

## Origins



THE GEVISSER<sup>†</sup> BROTHERS – Bereleib, Morris and Issy – arrived in Durban in the Crown Colony of Natal in the early 1900's. Bereleib was the first to arrive, followed a year later by Issy. Bereleib then returned to Lithuania and was replaced by Morris. Bereleib did not rejoin his two brothers until the middle 1930's when he returned permanently with his wife, Fanny. They had no children and both died in the late 1940's.

Their reasons for emigrating were common to all Russian Jews of that time and need no description. What was also common was their reluctance to talk about the families and the lives that they had left behind. There was a sister, an aging mother and a difficult step-father in Poselvi<sup>‡</sup>, in the Kovno district. Poselvi was a typical small *shtetl*, and the family was steeped in *shtetl* life, religion and superstition. All three Gevisser brothers were *yeshiva-bochers*, Bereleib being particularly learned and revered as a torah scribe. There was of course no secular education at the Vilna Yeshiva which they attended, sleeping on benches in the communal hall and relying, as was the tradition, on the charity of the community.

There is no record of how they left Lithuania, their routes and the undoubted hardships of their journeys, other than a letter from Issy to his mother (in Yiddish) written shortly after his arrival in Durban. He was devastated at not being met by Bereleib, and recalled how he was helped by a "kind Christian gentleman". It is a poignant record of the terror and fortitude of a teenager, travelling alone and with no language other than Yiddish, arriving at a sub-tropical, busy South African harbour. (Appendix i).

There was a small Jewish community in Durban, probably no more than 100 strong, which doubtless received and nurtured the newcomers, but most were doing no better than eking out a living. Again there is no record of the very early years of Morris and Issy's lives in their new home. The first occupation that Morris recalled was his one-quarter share in a *kaffir-eating* – an eating house for Zulu rickshaw pullers, a common

(<sup>†</sup>)the name was also variously spelled as "Geviser", "Geviseris", "Geviserov", "Geviserowitz" and "Gewischer"

(<sup>‡</sup>)also known as "Zelva"

means of locomotion and transport for people and goods. These men started work at 4 a.m., necessitating breakfast preparations – of *putu* and gravy and tea – long before that. The owners – Morris and his partners, and presumably young Issy as a helper – slept on the premises which were located in Point Road, in the rough dock area.

Morris, now integrated into the Jewish community, had begun to have some of his meals at a boarding house half-way up the Berea, run by the Moshal family – Jacob, Bathsheva, and their children, Louis, Janie, Sol, Barney, Anne, Tilly, Max and Sarah. The Moshals<sup>†</sup> had arrived in South Africa from Lithuania in about 1895, with their first three children, Janie being then two or three years old, and Sol a babe-in-arms. Jacob was just making a living by buying tobacco in bulk and repacking it for the Zulu trade. The family could not have existed without the boarding-house and dining room which was run largely by the teenaged Janie, who had to leave school (at the Standard 6 level) to help her parents.

A romance between Morris and Janie soon blossomed and they were married in 1912. Before that however it was necessary to arrange the marriage settlement, the *Nadan*. This was no easy matter. Janie was a prize, both in looks and accomplishments. Her father was recognised as a learned man, and was already a leading figure in the shul and the burial society, the key organisations in any immigrant community. The Moshal boarding house was a gathering place, and the Moshal children were already beginning to make their mark.

Morris of course had little money and no parents to back him. He did however have his quarter-share in the *kaffir-eating*. Family legend has it that he traded a half of this quarter-share for Janie, and that this was the foundation of the Moshal–Gevisser partnership that became one of the three or four great wholesale trading houses which dominated South African commerce from the mid 1930s to their post-war demise in the 1960s.

The partnership acquired premises in the Indian section of the commercial district in Victoria Street, and set up business buying used bottles, jute bags and bones from street hawkers. The bottles were washed and sorted and sold to the original bottlers or to other users. Bags were repaired and sold. Bones were accumulated, dried, bagged and sold to fertiliser factories. The all-pervading smell of rotting bones still haunts me. As a side activity, used wooden crates and boxes were also bought, and hand-sawn and hammered into sizes required by customers. Purchases and sales were all for cash, and there was a constant traffic of Zulu and Indian hawkers pushing home-made hand-carts piled high with bottles, bags, bones and crates.

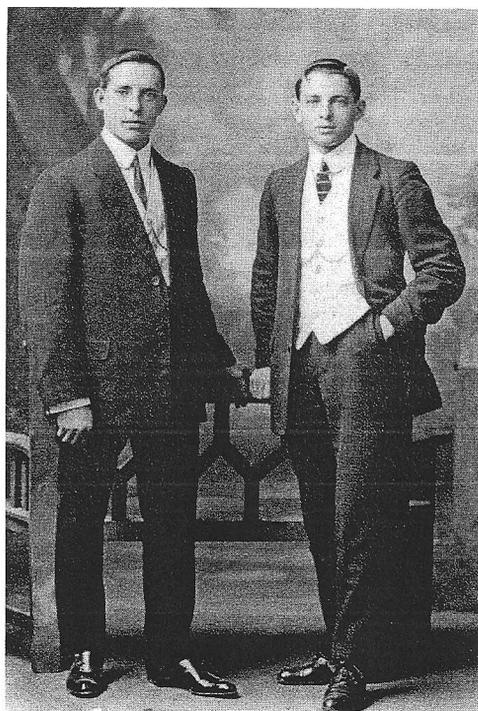
(†)originally “Moshalowitz”



*The wedding of Janie Moshal and Morris Gevisser, Durban 1912. Zeisi and Bathsheva Moshal on the far right  
The shepherd is Max Moshal. Louis, Issy and Sol are in the back row*



*Janie Moshal, circa 1910*



*Morris and Issy Gevisser, circa 1915*

The business prospered. In time it acquired the modern wonders of a bottle-washing machine, a heavy duty sewing machine for bag repair, and a circular saw bench for cutting crate components to size. This latter activity eventually became "The Acme Box Factory Ltd", fore-runner of what was to be a pioneering sawmilling organisation.

The Moshal brood moved to a spacious home in Avondale Road, leaving Morris and Janie with the boarding establishment which Janie continued to run, consolidating her reputation as a superb Jewish cook with more regard for feeding her customers and for quality than for economy and profit. Children began to arrive – Ruby in 1914, and Jocelyn in 1916.

The business, now expanded to include wholesale groceries, and presided over by Morris, Issy and Jacob Moshal, was doing well enough for Morris and Janie and their daughters to move to 87 Madeline Road, a spacious house for that time and their station, on the lower slopes of the Berea.

Meanwhile the Moshal children were growing, and beginning to make their mark. Louis moved to the goldfields of Johannesburg where he subsequently was a founder, with his cousin Hersov and Hersov's partner Menell, of Anglo-Vaal. Sol, the first Moshal to complete his schooling, went on to become one of the first Chartered Accountants in South Africa. He joined the army in 1915, was commissioned as a lieutenant, and served in the East African campaign. Barney became a doctor, a major in the second World War decorated for his pioneering work in aviation medicine and thereafter a highly regarded physician. Anne studied drama both in South Africa and at RADA and emerged as a respected local theatrical director. Tilly married and moved to Johannesburg, as did Sarah. Max, the only survivor of a triplet birth, was the warm and gregarious youngest who moved from army sergeant to such varied occupations as pig farmer, chicken farmer, and warehouseman.

Morris and Janie, comfortably ensconced in their new home, produced two sons – Leslie in 1919 and David, unexpected, and not initially very welcome, in 1926. Meanwhile, Sol returned from the war, and was demobilised in 1919. He decided to join his father and brother-in-law in their solid but pedestrian business, and rapidly became its unquestioned leader, transforming it eventually in 1946 into a public company with a country-wide spread of subsidiaries and branches, and expanding the box and crate factory into South Africa's first and largest integrated forest products company. To his credit, he never jettisoned the family's beginnings, and the bottle and bag business remained a department that operated under Morris and then Bereleib until the company was

finally sold in 1975. Sol was the drive and inspiration for the expansion and success of the company in which his father, Morris and Issy, played little part. They were acquiescent passengers, in awe of this increasingly autocratic business man who at an early age had become the leader of Durban's burgeoning Jewish community, and who was becoming well-known and admired in the wider business world. It has always been a personal regret of mine, that because of a basic conservatism, he never escaped from the Durban community's grip. He certainly had the brain and the drive and the personality to have done so, and to have become a major player on the national stage.