, the history of their antecedents is much longer. They include Abraham ben Samuel Zacuto, distinguished astronomer and astrologist at the University of Salamanca prior to the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492. His astrological tables were published in Hebrew, and then translated into Latin, and then into Spanish. They were used by Christopher Columbus, and more importantly by Vasco da Gama, for whom he also selected the scientific instruments and joined on his voyage to Africa. Zacuto, thereby, “was probably the first Jew to land on South African soil when, in mid-November 1497, the Da Gama party went ashore at St Helena Bay on the Cape west coast” (p. 4). By this time, he was likely a “New Christian,” himself a victim of the *limpieza de sangre* (blood purity) laws enacted in Spain.

Zacuto is thus symbolic of a double legacy at the heart of the history of Jews in South Africa: on the one hand, his knowledge and actions were intrinsic to European colonialism. But on the other

hand, Europeans colonized him in the name of the same basic ideas that justified European expansion and exploitation, notions that we can name in one word: racism. The “Zacuto complex,” as I want to call it, has played out through most of the history of Jews in South Africa, as this wonderful book demonstrates.

*The Jews in South Africa*, by two of the leading living historians of South Africa’s Jewish past, is the first general history of South African Jewry in over fifty years. It is written in lively prose, sumptuously illustrated, and includes rare photographs as well as documents culled from the archives, which are inserted into offset “boxes” that help illuminate the forces at work in South African Jewish history.

The book “is not a narrow institutional history of a community,” as Mendelsohn and Shain rightly claim. “Rather it attempts to encompass a broad swathe of Jewish life, from the *bimah* and the boardroom to the bowling green.” Nor is it a Whiggish history. Instead, “it depicts the fragility

of the early foundations, the oscillating fortunes of the community as it matured amidst turbulent currents, both domestic and international, and its latter-day challenges and responses" (p. ix). As such, it offers gems from the past that are touchstones for the big questions we should all think about as scholars of Jewish history.

To this end, unlike its historiographic predecessors (see the box, "Constructing a Usable Past," pp. 136-137), the Jewish community is not represented as monolithic, but as segregated along lines of class, ideology, and religiosity, not to mention separated in numerous ways from the larger British and Afrikaner white communities, and, of course, from the Blacks, Asians, and Coloreds who today might be their neighbors. South African Jews thus lived in ghettos akin to those of their early modern predecessors, sometimes with invisible walls and sometimes with diamond studs on the gateposts.

The book is divided chronologically into four broad periods, each of which had a distinctive character. First is the "age of pioneers" (1800-80), defined by Anglo-German Jewish immigrants who established the Jewish community in South Africa. Second is the "age of the Litvaks" (1880-1930), the immigrants who arrived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They consolidated Jewish life in South Africa. After the Shoah wiped out 90 percent of their brethren in *der heim* (the Old Country), they constituted the largest surviving community of Lithuanian Jews. The third period is that of the "South African Jews" (1930-1970) who instituted themselves into the lineaments of apartheid South Africa. Finally is our epoch of "Jewish South Africans," (1970-present), one of the diverse communities of the new multi-ethnic South Africa.

Given the format of the book, Mendelsohn and Shain are able to tell not only a grand narrative, but also countless *petite histoires* that provide a multifaceted rendition of this past that is not over. I will focus in on some these smaller

episodes as a means to render what the broader work offers.

After the Portuguese explorers like Zacuto, Jews were among the first Dutch travelers to round the Cape of Good Hope. But they were not allowed to step onto the land of the new Dutch settlements that began after 1652. Things changed when the British began to compete with the Dutch for the Cape Colony in the late eighteenth century. The principles of Lockean and deistic tolerance permitted individual Jews of English, Dutch, and German origin to begin to arrive in South Africa, with the first official *minyán* praying together on Yom Kippur in 1841. This small group of Anglo-German Jewish pioneers was highly acculturated, following English norms and habits, which they insisted upon maintaining when they created the first Jewish institutions in South Africa.

The example of Nathaniel Isaacs, "a young Jewish adventurer and trader" who lived among the Zulus in the late 1820s, shows how these pioneers were Zacuto's descendents. In 1836, Isaacs published *Travels and Adventures in Eastern Africa, Descriptive of the Zoolus, their Manners, Customs, etc., etc.*, a seminal text on Shaka Zulu. But as the extracts included by Shain and Mendelsohn make plain, it was a work that helped to justify the colonial expansion of South Africa by depicting Shaka as bellicose and barbaric. Not without interest, though, is the fact that Isaacs occasionally played the role of the doctor. Amongst his remedies was the use of "chicken soup" (see the box, "Chicken Soup and the Zulus," p. 7).

These pioneers trailing in Zacuto's wake would eventually follow the British into the interior of South Africa in search of the wealth that came from the discovery of diamonds and gold. Some came as prospectors, but most created subsidiary enterprises catering to the needs of those digging the earth. Aptly summing up this period, Mendelsohn and Shain write, "Their comfortable integration into the wider white community, their small numbers, the gender imbalance [since most

were men], and the assimilatory impulses of a frontier society, all pointed towards the eventual disappearance of this infant Jewish community” (p. 27).

Two proximate events resulted in their effloresce rather than their disappearance. The first was the pogroms that began after the assassination of Tsar Alexander II. The second was the discovery of the largest gold reef ever found in the South African interior. The result was that among the three million Jews who emigrated from eastern Europe between 1880-1914, forty thousand ended up in South Africa, the majority from the Kovno province of Lithuania. Mendelsohn and Shain wonderfully reconstruct the immigration chain that brought them from the nether reaches of the east to the southern tip of Africa. Dragging the baggage of Litvak life with them, they generally stopped in London, with half of them staying a fortnight in the Jews Temporary Shelter in the East End. They made their way from there to Southampton and then on to Cape Town. There they would be aided by formal and informal *landmannschaften* (immigrant fraternal societies), starting a new life, often as *smous* (itinerant traders), but some even finding their way into the underworld.

As was the fate of their fellow travelers in France and America, the newcomers were assaulted not only with the challenges of their new terrain, but also with a discursive onslaught. It was characterized by an anti-Jewish idiom that fused together social pathologies, criminology, eugenics, and social hygiene, all focused on the purportedly degenerate bodies of the as-yet unacculturated and perhaps unassimilable so-called Peruvian Jews, who were actually what was referred to in Yiddish as the *grieners* (greenhorns).

But quickly these new immigrants actually became “significant agents of the commercial revolution that transformed the South African countryside in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (p. 46). They were mediators between

town and city, storekeepers, and sometimes primary producers in niche markets, like the ostrich feather boom of the decades before the First World War. By 1911, 46,919 Jews were recorded in the first census of the new Union of South Africa, making Jews 3.68 percent of the white population and .79 percent of the total population.

Most who left Lithuania were not religiously observant. They were fleeing stifling conditions in search of a better life. They found it in the relative tolerance of South Africa. By 1909, there were six Jewish mayors of cities big and small. Compare this to the same period in Vienna where Karl Lueger was elected mayor on an antisemitic platform. Cape Town had its own version of the Lower East Side or the East End, called District Six. It created institutions of Jewish learning, a Yiddish-language press, and adherents of both socialism and Zionism. So by the time that Ghandi began his nonviolent agitation in South Africa, he was “surrounded by Jews” (p. 98), mostly Litvaks, who by then had become South African Jews.

But South African Jews could hardly rest easily on their laurels. In 1930, a Quota Act was passed that “ushered in a decade of profound difficulty and discomfort for South African Jewry. A ‘Jewish Question’ emerged against a backdrop of economic depression and a burgeoning and exclusivist Afrikaner nationalism that was struggling to capture the political high ground. The Act heralded what the historian Todd Endelman, writing in the European context, terms the transformation of ‘private’ into ‘public’ or ‘programmatic’ anti-semitism—the shift from ‘expressions of contempt and discrimination outside the realm of public life’ to the ‘eruption of antisemitism in public life’” (p. 105).

While Afrikaaner nationalism was gaining traction with antisemitism as a plank in its platform, ultimately by a very narrow vote South Africa decided to join the Allies in support of the war effort in 1939. In its aftermath, the choppy waters separating the Afrikaner white majority

and the Jews came ashore in the conciliation with apartheid. Jews who had previously been depicted as a swarthy race had this past whitewashed. The alliance was sutured by “the economic fruits of racial exploitation and political power” and antisemitism declined. But Jewish apprehension remained—an aspect of the Zacuto complex—and “contributed towards a political quiescence as the apartheid project unfolded” (pp. 135).

This capitulation would never remain unchallenged, however. Ronald Segal, writing in *Commentary* in 1957, would eloquently pose the question that resounds through to the present: “South African Jews are forever conscious of injustice, but of the injustice that they alone are made to suffer. They quickly grow furious over the treatment of Israel.... Yet they watch with complacency the innumerable daily manifestations of ‘apartheid.’... How can this one-eyed morality be defended?” (p. 138). Jewish radicals would repeatedly dispute this moral blindness. But they were mostly what Isaac Deutscher has called “non-Jewish Jews.”

The range of responses by South African Jews to apartheid was dramatically illustrated during the Rivonia Trial in 1963 that would result in Nelson Mandela’s twenty-seven year incarceration on Robbin Island. Among the seventeen arrested in Rivonia, there were five whites, all of whom were Jews. The defense team, as well, was mostly Jewish. But so was the chief prosecutor, Deputy Attorney General of the Transvaal Percy Yutar. Like him, most Jews closed their eyes, their ears, their hearts to the cries of those around them, ensconced as they were in the ever-expanding brick and mortar of bigger houses, larger synagogues, escalating Jewish day schools, expanding sports clubs, and chicer neighborhoods, which functioned like Jewish homelands in the archipelago of apartheid, ultimately segregating the majority of the now 120,000-strong Jewish community from that small still voice of conscience.

The Soweto riots in 1976 marked a wake-up call, but one that was responded to differently in different families. For nearly forty thousand like my family, over the next few years a new diaspora of South African Jews living in America, Canada, Australia, and Israel emerged. Others embraced the fateful “Pretoria-Jerusalem axis” (p. 176), which tied the rightward-moving irredentism of Likud’s first flush with power to the military and industrial relationship that would develop in the context of other African countries cutting ties to Israel, often around the campaign identifying Zionism as racism. Many began to turn inward, “towards increased observance which would transform the face of South African orthodoxy within a couple of decades” (p. 186). Some went on as before. But there were also young Jews joined by brave rabbis who formed organizations like Jews for Justice and vocally aligned with the broader anti-apartheid struggle. They were perhaps ready to shuck off the Zacuto complex.

When President F. W. de Klerk lifted the ban on the ANC in 1990, “Jews generally welcomed his bold initiative” (p. 192), but they remained uneasy about the future. The result has been ongoing emigration, cutting the Jewish community to nearly half its size from the peak in 1970. And Jews today remain fearful of crime, corruption, and rising anti-Zionism in the context of a more activist Muslim community and a significant turn by the government away from support for Israel. Jews today are more religiously fragmented, but also wedded to a future as Jewish South Africans. They will have to navigate that future delicately, as *The Jews in South Africa* so powerfully shows has always been the case.

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