

# The Abelson and Chasan Family History

Lithuania and South Africa

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*For my mother Pearl,  
daughter of Chaim Abelsohn and  
Sara Tsipe Chasan.*

London, November 2012.

# The Abelson and Chasan Families

### **Early Jewish Communities - Self Government and Religious life in Lithuania**

Vytautas the Great (an early ruler of Lithuania) had issued a Charter in 1388, which governed legal, economic, and community relations between the monarch and the Jews, between Jews and Gentiles and amongst the Jews themselves. Jews were recognised as free subjects of the Grand Duke. They were permitted to live in separate communities (administered by committees known as Kahals) and to regulate their internal religious and legal affairs themselves. Disputes between Jews were to be settled by a Jewish court. Other dukes issued new charters, and many of the Jewish charters were incorporated into the Lithuanian Statutes to distinguish Jews from other ethnic groups within the Grand Duchy.

The Kahal regulated Jewish internal affairs autonomously; it maintained prayer houses, courts, schools, abattoirs, bath houses and cemeteries, and collected taxes. A Kahal was established in every town which had a larger Jewish community. The town authorities were not entitled to interfere in Kahal affairs. The Kahal was protected by officers appointed by the monarch, or by the owner of a private town. Smaller Jewish communities were placed under the jurisdiction of the nearest Kahal.

In 1623 a Lithuanian administrative body, the Va'ad, (council of Lithuanian Rabbis and community leaders) was created to decide matters relevant to Lithuanian Jews, their daily life, relations with the monarch, the collection of state taxes among Jewish communities, scholarly and other matters. The Va'ad issued rules governing Jewish life and was careful to oppose anti-Jewish legislation. Jews in other countries did not enjoy such autonomy. However, in 1764 the right of the Kahal to collect the poll tax imposed on Jews was abolished, and a new tax was levied on every Jew above the age of one year. Censuses were carried out to collect this tax. At the same time, the Va'ads were abolished and measures were introduced to integrate Jews into Gentile society. This marked a turning

point and a decline in the previously comfortable situation for the Jewish population. Many Jews became impoverished. This, together with the many Pogroms taking place in the Ukraine, resulted in the formation of various new Jewish spiritual movements, including Hassidism.

The protagonist of traditional Orthodox-Talmudic Jewry at that time was the renowned Vilna Gaon - Elijah ben Shlomo Zalmanovich (1720-1797).

### **Daily Life and Activities of the Jews**

Three important aspects of Jewish existence in the Grand Duchy were personal life in the family, social life in the Kahal, and economic life outside the family and the Kahal. The first two were influenced in particular by Jewish religious traditions while the third was subject to the Kahal, which issued the rights to engage in a trade. Jewish craftsmen in the Grand Duchy established themselves as tailors, grocers, goldsmiths, furriers, clothiers, tinsmiths, bookbinders, etc. Most innkeepers and the majority of doctors and herbalists were Jewish. In all large towns, and most small ones, there would be a market, fairs, small shops and kiosks. Jews developed wholesale and retail trade networks. Civil lists were kept regarding the right to elect, or to be elected. These lists, which provided the basis for tax collection at that time, have today become a valuable source of genealogical information.

Within the Kahal, the rabbis and elders of the community had great influence. They selected from amongst their own ranks four or five leaders and a similar number of judges. These held office in various committees to regulate academic, financial, customs, security and other Jewish issues. The Kahal presided over civil disputes between Jews. Rabbis were elected every three years from the most learned and intelligent Kahal members. They enjoyed special authority within the Kahal because they regulated religious matters; they were the chairmen of courts, arranged marriages, inspected schools and so forth.

My mother has often told me that she had heard from her own mother that there were many generations of Rabbis on both sides of the family. This is entirely consistent with the practice in the shtetls of appointing lay rabbis from the community every third year. Most communities were small, and would not have been able to support a full time rabbinat.

Social and religious life centred on the synagogue, where people prayed and studied, and where Kahal meetings and court sessions were held. Near the synagogue would be a school, the rabbi's house, and a bathhouse (mikvah). From the age of four or five Jewish boys had to learn to read and write and each community would have a school (cheder). Boys would study there until they were thirteen years old; later those able and willing would study in higher religious schools (yeshivot). Girls did not go to school but were taught to read and carry out "women's work" at home. Because of their learning in the barely literate Grand Duchy, Jews were often hired by noblemen and gentry to run their farms. Amongst themselves Jews communicated primarily in Yiddish. They also learned the local language and prayed in Hebrew.

### **Intolerance**

There were a number of Pogroms in the Grand Duchy. The Church often had an inflammatory effect on inter-community relations and occasionally roused Gentiles against Jews. Jews were forbidden to settle in some towns. Accusations of deicide and religious superstitions (e.g. that they used the blood of Christian children in their rituals) were levelled against the Jews. Although popes and various rulers had denounced many of these superstitions over the previous thousand years, prejudices survived amongst the ignorant.

In the hope of confiscating Jewish property, Grand Duke Aleksander had expelled the Jews from the Grand Duchy in 1495 (much as the rulers of Spain had done in 1492). However, after he became King of Poland in 1501 and had noticed that the Lithuanian economy was stagnating, he allowed the Jews to

return to the Grand Duchy. From the mid-sixteenth century Jews were forbidden to wear expensive clothes and jewels in order to reduce tensions between Jews and Gentiles.

### **The Pale of Settlement**

In 1791, in order to restrict the Jewish population, the "Pale of Settlement" was instituted by Catherine the Great. It only ended 125 years later with the revolution in 1917. In brief, Catherine had inherited the large Jewish population in Eastern Europe in the Peace Treaty signed with Austria and Prussia. After the partition of Poland in 1791 several hundred thousand more Jews became incorporated into the Russian Empire. The Empire defined this as "the Jewish Problem," which was to be solved either by enforced assimilation, or by expulsion. The Pale included most of present-day Lithuania, Belarus, eastern Poland, Moldova and the Ukraine, comprising in all 20% of the territory of European Russia. Within this Pale, Catherine, and the subsequent Tsars, instituted a series of laws which aimed to confine, control and restrict the movement, activities, professions, educational opportunities and legal status of the Jews, and to enforce conscription for long periods of military service.

The reasons for its creation were both nationalistic and economic: the majority of Jews lived in villages and fulfilled a vital role in the village economy. However, the emergent middle class in the nineteenth century was rapidly being populated by Jews. By limiting the Jews' area of residence, the imperial powers were able to limit the size of the Jewish middle class, and ensure the growth of a non-Jewish middle class. The Polish nobility, having lost its feudal rights after the partition, wanted to regain those economic functions that they had once delegated to the Jews — a political demand that Russian governments were eager to accommodate.

A further purpose of these acts of confinement was to 'ensure' that the Jews would not 'infect' the rest of the



**Introduction of Jewish Surnames**

This legislation made compulsory the use of Jewish surnames. Previously Jews had been recorded in official documents using only their first names and/or nicknames. It was at this time that our family names were first adopted. Later (1859/1861) wealthy Jewish merchants with a higher education were allowed out of the Pale to settle throughout Russia, and soon after craftsmen were allowed to do the same. For a time Jews were also allowed to participate in town councils and courts. However, after the assassination of Alexander II (1881), in which a young Jewish woman was involved, there was a wave of Pogroms across Russia (though none in Lithuania). This became a pretext for again restricting Jewish rights; Jewish entry to grammar schools and universities was restricted, and rights to take part in local council activities were also narrowed.

In nineteenth-century Lithuania most Jews lived in depressed conditions. The "Jewish bourgeoisie" were few in number. Most Jews were lower class and they had an irregular income. Children left their parental homes because their presence was a financial burden. Forbidden to migrate within the Empire, Jewish communities became impoverished. Discriminatory anti-Jewish laws made life even more difficult and the wave of Pogroms led to increased Jewish emigration. Emigration overseas further impoverished local Jewry because the best and healthiest were the ones to leave. The poor and the weak stayed behind. It is not difficult to understand why our ancestors were part of the huge migration of Jews fleeing these deprivations.

population. In spite of the Pale Laws in force, the number of Jews living in Lithuania increased substantially. In some towns Jewish numbers reached up to 50% of the total population. At its peak the Pale had a Jewish population of over 5 million, which represented the largest concentration of world Jewry at that time.

**Life in the Pale**

After the Pale was introduced Jews were prohibited from entering into the so-called 'inner' gubernias (provinces) of Russia. Kahal was abolished under the guise of defending the rights of Orthodox Christians. In 1804 a systematic Jewish statute was issued; under this Jews were regarded as "a harmful element" that could be corrected by "useful works".

**Military Conscription**

Until the first quarter of the nineteenth century the threat of military recruitment did not yet exist for Jews. Before 1827 Jews in Russia were specifically forbidden from serving in the military. Instead, they were taxed because they 'did not' serve their country. After the law was changed in 1827, the following 28 years became particularly difficult. Lithuanian Jewish minors were conscripted into the Tsar's army for a term of 25 years (to alienate them from their religion, and with many of them being baptised). In 1856



conscription rules for Jews became the same as those for Gentiles –“only” 5 to 10 years of service. However quotas for Jews were not reduced, placing a heavy burden on the Jewish youth. Other than the Pogroms, the Czarist policy of forced military conscription was the most oppressive reality confronting the Jews in the Pale of Settlement. They resisted military recruiters as best they could, and fled the country when they ran out of options.

***These events were to have a profound effect on the generation of my great-grandfather Chaim Abelson, and, as will be seen later, led to a change in our family surname.***

The levy (quota) that was imposed on the Jewish community for the supply of military recruits called for ten Jewish males to be selected out of every thousand of the Jewish population each year (while only seven gentile males were to be drafted out of every thousand gentiles every two years!)

Thus a far higher proportion of Jews was required to serve. In 1878 the law had been further amended so that Jewish precincts were forced to meet recruitment quotas, even if that meant drafting unhealthy Jews who otherwise would have been exempt from duty.

Additional regulations stipulated that the family of any Jew who evaded military service was to be fined 300 rubles, while anyone who captured a Jewish draft-evader was to be rewarded 50 rubles in cash.

As an additional burden, Jewish communities were compelled to provide one further conscript for every 1,000 rubles of debt owed to the government in back-taxes. Between the years 1874 and 1892 a total of 173,434 Jewish recruits were drafted. The military authorities were highly organized, and it was extremely difficult to avoid recruitment.

The entire subject of conscription of Jews into the Russian army cannot be divorced from the overwhelming desire of the Russian oligarchy to convert all Jews to Christianity. Many measures were instituted to accomplish that end and tempt Jews to convert, including the granting of all rights accorded to Christians to any baptized Jew, and exemption from taxes for three years for any Jewish convert. Many did convert, although the majority resisted. During the darkest period of forced military conscription Jewish communities were ordered to appoint special officers, called khappers (which can be translated as “bounty-hunters”). The khappers were charged with seizing boys and young men from their families, incarcerating them in the town government building and turning them over to the army. The khappers were not fussy about adhering to the minimum age of twelve, and frequently abducted children as young as eight years old.

The government’s conscription policies, together with the violent Pogroms, caused a mass emigration of Jews from the Russian Empire. As a consequence of the loss of so many able-bodied young men, the Kahals became unable to furnish the required number of recruits. Since each conscript not presented on demand resulted in the forced conscription of an additional two men, it became necessary to recruit cripples, invalids, old men, and others who had previously been exempt. This included only sons, oldest sons, sole supporters of families and children as young as eight years of age. The authorities even went so far as to conscript members of the Kahals themselves, generally men of advanced years. In spite of these Draconian measures, conscription arrears continued to increase. In the second half of the nineteenth century, as exemptions became almost impossible to obtain, Jews began to flee to the west in large numbers, while those who remained frantically sought to evade the authorities.

### **Pogroms**

A wave of Pogroms spread throughout the south-western regions following the assassination of the Tsar. Derived from the Russian word meaning "to wreak havoc", a Pogrom is an organized attack, often a massacre, against a minority group, particularly Jews. In the Russian Empire the Jews had been subject to such persecutions for centuries, often at the instigation of local government officials. However, in the period between 1881 and the Russian Revolution in 1917, the Pogroms were especially violent.

A typical Pogrom lasted from one to several days. With astonishing brutality, peasants and even city folk would riot against their Jewish neighbours with little fear of punishment, looting and burning their synagogues and businesses. When the police did finally intervene little or no effort would be made to apprehend the attackers and bring them to justice.

In addition, many admired writers and intellectuals (such as Dostoevsky) were notorious anti-Semites. Much of the hate was driven by envy of recent Jewish economic advances. The old blood libel accusation was all that was necessary to trigger a massacre. The Russian Orthodox Church did nothing to stop the carnage, but instead repeated anti-Semitic rhetoric, blaming the Jews for the misery of the peasants.

Following the assassination of the Tsar, a new period of anti-Jewish discrimination and severe persecution began. Jews were once more prohibited from living in villages, or from buying or renting property outside their prescribed residences. They were denied jobs in the civil service and forbidden to trade on Sundays and Christian holidays.

In the final years of the Czarist regime the Jewish security situation deteriorated even further. In the periods 19th to 25th October and again the 1st to 7th November of 1905 a total of 660 Jewish communities were attacked. In Odessa alone 300 Jews were killed and thousands wounded, while 40,000 were ruined financially.

In total approximately 1,000 Jews were killed and 7,000 to 8,000 wounded, with millions of rubles worth of property damage.

In 1917, with the murder of the royal family and the violent overthrow of the Czarist regime, all repressive edicts regarding the Jews were repealed and the Pale of Settlement was abolished. However, the new communist ideology of tolerance was very short-lived, and as early as 1918 the Jews were again victims of several vicious attacks. Massive Pogroms continued in the Ukraine until 1921. In 1919, during the Ukrainian civil war more than 10,000 Jews were killed. We tend to forget that these Pogroms were so horrible, since they are overshadowed by the even worse atrocities committed by the Nazis.

**The Exodus** By the end of the nineteenth century, as the security situation of the Jews inside the Russian Empire worsened, many Lithuanian Jews fled from Eastern Europe to the New World including the United States of America and South Africa (which became a haven for 120,000 Jews who were thereby spared the Holocaust). A small number also migrated to Palestine. Those who decided to make the voyage sold whatever they had, converting into hard currency everything of value – including jewellery, watches, gold and silver objects, home furnishings and property. They made one last visit to the synagogue, received the blessing of the rabbi, bade farewell to everyone they knew and set off on their way, never to return. In most cases men left their families behind, planning to earn enough money overseas so that they could send for their wives, children and other relatives later. Some did, others did not.

# Two Jewish Worlds

The City and the Shtetl

### The city - Vilna

As the Jewish community became more established in the first half of the 17th century, Vilna (Vilnius) developed as an important centre for European Jewry. The town flourished during the 19th and early 20th centuries. As the fame of the Vilna Gaon spread, Vilna had come to be called Yerusholayim d'Lita (Jerusalem of Lithuania). Rabbi Elijah ben Shlomo Zalman, known as the Vilna Gaon (b. Vilnius April 23, 1720, d. Vilnius October 9, 1797), was an exceptional Talmudist, Halachist, Kabbalist, and the foremost leader of non-Hasidic world Jewry. Data from the 1920 census shows that Jews made up 36% of the town's population and most of these lived in the so-called "Jewish Quarter" in the town centre. Many of the street names in the Old Town reflected the Jewish presence in Vilna – Zydu (Jewish), Gaono streets, etc.

Vilna was the cradle of secular Jewish schooling and culture. The ideological aims and controversies of the Community were reflected in the Jewish educational systems of Vilna and the surrounding region. Kindergartens of various educational types, religious and secular schools, grammar schools, teacher training colleges and other types of educational institutions thrived. In 1935, 169 organisations maintained by the Jewish Community were registered in Vilna and a wide network of social assistance and charitable institutions was active. The town was home to more than a hundred synagogues and smaller prayer houses.

A group of Jewish writers began to make its mark. During World War One, the Vilner Trupe theatre was established. The skill of its directors and actors, its rich repertoire and especially its production of Solomon Anski's play "The Dybbuk", won world-wide praise. A Jewish Conservatory and Ballet School, a symphony orchestra and several choirs also thrived in town, as did Jewish sport organisations, of which the largest was Maccabi. Vilna was renowned as a production centre for Jewish books, and was acknowledged to be the capital of world Yiddish culture and learning.



Gaono Street, Jewish quarter of Vilna - late 1800's.



The same street today.

### **The Shtetl**

100 years ago there were numerous small towns in Lithuania such as Nemokshti, Salant and many others, known as shtetls. In some, half or more of the population of the town was Jewish. These towns still exist today, but the once ever present life of Jewish small towns has disappeared from Lithuania without a trace. All that remains is abandoned synagogues, preserved or ruined graveyards and a few Jewish words that have made their way into the Lithuanian language.

### **What was Shtetl life like?**

This is an account that was written to describe Jewish life (late 1800's) in a small Shtetl called Aukstadvaris: *"This Shtetl was quite typical. A family would consist of two or three children, plus their parents. A third of the population was involved in production. Members of the successive generations would often take over their father's profession. The central institutions of the Shtetl were the synagogue and the rabbi. Many of the males would pray each morning and evening, usually at home. Trade was one of the most important Jewish occupations. There were seventeen shops in Aukstadvaris, which were similar to today's market stalls. The busiest day was the weekly market day and the locals had to compete with tradesmen who would come to the market from other places. According to archival information shopkeepers would make between three and five rubles a week - not enough to provide a basic standard of living.*

*Artisans included tailors, cobblers, blacksmiths, tanners, turners, hatters, tinsmiths, and barbers. They would earn around five to seven rubles a month. There were also construction workers - stone-breakers, carpenters, painters, glaziers. In addition, there were wholesalers who bought linen, furs and apples, a miller, the owner of the saw-mill, the carrier, etc. The population was sixty five families, half of them Jewish. Some owned their own houses but almost all of these were*

*built on land belonging to peasants. Twenty three families rented their dwelling. All but two houses were built of wood and contained two rooms. They did not have running water and toilets. The furniture was old, with benches instead of chairs. Half the households had one or more cows, and five families kept a sheep. Since Jews had no rights to own land, they had to pay for the right to pasture (usually ten to fifteen rubles per summer). Aukstadvaris' Jews kept nine horses, which were used for everyday work, carrying people, ploughing gardens or transporting timber from the forest.*

*A third of all households grew vegetables and potatoes in gardens next to their house. Their diet consisted of black bread, potatoes, beetroot soup, cabbage and the occasionally herring, and milk for those who kept a cow. Meals were taken twice a day at 10 a.m. and 6 p.m. On the Sabbath meat and broth would be consumed. By the 1920's, although food was cheap (a kilogram of bread would cost 2.5-5 kopeks, meat - 10-15 kopeks and butter - 25-30 kopeks), an income of 10 kopeks per month was needed to live normally, and about twenty five kopeks for a better standard of living. Few had such financial resources and so foreign support was hoped for by many.*

*There was hardly a family that had not seen somebody leave for America, Canada or South Africa. Fifty-five households received parcels and financial support from abroad. Seven families were only able to feed and clothe themselves because of the support they received."*

In bigger shtetls there were community associations, organized by profession (tailors, woodworkers, carriers and so on), Torah study societies, diverse charities, affiliated societies of the Jewish Bank, a library, a reading room. In each shtetl there were also followers of different parties and movements - Zionists, Bundists (modern social democrats), communists and so on.

## **World War I and Lithuanian independence**

At the start of World War I Russian troops invaded East Prussia, but the German armies soon turned the tide; Lithuania was occupied by Germany and the Russian armies driven back. In 1915 the Russians, fearing that the Jews might spy for the Germans, who treated them better than the Russians had done, forcibly moved a large portion of the Jewish population (about 200,000) from the Pale to other parts of Russia. Many Jews from north-eastern Lithuania ended up in the Crimea, others in central Russia. In February the elected Council of Lithuania proclaimed an independent state of Lithuania and many Jews who had been forced to leave, returned.

The new Lithuanian state remained independent throughout the period between the two World Wars. Jewish life in this period was untroubled. On the whole, Jewish communities got on well with their non-Jewish neighbours. Community life was rich and well organized. There were six daily Jewish newspapers. Vilnius had 105 synagogues and prayer houses.

On June 15, 1940 the Soviet army moved in and took control of Lithuania, and seven weeks later Lithuania was officially annexed to the USSR. Lithuania's Jews were affected profoundly when it became a Soviet republic. The effects were mixed. On one hand, Jewish representatives were asked to join the government, and Jews were allowed to attend institutions of higher learning without restriction. On the other hand, many of their businesses were nationalized (as they were in Latvia), and Jewish political, cultural, and welfare organizations were closed down. On June 14, 1941 (only a week before Germany invaded) the Soviets exiled tens of thousands of Lithuanians whom they considered to be "enemies of the people" into Russia. Among them were some 7,000 Jews. Whilst conditions as exiles were extremely difficult, many survived the holocaust as a result.

## **The Holocaust in Lithuania**

On the eve of the second World War there were one and a half million Litvaks (Lithuanian Jews). In June 1941 Germany invaded the Soviet Union, including the Soviet-held territories of Latvia and Lithuania. Most of the Lithuanian population welcomed the Germans, and many willingly collaborated with them. The Germans implemented a systematic plan to exterminate all of Lithuanian Jewry. During the summer of 1941 most of the Jews in the provinces were murdered, and from September to November most of those in the big cities (who had been imprisoned in ghettos when the Germans arrived) were also slaughtered. By late 1941 only forty thousand Jews were still alive in Lithuania; these were localized in four ghettos (in Vilnius, Kaunas, Siauliai, and Svencionys) and several labour camps. During the summer and autumn of 1943 the ghettos in Vilnius and Svencionys were liquidated, while those in Kaunas and Siauliai became concentration camps. By the time Germany surrendered to the Allies in 1945, only a few thousand Lithuanian Jews had survived. In March 1990, with the dissolution of the USSR, Lithuania became an independent state once more, and is now part of the EU.

### **Epilogue.**

Over ninety five percent of Lithuania's Jewish population perished, all unarmed innocent civilians. Two hundred and thirty-nine Jewish communities were destroyed in Lithuania, their people shot and buried in two-hundred-and-two known mass graves that are to be found in every region of the country. Historians attribute this to the extraordinary rate of voluntary collaboration by elements of the local population, constituting an infamous betrayal of neighbours, friends, and schoolmates.

Amongst those murdered were many members of the Abelso(h)n, Meierovich and Chasan families.

## The Family Names - Abelson and Chasan

The English spelling of the names and surnames of our ancestors and their siblings is inconsistent and depends on where they had migrated to. In researching our genealogy, we find different English spellings for Abelson and for Chasan. This is in part due to the fact that these names were originally recorded in languages and alphabets other than English. Local and Jewish records were kept in Lithuanian, German and Russian, as well as Yiddish, using both Cyrillic and Hebrew script.

Many used both Hebrew and local first names. Different administrators and census-takers (often semi-literate) wrote the names in different ways, often recording the names phonetically as they understood them from the pronunciation; and after people left Lithuania these names were transliterated to English, introducing yet further variations.

My own research is based on documents in the public domain, previously translated into English, as well as original archival documents, mostly handwritten in Russian and Yiddish, and which were translated jointly by other researchers and me.

In searching genealogical sources for our families (mainly the Belarus and Lithuania censuses and family lists from 1795-1900), and starting with facts already known to me (e.g. my maternal grandfather was Chaim Chetsel Abelson, son of Meier Leib of Nemokshti), I was immediately confronted with the fact that the spelling *Abelson* is not to be found at all in those Lithuanian records which had also been recorded in Latin scripts. Almost all instances of the name are Abelson, though other spellings include Abelzon.

Similarly, Chasan embraces Chazen, Chaizen. Kazan, Khazan, Khazen, Khasan, Khasin, Khazon, Khazin and Khazina (feminine form), Khezin and Khezsina, Khisin and Khisina, Kashin and Kashina, Kaczan, Hazan, Hason, Hasin. The same records may show multiple spellings (as if the recorder was unsure), e.g. Hazan/Khazan. Tsorra (Sara) Tsipe Abelson (née Chasan) is found in the records as Khazsen, Tsipe and as Tzipa Chazan.

Meyerowitz is not used, but Meierovich and Meyerovich (amongst others) do appear.





# The Abelsohn Family

### The Abelsons

Chaim Abelson originated from Nemokshti (or Nemoskiya, now called Nemakšėiai) in the Raseiniai district of Lithuania.



His wife Sara Tsipe Chasan came from Salantai (now Salantai), in the Kretinga district of Lithuania. We know very little of the Abelsons in Lithuania. The following account from Rabbi Kassel Abelson contains most of the previously known facts:

*“My father (Gershon Abelson - Gershon Shmaryahu ben Yehuda) was born in Nemoskiya, Lithuania, and was a student at the Telsa (Telz/Telsai) Yeshiva. The family name, Abelson, only goes back a couple of generations before my father. The original family name was Meyerovitch. The change of name came about because of the Czar's army.*

Boys would be taken to serve in the army for 25 years. Jews felt no allegiance to the Czar, and did what they could to escape from serving in the army. Since the oldest son in a family was exempt, one method was to have male children take the name of childless couples and be their “first born son”. So three brothers had the family names of Meyers (Meyerovitch), Abelson, and Shane. [Shein]”

My own mother (Pearl Bernitz, née Abelson) remembers that the Meierovich name used to come up in family discussions in her home. There was a Meierovich family in Johannesburg at that time and she remembers that her own sisters, Lena and/or Betty were in contact with them. She also recalls that the Abelson's had relations called Abelman in Pretoria. (The wife was called Dobba, and her son was Dr. Barney Abelman. Barney was the father of Pat Abelman. Barney had a sister called Lena Abelman). An application made in Lithuania in 1901 to the orphans court by Gershon Meierovich regarding his grandchildren (see p. 77), shows that a Mordchel Abelman was appointed as their guardian. This would appear to support a familial connection between the Meierovich, Abelson and Abelman families.

Searching Lithuanian records for these families, and any link between them, is hampered by the fact that neither the vital records of Nemakšėiai nor those for Salantai are available from the Lithuanian Historical Archives.

Galina Baranova, head of the Vilnius archive writes that “.... the members of your family came from Salantai and Nemakšėiai. The most important source for the search is vital records. Unfortunately our archive has not received any vital (birth, marriage or death) records of Salantai and Nemakšėiai Jewish communities for keeping. I think they were destroyed during wars and fires.”

The Kaunas (previously called Kovno) archives have yielded a number of civil records regarding the

Abelson and Meierovich families. The material available for various different Jewish communities for the first part of the 19th century provides an (incomplete) picture for members of Jewish families registered in those communities. It is noteworthy that there were a number of shtetls in close proximity to each other that were all home to Abelson, Meierovich and Sheyn families. Whilst our immediate ancestors came from Nemakšėiai and Salantai, others with this same surname came from nearby shtetls including Ariogala, Raseyn (now Raseiniai), Neishtot-Tavrig (now Zemaïėiu Naumiestis) and Jurbakas, as did many of the Meierovich family.



All the records for the Abelson, Chasan (Khazen) and Meierovich families in the whole of the Pale show they were actually concentrated into a fairly small geographic area of Lithuania. The Bernitz family were from Latvia, just outside the Pale, but they nevertheless lived nearby. Often there were only a few residents in the main town, while many families lived in small villages or in karchmas (taverns and inns). The identification of these very small villages (often home to a single Jewish family) and matching them with modern place names can be extremely difficult.

### Nemokshti – home of the Abelson family



*Above: A street in Nemakšėiai. Although these are new houses, the street layout is as it was during the shtetl era. The large fields between the houses provided grazing for the domestic animals of the Jewish families, including milk cows and horses.*

Very little has been published in English about Nemokshti (Alternate names: Nemakšėiai [Lith], Nemokshti [Yid], The first Jews settled there in the 17th century. The Jewish Population in 1900 was 954 (80% of the population). Many immigrated, especially to Israel. By 1940 70 families remained. After the German invasion in 1941 Jewish males aged 15 and up were seized for forced labour. On 24th July 1941 they were shot beside previously prepared pits, in which they were buried. The women and children were murdered in August. The memorial (below) at the site of the mass graves lies 1.5 km outside the village.



The official Town plan of Nemoskiya in 1910 shows that both Leib Abelson and Eliash Meierovich were still living in the Shtetl, close to the synagogue.



Plot no. 49 – home of Eliash Meierovich – a large plot of land with many buildings on site – probably his dwelling and business premises.

Plot no. 112 – home and business of Leib Abelson.

Plot no. 100 – The Synagogue complex. The plan shows a large building (the shul), and a number of smaller buildings, spreading onto the adjoining plots (probably school buildings, mikva, etc.)



*Clockwise from Top  
The entire area around Nemoskiya is still surrounded by large flax and linen farms.  
A wooden house.  
The horse and cart is still used extensively around the town.*

### Some notes on Archival documents

Revision Lists are census lists, which were first recorded in 1772. They are comprehensive lists of a tax paying population to which almost all the Jews belonged. It is difficult to find much information about our Lithuanian ancestors before this date. Revision Lists were revised or updated, sometimes several times, until the next full census was recorded. Such information frequently covered a period of ten years or more. The records were written mainly in Russian (Cyrillic). Some records contain additional notations written in Yiddish or Hebrew.

Fields that are included in the list are:

*Uyezd.* The term "Uyezd" is very old and was in use for several hundred years up until Lithuania became an independent country in 1919. It can be understood to be the equivalent of a county.

*Gubernias /Guberniya:* A Province of the Russian Empire:

*Family Name (Surname):* Very few surnames appear in the earlier Revision Lists. Although the majority of Jews in Lithuania did not have surnames, some families had begun using them as early as 1816. Without surnames, one must rely exclusively on patronymics, hoping that names repeated within a family will show a trend. From 1834, family names began to appear much more frequently.

*Given Name:* Self explanatory

*Father:* Self explanatory

*Relationship to Head of Household:* While large numbers of Jews gradually moved to the cities, many 18th and 19th Century shtetls had fewer than a thousand people - and many of these residents were fairly closely related. The chances of finding distantly related cousins within this field are very likely. This field describes how each person in the household is related to the head of the household.

*Age at last revision / Age:* Age given at present enumeration. In addition to the adults listed, the names and ages of children born between the census and each subsequent revision were also recorded. The birth year of an ancestor listed in 1816, aged

approximately 65 - 70, could be assumed to be between 1746 -1750.

*Reason Left:* This field reports what happened to people that had been registered on the list at the last census. People left their shtetl for a variety of reasons - for instance if they moved to another town, or if boys were conscripted (or in some cases, were declared "missing" in an attempt to avoid conscription by the "khappers"), or if someone had died in the interim period. Other reasons given were "expelled from the community" - "converted" - "moved to ....." etc.

In 1902 a list of Jews who avoided military service (e.g. because of emigration to the USA) was published in the Latvian newspaper "Kurlandskiye gubernskiyе vedomosti" [KGV]. Their relatives who remained in Russia were forced to pay "the enormous pain in 300 rubles." In KGV the authorities announced they were searching for the members of the family of the person who had avoided military service (in 1901), and published the names of the relatives and their ages, including the draft avoider's parents and brother; and searched their property, asking for payment in the amount of 300 rubles. It would seem that 300 rubles was the standard fine to be paid by the family for draft evasion for the early part of the 20th Century at least. This applied to families within the entire Pale of Settlement.

Some families were able to buy their son's way out of the conscription, but most were extremely poor. The cost of buying oneself out of the army was even greater than the cost of a steerage ticket to England or the USA. When the emigrant attempted to send money "back home" to help pay these fines, the letters were frequently opened by the post office authorities to search for money orders or cash, and the money seldom reached the families most in need of it.

Notes by Vitalija Gircyte, Davida Noyek Handler, Carol Coplin Baker, Alexander Karnovsky and Judith Langer Caplan


The May 27 1858  
 Revision list for Yankel,  
 son of Eliash  
 Meierowitz. 99

Raseiniai District,  
 Nemokst Jewish  
 Community.

Vitalija Gireyte, Chief  
 Archivist at the Kaunas  
 Regional Archives,  
 writes:

"The Jews since at least  
 the beginning of the  
 19th century belonged to  
 the category of tax-  
 paying population,  
 which had to pay poll  
 tax, be recruited into the  
 army and listed in the  
 revision lists. In Russia  
 the rights of those who  
 had graduated from  
 universities were equal  
 to the rights of personal  
 nobility - they did not  
 pay poll tax, were not  
 subject to military  
 recruitment, etc.

Lawyers, doctors, phar-  
 macists, etc. were not  
 included in the revision  
 lists; certain financial  
 status entitled one to the  
 rank of "honorary  
 citizen"; or "hereditary  
 honorary citizen", and  
 they also did not belong  
 to the tax-paying  
 population."

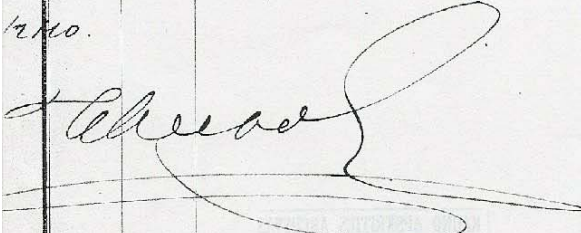
Ревизская сказка.					
1858 года Мая 27 дня Кооенской губернии, Россіенскаго уезда, Немонитинскаго Еврейскаго общества					
№ семьи.		МУЖЕСКІЙ ПОЛЪ.	По послѣдней ревизіи состояло и послѣ оной пребыло.	Изъ того выбыло.	Шляхъ на лицо
9-й ревизіи.	10-й ревизіи.		Лѣта.	Когда именно?	Лѣта.
2	1	Янкель Яншовичъ Мееровичъ	39	"	47
		Его сынъ Мошиа Лейбъ-	8	"	26
		Мошиа Лейбъсынъ Янкъ Кива	новорожд.	"	1
		Янкель другой сынъ Беръ-	16	"	24
		Его третій сынъ Тершонъ	14	"	22
		Его же четвертый сынъ Зохаель	10	"	18
		Его пятый сынъ Меушенъ	пропущ.	"	15
		Шестой сынъ Довидъ -	4	"	12
		седмой сынъ Хауцнель	новорожд.	"	6
		и восьмой сынъ Янкель			
		Тессель -	новорожд.	"	3
Съ подлинною вѣ,					
 Староста					



## Ревизская сказка.

1858 года Мая 27 дня. Ковенской губернии, Россіенскаго уезда,  
Немокиштынского Еврейскаго общества

№ семьи.		ЖЕНСКИЙ ПОЛЪ.	Во временной отлучкѣ.	Наличъ на лицо.
9-й ревизіи.	10-й ревизіи.		Съ котораго времени.	Лѣтъ.
2	1	Анкеля жена Стауба Мерси	"	46
		Его дочь Пая	"	9
		Мовши Лейба жена Фрейда Зига	"	24
		Берси жена Сога Хволя	"	22
		Бершона жена Стауба Маргома	"	20
		Его дочь Шейна Фрейма	"	1
		Зохелъ женою Демеръ Лида	"	17

и.и.о.  


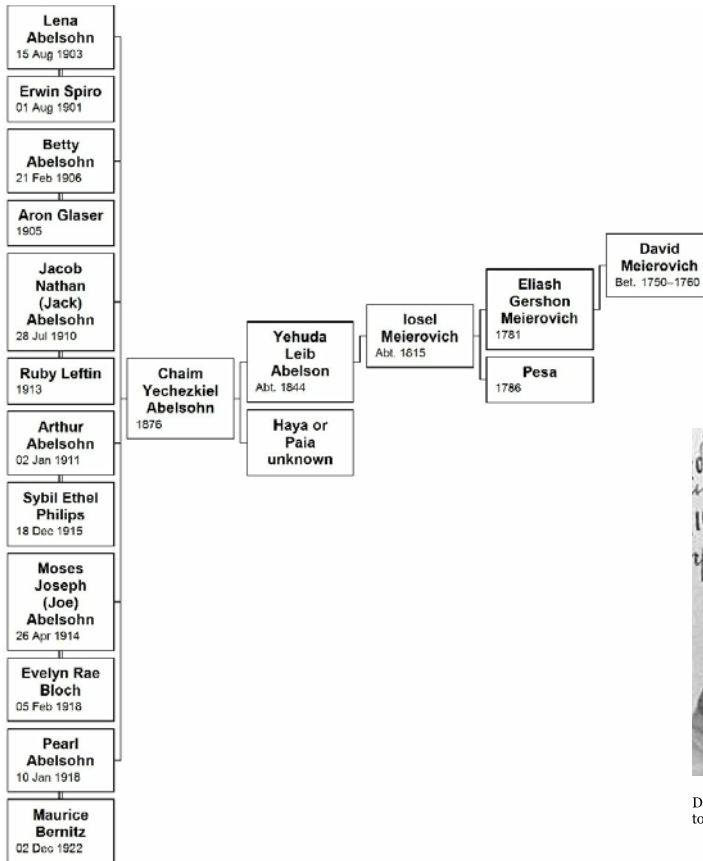
The last revision took place in 1858. Later, only additional revision lists were made for people who had been omitted in 1858. Only a very few Jews had acquired sufficient educational or financial status to be exempted from the category of tax-paying population before 1858.

Rabbis, religious slaughterers or any other Jews engaged in religious studies were exempt from poll tax. But yeshivas were hardly equal to universities from the point of view of the Russian government, and their graduates had no special privileges.

## The Abelso(h)ns – our surname was originally Meierovich.

We know from the account of Gershon Abelson (father of Rabbi Kassel Abelson) that the Abelson's are descended from the Meierovich family.

It was important to find the precise genealogical connection so that we could trace our full ancestry. This is described in the following chart and discussion:



David Meierovich of Vilna, a cousin to Chaim Abelsohn.

Lithuanian tax lists show that Yehuda Leib (Leyb) Abelson was born in the mid 1840's, and that he was the son of Iosel (no surname recorded in the earliest records.). Iosel's birth can be estimated as being between 1810 and 1815. This was the period in which most Jews did not yet have Surnames in Lithuania. In later records he is listed as Iosel Meierovich, and he was certainly one of the first members of the family to bear that surname.

Nemakšėiai records currently available in the Kaunas (Kovno) archive show that a large Meierovich family was living there at the same time as the Abelson family (see chart on previous page). Iosel Meierovich was himself the son of Elias, and had three brothers and three sisters. Meierovich records in Nemakšėiai date back a further two generations at least, to the late 1700's; the names Khatskel, Paiya and Gershon were all used by the Meierovich family as well as by the Abelson's across several generations. This coincidence of naming patterns strengthens the probability that Gershon David Meierovich and Yehuda Leib Abelson were brothers, and that Yehuda Leib Abelson was the son of Iosel Meierovich. (Iosel, the father of both Gershon and Leib, was himself the son of a Gershon). However, further proof was needed. In establishing the Meierovich connection I was assisted by Vitalja Giryte, Chief Archivist of the Kaunas Regional Archives. At the outset Vitalije told me that whilst the practice of adopting new surnames was common, proving family connections was seldom possible. Parents sought to disguise their identity to protect their children and themselves from conscription.

Vitalija advised me that in studying the actual records, clues to relationships could be found by considering the manner in which information was recorded (especially in later documents, recorded after the fear of conscription had passed). And so it proved. One of the more telling entries is in the 1912 Municipal Electors List (by 1912 the fear of conscription had passed, and the brother had emigrated). Entry number 30 is for Abelson Leib, son

of Iosel, age (ca) 63. The following entry No 31 is for Meierovich Gershon, son of Iosel, age (ca) 65.

The inference is clearly that Gershon and Leib are brothers, born to Iosel 2 years apart. (Earlier entries show them to have been born up to 12 years apart. It is not unusual in these records to find birth date discrepancies intended to obscure their ancestry). But Vitalje states that names placed so closely together suggests a true family relationship; and there are numerous instances of these two surnames being found together in the town records. Examples are:

1891- Rabbi Electors list: *Entry No. 78 Abelson Leib, son of Iosel aged 46 (in 1891). Entry No. 82 Meierovich Gershon son of Iosel aged 58* 1892 Municipal Electors list: *Entry No. 77 Abelson Leib, son of Iosel, aged 48. Entry No. 121 Meierovich Gershon son of Iosel aged 58.* Incontrovertible evidence of the relationship between the Abelson and Meierovich families is to be found in the proceedings of a court case, the original documents of which were found in the Kaunas archive:

***1893 – 1894 – Complaint to the Court of the Governing Board about the Merchant Meierovich.***

This document together with a full translation is attached at the end of this book as Appendix I. It is an accusation of corruption levelled against Gershon David Meierovich and Yehuda Leib Abelson. They are fully exonerated from these accusations by the court. It provides documented evidence that Gershon David Meierovich and Yehuda Leib Abelson were in fact brothers, and it proves that my great-grandfather Yehuda Leib Abelson was actually born the son of Iosel Meierovich. It further provides a fascinating account of life in Nemokshiti, and of the civic roles of our family in that shtetl. The Shane connection referred to by Kassel is proved by the 1885 Box Taxpayers list (see above). Entry No. 15 supports the fact that David Shane was the third brother to carry a different surname.

The 1885 Box Tax List

Министерство Финансов  
 Департамент Земельных и Податных дел  
 Сводный список владельцев недвижимой собственности в уезде Радзевичском  
 на 1885 год

№	Имя владельца	Вид собственности	Площадь	Содержание
1	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	
2	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	
3	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	
4	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	
5	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	
6	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	
7	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	
8	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	
9	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	
10	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	
11	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	
12	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	
13	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	
14	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	
15	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	
16	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	
17	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	
18	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	
19	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	
20	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	
21	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	
22	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	
23	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	
24	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	
25	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	
26	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	
27	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	
28	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	

62	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	
63	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	
64	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	
65	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	
66	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	
67	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	
68	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	
69	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	
70	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	
71	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	
72	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	
73	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	
74	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	
75	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	
76	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	
77	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	
78	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	
79	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	
80	Иосел Давид	Земельный участок	100	

Сводный список владельцев недвижимой собственности в уезде Радзевичском на 1885 год

Композитор Иосел Давид

КАНО АПСКОБИТЕС АРХИВУС  
 ПАГИДИАС P. 2463 Ap. 1  
 M. 2463. 2. 63. 111  
 1885

Entry No. 15 above is for David Sheyn, son of Iosel and proves the Shane connection referred to by Kassel, supporting the fact that David Shane was a third brother.

Name: David Sheyn Father: Iosel . Record Date: 1885  
 Town: Nemačšciai Uyezd (Region): Raseiniai  
 Guberniya (District): Kaunas

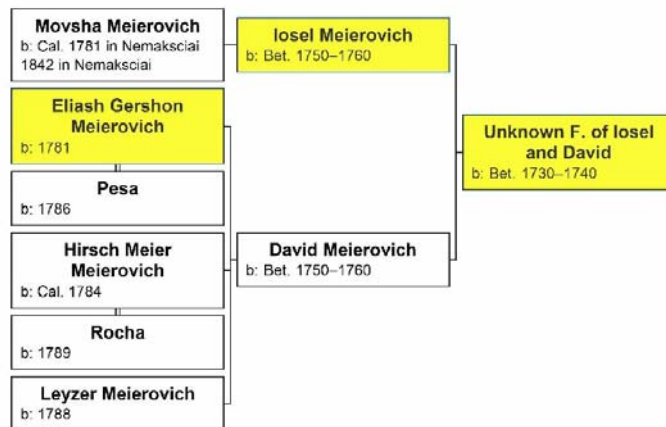
Entry No. 66 is for Abelson Leib, son of Iosel.  
 Entry No. 67 is for Meierovich Iosel. The father of both Leib Abelson and Gershon Meierovich, Iosel was the son of a Gershon.

Entry No. 69 is for Meierovich Gershon, son of Iosel.

## The Abelson's and Meirerovich's of Nemoskiya

*First Generation – my great-great-great-great-grandfather.*

**David (Meierovich) born ca. 1750-1760**



We are descended from David Meierovich. The first ancestral records to be found in Nemoskiya records are for David and Iosel, undoubtedly brothers. They are individually mentioned in various documents as being the respective father's of David or Iosel. This accords with the time frame before which Jews were required to take heritable surnames, and they were most probably our first family members to be given a statutory surname by the authorities around 1814.

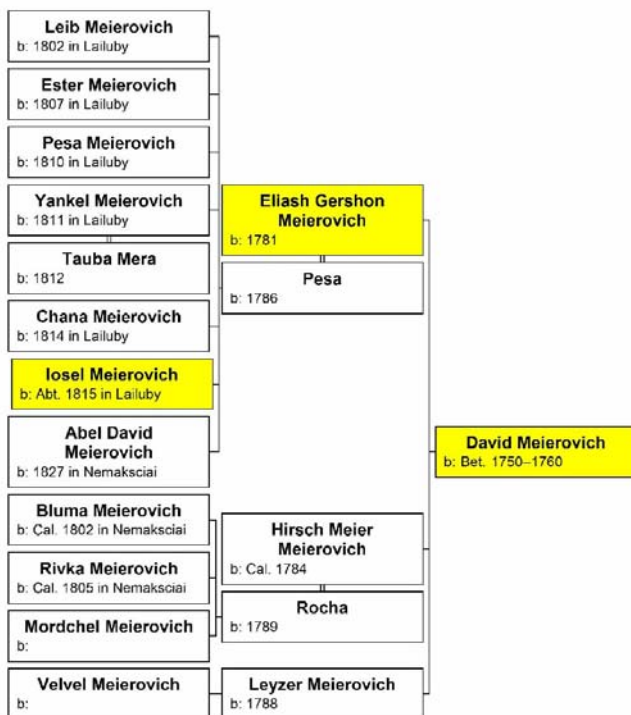
We know from the All Lithuania List (census) of 14 August 1816 that David and Iosel were both living in the Nemoskiya district in 1816, and that the census listed them as having come from abroad in 1814. Archivists have explained that "coming from abroad" is translated from the Russian documentation of the time. It could mean that they had come from some another district or part of the Russian Empire, and not necessarily from another country. We can extrapolate their approximate year of birth from the ages of their children, which are known.

Thus David and his brother Iosel (Meierovich) would have been born between 1750 and 1760. Iosel had one son (to our knowledge), Movsha (Berel) Meierovich, born between 1785 and 1800. The 1845 Taxpayers list records that Movsha died in 1842. We know that he was unable to pay his taxes, and lived (and probably died) in poverty.

David had three sons - Eliash Gershon (our ancestor), Hirsh Meier and Leyzer Meierovich. They all married. Details of Eliash and his descendents follow below, and those for Hirsch and Leyzer are included later. There were many other Meierovich families living throughout Lithuania at this time, including all of the following locations: Panevezys, Vilnius, Ukmerge, Ariogala, Kaunas, Vilijampole, Gargzdai, Raseiniai, Taurage Zemaieiu Naumiestis, Rietavas, Jonava and Pumpenai.

It is probable that some at least were relatives, and that further research will show that David and Iosel had siblings.

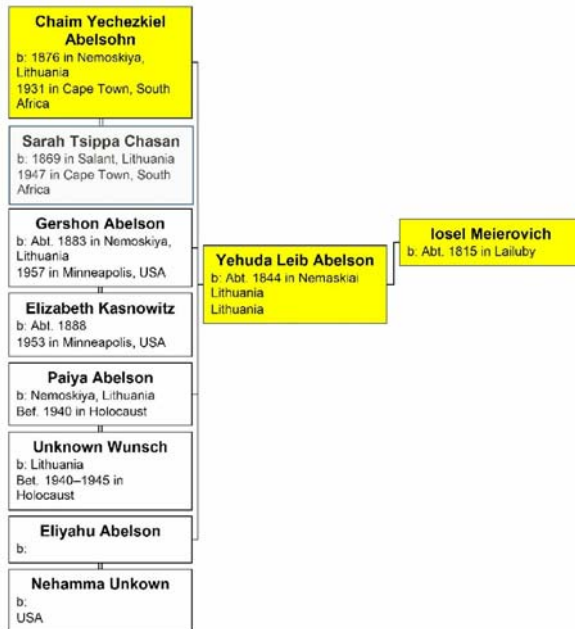
*Second Generation- my great-great-great-grandfather.*  
**Eliash Gershon Meierovich, born 1781.**



Eliash was married to Pesa (maiden name unknown). They had four sons and three daughters. The taxpayers list indicated that there were two men and four women living in his household in 1851. There are no records of his daughters having married. The household consisted of his wife Pesa, then aged 65, three of his four daughters Ester (44), Pesa (41), Taube (39),

Chana (37) and his youngest son Abel David, then aged 24. Eliash died in 1854, aged 73. A will, written in Russian, was lodged with the Kaunas Court of Inheritance. The seventh child, Iosel Meierovich, was my great great-grandfather. His descendants follow below. The Descendants of the other children of Eliash are included in the appendices.

*Fourth Generation- my great-grandfather, the first Abelson.*  
**Yehuda Leib Abelson, born Meierovich (b. 1815)**



This was the generation in which our surname was changed from Meierovich to Abelson . Iosel Meierovich had 3 sons, and gave them different surnames to protect them from military conscription:

Yehuda Leib **Abelson** (see below), David **Sheyn**, and Gershon David **Meierovich** – who was the father of Zelig, and the grandfather of David and Etta – (for details see the case re the Orphans – Appendix II. There may also have been daughters. Because the vital records were lost, and as girls and women were seldom

named or recorded in tax and civil lists we do not have any details.

My mother recalls that the Abelson's had relations called Abelman in Pretoria. An application made to the orphans court by Gershon Meierovich in 1901 regarding his grandchildren shows that Mordchel Abelman was appointed as their guardian of the two minor children of the deceased Zelig Meierovich and his wife Sara (unknown maiden name). This would appear to support a familial connection.

*Fourth Generation – my great-grandfather*

**Yehuda Leib Abelson b. 1844**

Yehuda Leib was a wood merchant, and a prominent citizen of Nemokshti. He married Haya (surname unknown) around 1875. According to both Kassel and Pearl, she was descended from six generations of Rabbis. They had three sons and a daughter - Gershon Abelson, Eliyahu Abelson, Paiya Abelson, and Chaim Abelson

*Fifth Generation- Great Uncles and Aunt*

**Gershon Abelson b. 1883**

(Gershon Shmemoryahu ben Yehuda and Haya).

Gershon studied at the Telz Yeshiva. He immigrated to the USA, sailing aboard the Hamburg-Amerika Line Batavia on November 4th, 1904. A record dated November 18th 1905 shows that he was detained on Ellis Island as an alien for special enquiry. Evidently he was able to satisfy the enquiries of the immigration authorities. Gershon practised as a Rabbi in the USA. He married Elizabeth Kasnowitz (Laya bat Katriel). She was born in the United States, but her parents were from Austria. They had two children, Kassel and Judith.



Rabbi Gershon and Elizabeth Abelson

**Paiya Abelson**

Kassel writes “. . . Paiya (Wuntsch) married and remained in Lithuania. I remember my father writing to them, and every so often sending packages. We lost contact, during WWII, and we presume the family died in the Holocaust.”

**Eliyahu Abelson**

Kassel writes “. . . Eliyahu Abelson was married to Nehamma. They lived in Philadelphia, and had two children, Samuel and Judith. My uncle, Eliyahu, died before I was born. Samuel, when he was a teenager committed suicide, asphyxiating himself in a closed garage. After his death Nehamma and Judith moved to Queens. They developed a ceramic jewellery business in the late 1940's. Judith never married and lived in Manhattan in a hotel. In the late 80's she suddenly called, having learned where I live from (a colleague). We (remained) irregularly in touch until she passed away (around 2000. She was buried in NY by the Hebrew Free Burial Society.”

**Rabbi Kassel Abelsohn b. 1924**

Kassel was for many years a prominent leader in Conservative Jewish movement in the USA. His first wife Shirley Raskin died in 1987. They had 3 children, Samuel, Elissa and David.



Rabbi Kassel and Shirley Abelson.



*Sixth Generation – My maternal Grandfather*  
**Chaim Abelson (1876-1931)**

Chaim Yechezkel Abelson (the son of Gershon Abelson, brother of Chaim) was born in Nemokshiti in 1876. His father was Yehuda Leyb Abelson (Meierovich), a successful wood merchant, and a man who was active in Kahal matters.

Rabbi Kassel Abelson has written as follows about Chaim's mother Ita: “. . . on her side, I am told, there were six generations of Rabbis. My (own) father was a student at the Telz Yeshiva and an outstanding Talmudist.” Chaim had two brothers, Gershon and Eliyahu, and a sister Paiya. Following schooling, Chaim also attended a Yeshiva. It is possible that he did so in Telz, as did his younger brother.

My mother Pearl states that he was a very observant man all of his life. She had thought that he may have trained as a Rabbi, although he did not practice as one. There is at least one reference in Lithuanian records as to him being a schoolteacher in Salant.

Charles Abelson writes: “my understanding is that he attended the Mir Yeshiva in Vilna. I do not know if, in addition, he studied at the Telz yeshiva. As is the Jewish custom when a parent passes away, the son(s) sit Shiva at home for several days and then continue to attend synagogue and say kaddish for a year, Thus the Abelson sons said kaddish for their father for a year. What is unusual is that a synagogue was set up in their home in Kloof Street and services were held every day at home during the year”.

My mom told me that when Chaim died, at the request of the congregation his coffin was driven past the Roeland shul, whilst the congregants gathered outside to mark their respect.

Charles Abelson writes: “In 1959 (I attended) the yeshiva at the Schoonder Street shul, the successor shul to the Roeland Street Synagogue which most of the Lithuanian Jews attended at the turn of the 20th century, and of which my great grandfather on my



mother`s side, Mones Bloch, was one of the founders. At the first lesson, the rabbi gave each of us a copy of one of the tractates of the Talmud, Bava Metzia. I found written on the front page that it had been the property of my late grandfather Chaim Abelson. The rabbi told me that Chaim Abelson had been the single most learned Jew in Cape Town and had possessed the largest home library”.

In 1900 Chaim moved to Salant, where he married Sara Tsipe Chasan (Khazen) in 1901. Sara was 32 years old and Chaim 25. An announcement was printed in the Hebrew newspaper HaMelitz, with a donation being made on the occasion of their wedding by Meyer Moshe Chasan. Sara was always sensitive about her age, and hid it from her children. She misstated her birth year as 1878 in the shipping records when she sailed for South Africa.

Sara was always sensitive about being older than Chaim, and hid it from her children. She misstated her birth year as 1878 in the shipping records when she sailed for South Africa. According to Pearl, this was often speculated on by her and her siblings, but never admitted to by Sara.

Pearl was in turn almost five years older than Maurice (a fact she hid from me and my siblings until we were adults!) She has recently told me of the discussion that she had with her mother when Mo proposed to her. Pearl was already engaged to at that time, and was concerned about her mother's views on her breaking off the engagement to marry a man so much younger than herself.

She was surprised that her mother strongly supported Maurice, and told her that an age gap was no obstacle. Even then Sara did not tell my mother what her true age was. Mom finally learned the truth from me when she was aged 91!

The first reference found for Chaim Hatskel Abelson in Salant is in 1900, with the deposit of 500 roubles into the postal savings bank. The deposit carried the comments "born in 1876 in Nemaksciai; a town dweller; money deposited by his father ABELSON Leyb son of Iosel. Should Chaim die before his marriage to Sara Tsipe, the money to be returned to his father."

Six months earlier 200 roubles had been deposited in Sara Tsipe's name by her father. These were large sums of money for the times, and an indication that Meyer Moshe's shop was reasonably successful. Archivist and historian Vitalje Gircyte has told me that the standard measure of value at the time was ten roubles, the price of a cow. 500 roubles was considered an enormous sum, many years' earnings. These were dowries provided by their parents. The marriage had been arranged, as was the custom, and Chaim moved from Nemokshiti to the larger town of Salant to join his bride.

Chaim and Sara had two daughters, Lena in 1903 and Betty in February 1905, both born in Salant. Chaim's occupation whilst in Salant was recorded as a teacher. He then emigrated, leaving his wife and daughters in Salant. According to my mother Pearl, his intended destination was the USA. Charles Abelson writes: "*I always understood from my father, Joe Abelson, that his original intention was to join his brother in the USA*". It is possible that he sailed before Betty was born, sometime in 1905.



Chaim Abelson's Passport: Issued in 1904, it includes a release from army conscription

Legend has it that upon arrival in London Chaim received a telegram from his wife Sara. She told him that she had received a letter from her half-sister Rieva to say that her brother-in-law (Lewis Suzman) had a cigarette business for sale in Cape Town. Lewis had in fact founded L.Suzman Ltd. in 1889. He wished to move to the Goldfields in the Transvaal, and he was proposing to sell this business to Chaim and would offer him credit terms to facilitate the purchase. She recommended that Chaim divert to Cape Town and acquire the business. I believe that, as with most good legends, this one has a basis in fact.

Above: The Union-Castle Mail Steamship "GALEKA" - 6722 tons

Chaim sailed from England aboard the SS *Galeka*, a steam ship of the Union-Castle Mail Steamship Company, arriving in Cape Town on the 25th February, 1905. When he could afford to do so he sent for Sara, Lena and Betty, and they joined him in 1909. Chaim died in 1931. Having complained regularly to Tsipe of stomach pains, he was admitted to the Hos Street hospital for exploratory surgery. He was found

to have terminal cancer, and died in hospital. My mom clearly remembered that she and Tsipe were sitting on the veranda of the house in Tamboers Kloof when Joe and Nathan Bloch arrived by car to tell them that Chaim had passed away.

Chaim, Sarah and their granddaughter Irene are all buried at the old Roeland Street Cemetery in Cape Town.

*Wife of Chaim Abelsohn – My maternal Grandfather*  
**Sara Tsipe Chasan (1878-1947)**

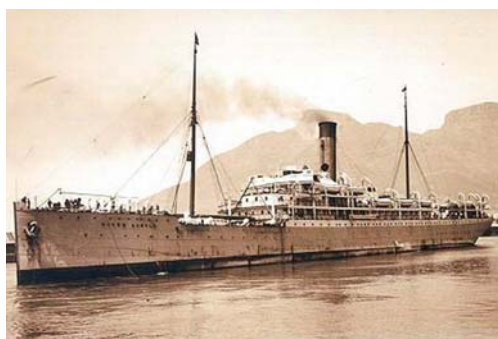
We know nothing of her childhood. In 1900, at the age of 22, she was married to Chaim Abelsohn. This was probably through the customary arranged marriage; they were unlikely to have met each other previously, given the distance between Nemaksciai and Salant. Undoubtedly her parents were actively involved in the marriage arrangements!

The Salantai Real Estate Owners list of 1903 reveals that Chaim had a "Wooden house on Bazarnya Street, shared with N Gitkin (7 family members), S Fur, Sh. Zagen-Kagen (7 family members);" ; and there is also an entry for the same N Gitkin showing that he had a "wooden house on Libarskaya Street, with S Fur, Sh. Zagan-Kagan & Ch. Abelson". We can assume that one of these houses, probably crowded, was the home to Sara , Lena and Betty.

As mentioned above, Sara Tsipe had remained behind in Salant with her daughters when Chaim left Lithuania for Cape Town. She was finally to join him 4 years later. When Sara, (who was affectionately known to all as Sara Tsipe, or Aunt Tsipe) and her two daughters left Salant, they travelled initially by train to Hamburg. In Hamburg the shipping companies had established enormous receiving areas. The Jews of Hamburg, in company with other Jewish communities, provided assistance to the immigrants passing through; they had founded a relief organisation which took care of the migrants from their arrival at the railway station to the departure of their ships.

On the 7th August 1909 (a Saturday) they embarked on the 'Kirsten' Line's boat the *Silvia*, bound for London. The boat arrived on Monday and discharged her passengers at St. Katherine's Dock. They had probably bought a package ticket from Lithuania to South Africa by way of London.

An essential part of that package was the arrangement that a representative of the Poor Jews' Temporary Shelter in London would meet migrants at St. Katherine's Docks, and escort them a short distance to



Above. The Dover Castle, Cape Town harbour.

the shelter in Leman Street, where women and children were cared for by its sister organisation, the Jewish Association for the Protection of Girls, Women and Children. Families were housed in approved lodging houses. By such means, the Shelter protected newly-arrived Jews from being duped into paying exorbitant prices for temporary lodgings. As well as providing accommodation, the Shelter exchanged money and sold tickets (often providing these free of charge) to Jewish trans-migrants heading for South Africa, South America, the United States, Canada and Australia, generally looked after them while in London, and then saw them off onto their boat.

On Friday 13th August they sailed from London on the Union Castle Line's ship *Dover Castle*, bound for Cape Town. The ship was small by today's standards at 5219 tonnes, with 167 passengers on board, the majority travelling third class. They arrived at the end of August, to be met by Chaim, who had obtained residency permits for them.

Initially they lived on the premises of the business, now called Ch. Abelsohn Ltd., at 22 Sir Lowry Road, Cape Town. They had four further children in Cape Town – Jack (1910), Arthur (1911), Joe (1914) and Pearl (1918).



Above: Sir Lowry Road, Cape Town in 1896. The low white building on the right bears the name of L. Suzman on both sides of the door. This was the business which Chaim Abelson purchased. He was to rename it Ch. Abelson and Sons, the name under which it traded for over eighty years.

Below: Tamboers Kloof - 1903

When the Abelson finances improved, they moved home. When Tsipe was pregnant with Pearl they moved to New Church Street in Tamboers Kloof. After Chaim had died (around 1938) the family moved to 25 Queens Road, Sea Point. This home featured often in the lives of the Abelson and the Bernitz families. It was at this house that Pearl first met Maurice. Whilst he was in the Air Force, serving in Cape Town, the Abelsons would often host him to Shabbat dinners. He met and fell in love with Pearl, 4 years his senior. They were married in 1943.

As the family prospered, they would spend their summers in Muizenberg. They rented a house there, and let their Sea Point home for the same period. They were members of the Muizenberg shul during the summer.





Tsipe Abelsohn at 25 Queens Road, Sea Point with Ruby Abelsohn



The house in Church Street, Tamboers Kloof. This photograph was taken in January 2008. The house was still very much as Pearl remembered it to be 70 years earlier.



Pearl as a young woman in Cape Town.



The Good Hope Seminary, Pearl's school. Photographed in 2008, the school is still very much the same as Pearl remembers it.



Chaim and Tsipe.



Pearl, in school uniform.

### The Descendants of Chaim Yechezkel and Sara Tsippe Abelsohn





Chaim and Sara had 6 children

**1. Lena ABELSOHN**

Lena was born in 1903 in Salant, Lithuania. She travelled to South Africa with her mother in 1909. After working as a nurse during WWII, she practised as a librarian and a Latin Teacher. Lena was married late in life to Erwin Spiro. They did not have any children.

Dr Erwin Spiro qualified and practiced as an advocate at the Court of Appeals in Berlin until barred by the Nazis in 1933 from practising his profession. He immigrated to South Africa in 1936 and obtained an LL.B. degree in 1947 from UCT. He was fluent in several languages and served with the South African forces in North Africa during the second world war as in interpreter for prisoners of war (mainly) in German, Italian and French. He was awarded an honorary Doctorate in 1983, and was made an honorary life member of the Cape Bar council. He was an esteemed member of the Cape Committee of the SA Jewish Board of Deputies. With great dedication, he voluntarily assisted German Jewish refugees over many years to obtain reparations from Germany. He wrote on family Law and was also an acknowledged tax law authority. He published a monthly journal, the "Taxpayer", which Ernie Bernitz recalls was regarded as the tax bible by all South African accountants. Due to his knowledge of languages (including Latin), he had an international reputation in Conflict of Laws and in fact wrote the internationally used textbook on the subject. Lena died in 1981 in Cape Town, and was survived by Erwin. Erwin bequeathed his estate to the Jewish community and today the Cape Town Jewish Community Services are housed in "the Spiro Centre".



Above: The wedding of Lena to Erwin Spiro. Back Row: Arthur, Sybil, Evelyn, Ruby, Jack, Lena, Aron, Erwin, Betty, Joe, Pearl. Children: l. to r. Charles Abelson, Anna, David, Alan, Gerald, Jeffrey, Johnny, Cyril, Rufus.



Photograph on the front veranda at 42 Plumer Street, Witbank, on the occasion of Herman's Barmitzvah. 22 June 1968.

Left to Right: Joe, Pearl, Arthur, Betty, Lena, Jack.

**2. Betty ABELSOHN**

Betty was born in early 1905 in Salant, Lithuania. She was married to Aron Glaser, himself an immigrant from Latvia. Aron worked in the family business of Ch. Abelson and served in North Africa with the South African army during the Second World War. Their son Cyril was born on 27 December 1946 in Cape Town. An accountant, Cyril was the third generation to work in the business. Aron died in 1960 at the age of 55. Betty survived him by 18 years, passing away in 1978, aged 72.

**3. Jacob Nathan (Jack) ABELSOHN** Jack was born on 28 July 1910 in Cape Town. After qualifying as a doctor, he became one of the first South Africans (and the first Jew) to acquire a higher degree in anaesthesia, and became the first resident anaesthetist at Groote Schuur hospital in Cape Town. During the WWII, Jack served as a high ranking officer in the Medical Corps of the South African army. He married Ruby Leftin (see chart below) on 26 March 1942, and they had 3 children. He died on 11 February 1979 in Cape Town.



Lena (left), Tsippe and Betty (right) on a Cape Beach.

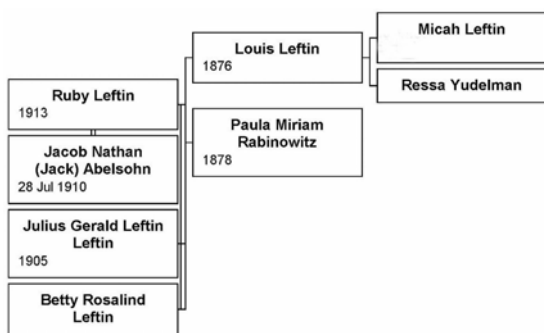




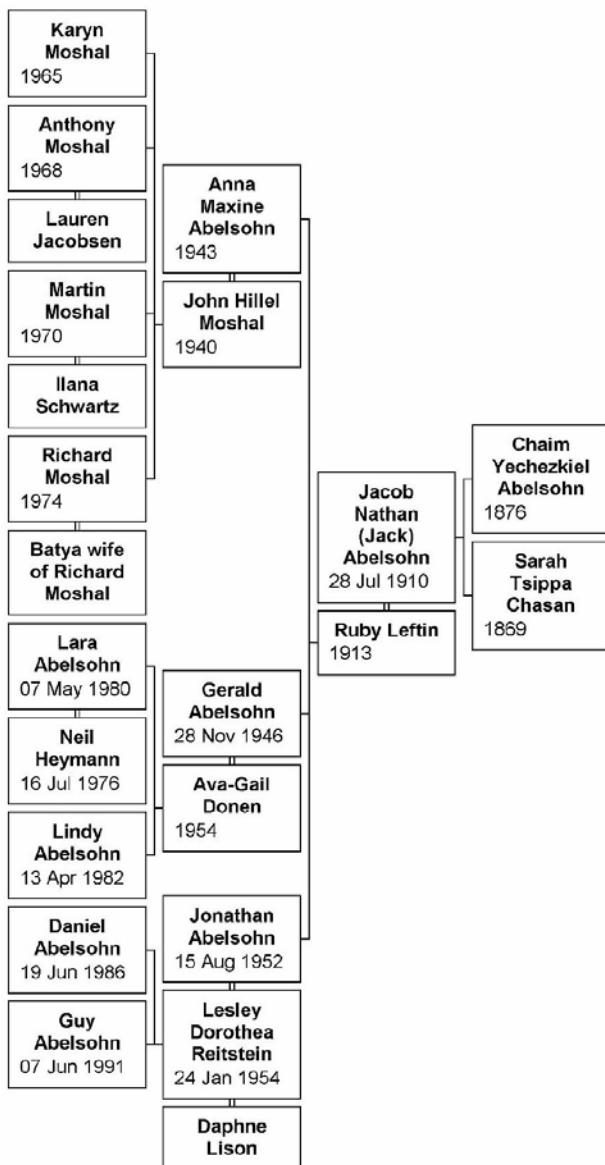
At the wedding of Jack and Ruby: L. to R: Maurice Bernitz, Jeanette Salmohanson (married Mickey Bernitz in September, 1942), Selwyn Chasan, Sylvia Chasan (née Jacobson), Audrey Bernitz (née Lewis), wife of Mischa Bernitz, Lena Abelson, Betty Glaser (née Abelson), Pearl Abelson, Frida Chasan (née Bernitz), Aron Glaser

**The Ancestors of Ruby Abelson (née Leftin)**

Louis Leftin, Ruby's father, was born in Liebau. Louis' grandparents were born in Salant and were resident there in the same time frame as Jack's grandparents.



**The Descendants of Jack and Ruby Abelson**



#### 4. Arthur ABELSOHN

Arthur was born on 2 January 1911 in Cape Town. His father had died when he was 20, and he gave up his studies in order to take over the management of the family business, and to support his mother and younger siblings. The business was to be very successful, occupying a large building on the foreshore, with tall neon sign advertising Cavalla cigarettes; this could be seen from miles out at sea, and was for many arriving travellers their first glimpse of Cape Town at night.

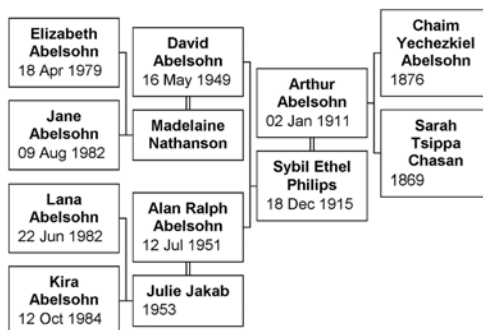


Ch. Abelson Ltd, wholesale tobacconists, provided employment to a number of family members, including Betty and her husband Aron Glaser, and to my mom Pearl before she married. The business was to provide income to many of them over a lengthy period. It was a tradition that Ch. Abelson supplied family members with 400 cigarettes a month. As arranged by my mom Arthur provided my supply from the time I left school until the time we emigrated from South Africa, even ensuring that I received my monthly allowance whilst studying in London. Little did we know the harm that this perk was causing!

Ernie Bernitz has commented *“Your reference to the cigarette allowance was also practised by Suzmans in Jo’burg. While at University I used to work in dispatch, and as an employee was entitled to weekly ration of cigarettes- I think 10. In those days the cigarettes were only packed in paper wrappers of 50, and were pretty scarce, I was very popular at varsity, always good for a smoke or two. You are right - little did we know what we were doing. For me it was worse. I learned to smoke cigars. One of the directors would always slip me a real Cuban cigar, a habit I still crave.”*

A third generation joined the business with Cyril Glaser, Rufus Abelson and Gerald Abelson all working there. After Arthur died on 14 August 1989 in Cape Town, the business was sold. Arthur married Sybil Ethel Phillips, a medical practitioner. They had two sons, Alan and David.

The Descendants of Arthur Abelson and Sybil Phillips



## 5. Moses Joseph (Joe) ABELSOHN



Joe was born on 26 April 1914 in Cape Town. Joe was an Attorney and spent his entire working life at C. & A. Friedlander in Cape Town, where he was to become the senior partner. Established in 1899 this was the first Jewish legal firm in South Africa. Alfred Friedlander, a founder, handled the sale of the business from Lewis Suzman to Chaim Abelson. Joe was married to Evelyn Rae Bloch. There was a connection between the Abelson and Bloch families which went back at least to the time when Evelyn's father, Nathan Bloch, assisted Chaim Abelson in the purchase from Lewis Suzman of the business to be known as Ch. Abelson.

M. Bloch & Co was established in 1892 and Nathan Bloch and Lewis Suzman probably knew each other both from business as well as synagogue. The Bloch's were from Plunyan (Plunge); it is believed that the close connections between the Bloch and Abelson families commenced in Lithuania.

Evelyn and Joe lived in Sea Point, as did the Bloch family. Joe was a keen tennis player throughout his life. Joe and Evelyn had four sons, and lost a daughter at birth. The self-proclaimed "Mayor of Sea Point," Evelyn was a larger than life character, and there were few who did not know her, or know of her. Joe died in Cape Town in 1991, and Evelyn passed away the following year.

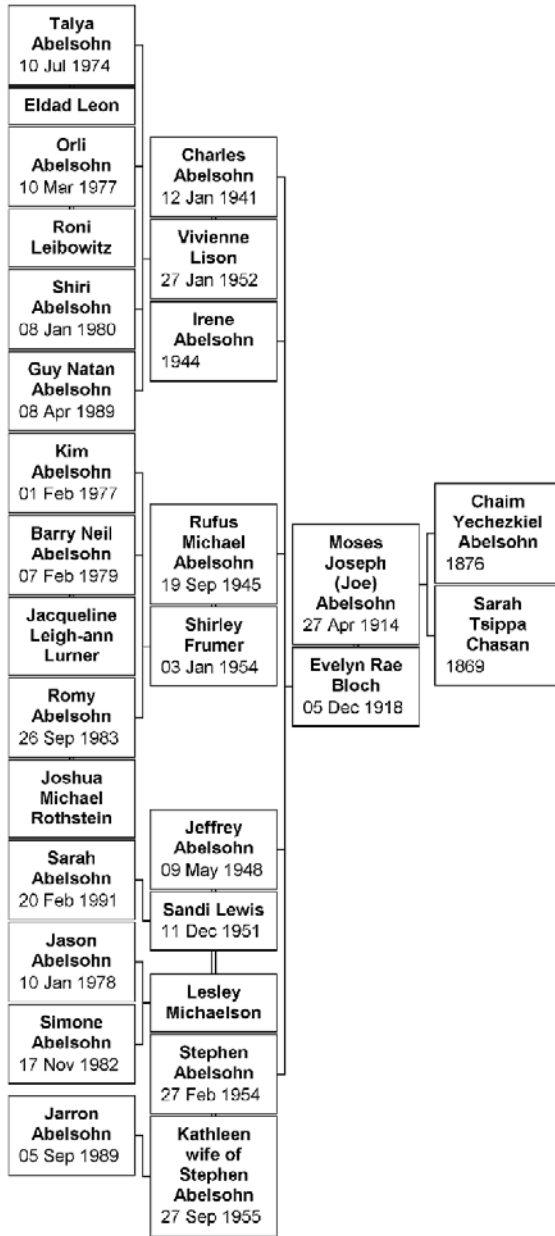
Charles and his wife (Vivienne Lison, born in Paarl) immigrated to Israel in 1973 where he became head of legal affairs at EL AL. Her father, Cecil Lison, was born in Ponevezh, Lithuania. He was a Reverend at the Uniondale, Beaufort West and Windhoek synagogues. He and his wife, Helen, later joined Charles and Vivienne in Israel. Charles and Vivienne have four children - Talya, married to Eldad Leon, Orli, married to Ronen Leibovich, Shiri and Guy. All served in the Israeli armed forces. Talya has three children, Oreen, Yonatan and Mai, and Orli, one daughter, Shani.

Rufus Michael Abelson was born in Sea Point in 1945 and worked at Abelsons. He married Shirley (Frumer) whose father also came from Ponivez. They live in San Diego. with their three children, Kim, Barry and Romy. Kim is married to Joe Dolin and has three daughters, Rachel, Rebecca and Mia. Barry is married to Jacqui Lurner and has one daughter, Aubrey. Romy is married to Joshua Rotstein and has a daughter, Emma.

Jeffrey was born on 9th May 1949. He too lives in San Diego. He was first married to Lesley Michaelson of Franschhoek and has two children from this marriage, Jason and Simone. Jeffrey and Lesley divorced and Jeffrey remarried Sandi Lewis. They have one daughter, Sarah.

Stephen Abelson was born on 27th February 1954. After he left South Africa he lived for a while in Washington State where he met and married Kathleen and they have one son, Jaron. Stephen lives in Ashford, Oregon.

The Descendants of Joe Abelson and Evelyn Bloch





## 6. Pearl ABELSOHN (my mother) -*Seventh Generation*

Sara Tsipe gave birth to Pearl, her last child in 1918, at the age of 49. Pearl was 15 years younger than Lena, her eldest sister. Lena, and to a lesser degree Betty took an active role in her upbringing, and her brothers were very protective of her. She remembers fondly how her siblings took care of her. Her early years were spent in Tamboerskloof, and then in the house in Sea Point.

My mom has always told me that her only memories of her parents are of elderly people. She was considerably younger than her siblings as well. Her father had died when she was just 13.

She attended the Good Hope seminary in Cape Town. When she completed her schooling she worked in the family business.

The Abelson home in Cape Town was always open to visiting family from the Transvaal. It was here that Mo was entertained whilst at an Air Force base in Cape Town. He had met Pearl when her parents had invited him home for a Shabbat meal. Although she was already engaged, Mo courted her aggressively, persuading her to break off her engagement, and marry him instead. They were married on February 7th 1943, at the Roeland street shul in Cape Town.

He was posted to Bloemfontein and Kimberly, where he and Pearl lived in married quarters, before returning to Cape Town, where I was born in February 1944, by which time Mo had already been posted to

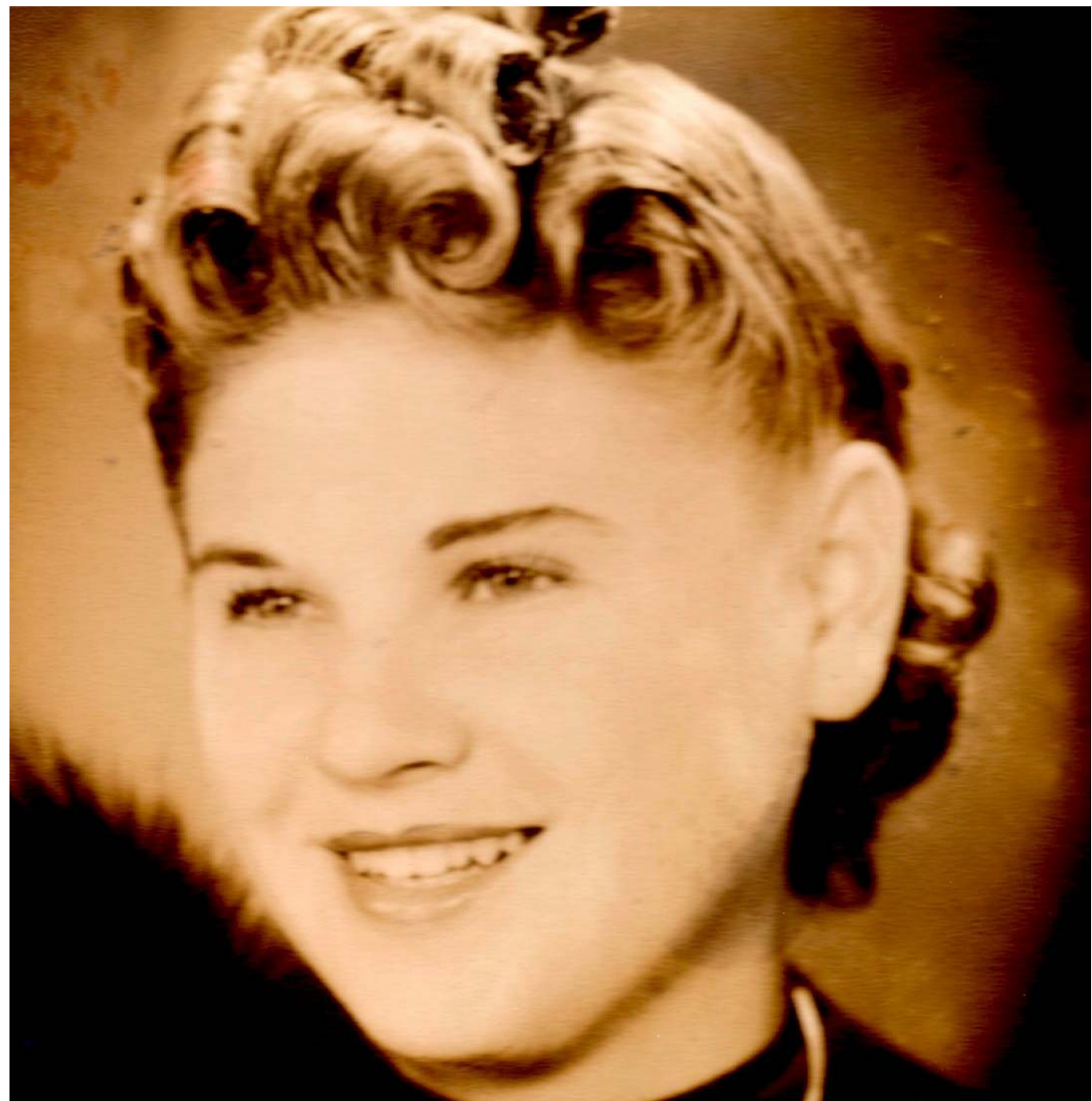
North Africa and then on to the Italian theatre of war. He returned to Cape Town shortly before the end of the War. Mom was very ill (her gall bladder had been removed), and he was given compassionate leave to visit her in Cape Town.

The war ended during his visit, and he was not required to return "up North". Mo, with Pearl and me (aged 2) returned to Witbank, where we moved into Herman and Katie's home, at 21 Rhodes Street, a large imposing house.

They built a new home at 42 Plumer Street, in which Jill, Shana and Herman were born, and which remained the family home until we all left Witbank. Pearl was an active member of the Jewish community and the Women's Zionist society. When in the early sixties Mo started a weekly newspaper, "The Witbank Mirror" Pearl learned new skills, and became the newspaper's main proof-reader, a job she loved.

After Jill, Shana and I had all married and left home, Mo and Pearl (together with Herman) moved to Johannesburg, to be closer to their children and grandchildren. They bought a flat - 304 Gravenhage, Rudd Road, in Illovo.

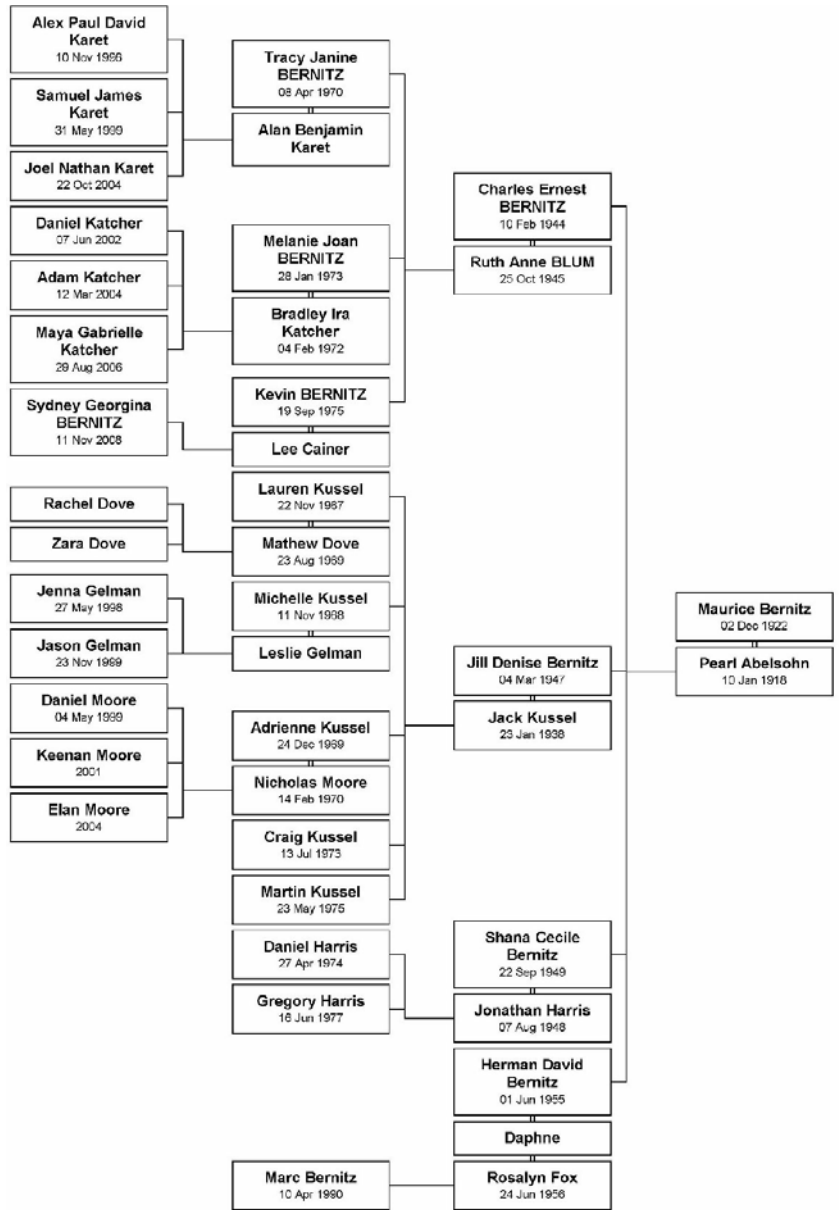
When Mo became involved in the travel industry, and purchased a travel agency in Miami, he and Pearl went to live there for a short period. They returned to Johannesburg, and shortly thereafter Mo died tragically of a heart attack. He was 55 years old.





Pearl and Mo on their wedding day.  
The Roeland Street Synagogue in 2008. It is now a  
government building.

The Ancestors and Descendants of Maurice and Pearl Bernitz (née Abelsohn)



Other Abelsohns, Meierovich and Chasan families in Lithuania

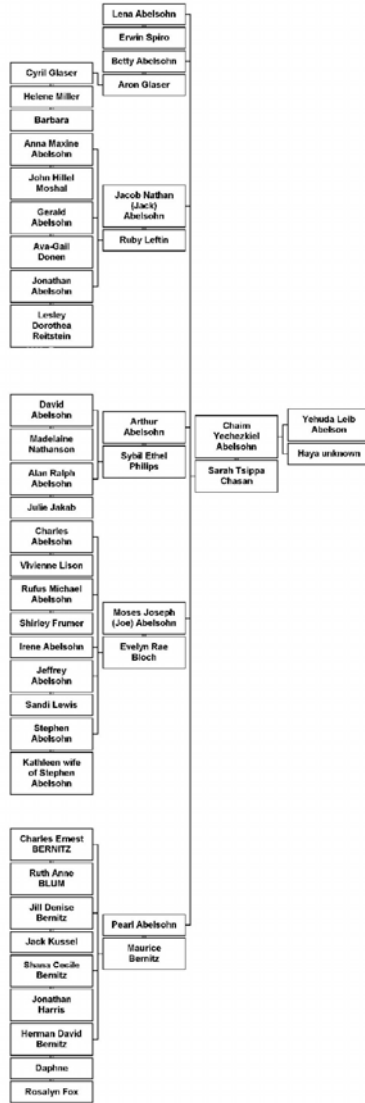


There were, and still are Abelson, Meierovich and Chasan families to be found in Lithuania. It is possible that some may have been holocaust survivors, and it is likely that some have returned from Russia. Evidence of their presence can be found in current phone books, as well as in modern Jewish cemeteries (e.g. Vilnius).

Graves in Vilnius Cemetery - clockwise from top left: Carl ben Levi Abelson (d. 1954), Abelson (1916-1990), Yisroel Meierovich (d. 1954), Isaac Chasan (1922-2008).



# The Descendants of Chaim Yechezkel Abelson and Sara Tsipe Chasan



# The Chasan Family

## Salant – home of the Chasan Family

Salant (Salantai in Lithuanian) is located in the north-western part of Lithuania, about 32 km north-east of the main district town of Kretinga. The nearest train station was 12 km away from Salant. The village is built on both banks of the Salantas River. Jews settled in Salant at the beginning of the 18th century. In 1765 there were 279 Jews in town who paid poll tax. They made their living in crafts and commerce, in particular from the flax trade (both flax and linen are still extensively farmed in this part of Lithuania). The market days and the fairs were the source of their livelihood. The two weekly market days, Tuesday and Friday were very important in the lives of the Jewish families who lived in the town. There were 60 Jewish shops, 20 flax merchants, and a water powered flour mill. Jews were engaged in 18 different trades in town, including 6 butchers, 2 shoe makers, 2 barbers, a tailor, a baker, a tin smith and a watchmaker. There was also a Jewish doctor, a female Jewish dentist and a pharmacist. Jewish children studied at the Cheder. There was a Yeshiva and five Chedarim. In 1906 a Jewish library was established. Salant was known in Lithuania and in the Diaspora for the scholars, rabbis, intellectuals and authors who trace back their roots to the town. There was also an old synagogue in Salant, built in the first half of the 19th century. In 1915, the Russian army exiled many Salant Jews and most of the Jews of the Kovno Guberniya deep into Russia. After WW I the Jewish population decreased as some emigrated to South Africa, America, and Palestine.

The great fire of 1926 destroyed almost half of the town and resulted in many of Salant Jews immigrating to South-Africa, America and Israel. 151 families were left homeless and poverty-stricken.

In June 1940 Lithuania was annexed to the Soviet Union, becoming a Soviet Republic. Several shops belonging to the Jews of Salant were nationalized, and commissars were appointed to manage them. The German army entered Salant on the first day of the war against the Soviet Union, on June 22, 1941. A few Jews escaped to Russia.

On the eve of the Shoah, about 150 Jewish families, about 500 persons, still lived in Salant, most of whom were still engaged in trade and crafts. The new rulers, helped by the auxiliary Lithuanian police ordered all Jewish men to leave their homes and sit on the sidewalk, where they were robbed of their valuables by the Lithuanian policemen. Then the men were made to run through the streets, with the Lithuanian public watching and jeering. The books they had confiscated from Jewish homes and prayer houses were burned by the Lithuanians.



After the big fire of 1926.

On the 1st July 1941 all the remaining Jews were ordered to leave their homes and gather in the synagogue with their money and valuables. There was public looting of their property. A heavy guard of Lithuanian auxiliary police surrounded the building. Each night ten men would be called out and shot following terrible abuse. 150 young women were forced out of the synagogue and sent to farms to work, a number of them in the fields of Lithuanian peasants. On the 12th of September these young women were taken to a field where they were all shot and buried. Only one (Bathyah Abelman Yankelevitz) managed to escape and hide with the peasant's for whom she had previously worked. They hid her until the liberation. On the 10th of July all the men were taken from the synagogue to the river where they were shot and buried in mass graves on the riverbank. On the 20th of July the remaining women and children were killed.



The market place in Salant. The house at right was lived in by the Zusmanowitz family. The original picture is from Tilly Broomberg, daughter of Hannah Susman (Zusmanowitz), who can be seen in the middle of the photograph standing together with two of her sisters.

### Salant Today

Top: A small-holder tends to his fields at the rear of his house in Salant.

Middle: The Jewish Cemetery in Salant.

Bottom: The Shul, now a cultural centre.

The cemetery is outside of the town, with access made difficult by a rutted dirt driveway. A memorial plaque indicates that this is a Jewish cemetery. A large wooden sculpture honours the memory of 405 Jews murdered here during the Holocaust. Almost empty of tombstones now, the walled cemetery is on a gently sloping hill. Its size indicates that there would have been several hundred graves for the sizable Jewish community that once lived in Salant. Some graves are legible, others completely weathered. Elsewhere are more markers, some with extensive and legible inscriptions, including the deceased's name. They date from 1881 to 1923. Local people claim that there were many stones still standing in the 1960s. Russian soldiers removed stones for construction during the '70s and '80s. Many stones are partially sunk into the earth, and would require excavation in order to be read.

Although I examined every visible stone, I was unable to find any for members of the Chasan family.





Salant today. The Catholic Church was completed in in 1912, three years after Sara Abelson and her daughters left for South Africa. The village is built on both banks of the Salantas River..

## Chasans in Lithuania

There are a number of Chasans to be found in various Lithuanian databases. It is highly probable that some of them, at least, were related to the Chasans of Salant. For example the following is an excerpt from the Rabbi Electors list for the town of Vandžiogala (about 100 kms. distant from Nemakšėiai) in the Kaunas Guberniya (District).  
Name: Leyb Khazan  
Father: Gershon  
Record Date: 1859.

The earliest reference to any Chasan (Khazan) in Salant is to be found in the 1877 Box Tax payers list. It states that "Meyer Moshe Chasan, son of Osher owns a house". From this record we are able to determine that Osher was the father of Meyer Chasan.

Searches of the surviving records (in the Kaunas archives) for 1846, 1848, 1855 and 1867 do not show any Chasans in Salant. References for the family are found in documents dated 1887, 1892, 1901, 1903 and 1912. No references are found after 1912. These are all local voting and tax records. The so-called vital records (including birth and death registrations) no longer exist for Salant. We can therefore be reasonably sure that no Chasans lived in Salant prior to 1867, and that soon after 1912 they had all left. Unfortunately this is of no help in determining when the first Chasan adopted the surname.

The records do however help us in building a picture of their life in the shtetl.

1877 Box Taxpayers list. Entry 174 – Meyer Moshe Khazan, son of Osher owns a house.

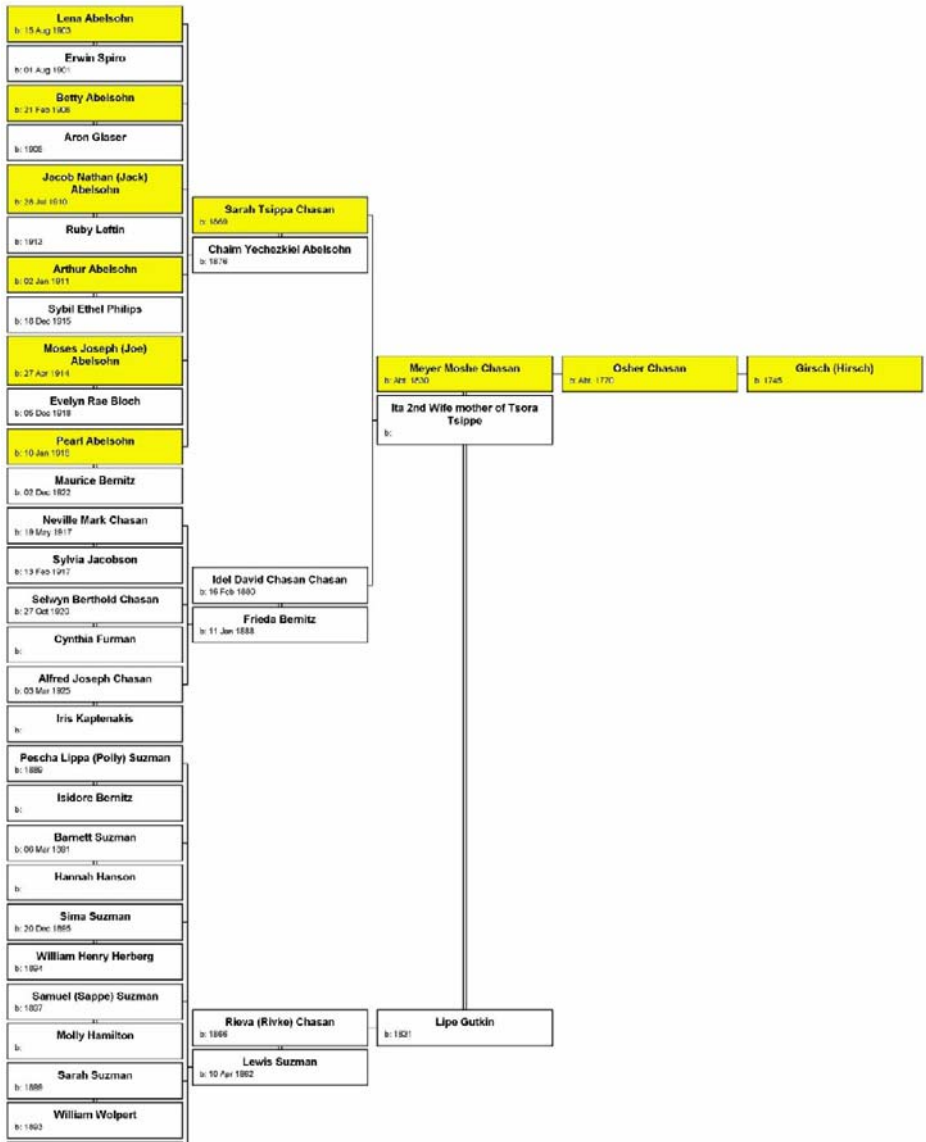
1892 Box Taxpayers list. Movsha Khazan, son of Osher – a shopkeeper. 7 family members living in house.

1900, April 5th. A postal bank application to deposit 200 roubles for Tsipe Chasan. The application was signed on her behalf by her father. This was most likely her dowry, and Chaim and his father would have been informed.

1900, October 30th. Chaim Khatskel, born Nemokshti 1876, deposited 500 Roubles in the postal savings bank. It is noted that the money is left to his father in the case of his own death. This was the reciprocal dowry from Chaim's father. He was obviously a careful man!

1903. Chaim Abelson is named in the Salant records as a house owner. It is described as a large wooden house, home to four families. Other than himself, there were a number of tenants including S. Fur, Ch. Zagenkagen and N Gutkin. (This would have been Nehemiah Gutkin, the uncle of Sara Tsipe, Chaim's wife).

The Descendants of Hirsch Chasanovich (aka Osher Chasan)



## The Chasans of Salant

*First Generation – my great-great-grandfather.*

### **Osher (Chasan) Chazanovich (1800)**

The first ancestor to be found in Lithuanian records is Osher (Asher). We know this as he is identified as the father of Meyer Moshe Chasan in tax and voters lists dating from 1892. He is referred to in a translated document (box tax payers list, 1877) as Osher Kagan, son of Girsha. Considering the issues of translating from the Russian records, this can also be written as Hirsh Chasan. He came initially from Seda, a town twentytwo miles WSW from Salant. Records described him as not poor, but not owning real estate. Using a rule of thumb that he was born some fifty to seventy years before his granddaughter, his birth year is calculated as being around 1800. His father Girsha was therefore born in the later 1700's; Osher was probably the first generation taking the surname Khazan. Before living in Salant, he may have lived for a while in Gorzd (Gargzdai).

*Second Generation - my great-grandfather.*

### **Meyer Moshe Chazanovich (Chasan)**

Picture right

The original birth records are not available for Meyer Moshe. His birth date is calculated as approximately 1830. The 1892 Box taxpayers list record him as having been a shopkeeper. Meyer Moshe was a learned and pious man. He was married twice, first to Lipe Gutkin, and then after he early demise to Ita (Surname unknown),



### **The Derivation of the Surname - Chazanovich to Chasan**

Much of our knowledge of Meyer Moshe's early life has been researched by Charles Abelson, like myself a great-grandson. Charles has written as follows:

I have the Talmud used by our grandfather. It was published in 1875. On the first page of Volume 1 (there are twenty five volumes) the name of "Chiam Abelson" is written, together with his Tamboerskloof address. "Chiam" had inherited the shas from his father-in-law, Reb Meyer Moshe Chasan (the Salanter). On the first page (along the edge) of the Hebrew text (the handwritten) name of Meyer Moshe Chasan appears as follows (in translated form): Meyer Moshe B"R Yehuda Asher Chazan Mi (of) Salant. Each volume of the shas has the same inscription. B"R means the son of Reb. In other words, the name of Meyer Moshe's father is Yehuda Asher. Note that the Hebrew spelling of Chazan is chet aleph zayin aleph nun (final)."

Charles had been given the set by his aunt Lena Spiro Abelson who received same from her father on his death. Charles Abelson continued "I also have two books of the Chumash, Devarim (Deuteronomy) and Bamidbar (Numbers) which belonged to Meir Moshe. The set is incomplete but important for the writing on the front and back pages mainly of Devarim. (See right.) As the books were printed in Vilna in 1863, Meyer Moshe could only have obtained the books as a married adult. It is uncertain whether this was during his first or second marriage. Charles speculates that it could possibly have been a gift at the time of the engagement of Meir Moshe to Ita.

As indicated by notes 1 and 5, it appears that the original name of the family is Chazanovich. Note 1 is very clear on this point. Note 6 reverts again to Chazan (Chasan). The handwriting of note 6 is the same as for note 1 and is probably that of Meir Moshe. A note in a chumash reads "this Chumash belongs to reb Meir Moshe B"R (son of reb) Yehuda Asher Shaliach Tzibur (emissary of the congregation) in Garzd Cantor (Hazan)". Charles Abelson writes: "Note that this Hebrew spelling of Chazan is het zayin nun (final). This means "cantor". (Since there are no "alephs", it does not mean the name "Chasan"). I have come to the opinion that our great grandfather, who was a very learned man, was the "chazzan" in the Garzd shul before he left for Salant. If so, we may assume that the connection between the Suzmanovich's and the Chasanovich's began in Garzd.

These handwritten notes give us a fuller understanding of the origins of the Surname. Meier Moshe used the surname Chasan, particularly in later life. But he initially used the surname Chazanovich too, describing himself as the son of Idel Asher Chazanovich. Idel Asher(Osher) was born around 1800. Thus he was the first generation to adopt a Surname during the period that the taking of Jewish surnames became compulsory.

The Surname Chasan/Chazanovich almost certainly originates from the occupation; whether or not Osher was the Cantor, or so named because his father was also a cantor is not known? The name is clear when written in Hebrew – the Latin language spelling is arbitrary. I think we may well be looking at his personal notes on the derivation of the surname.



### **Meyer Moshe Chasan His Early years and Studies**

Family lore is that Moshe Meyer studied under the Salanter Rebbe, Rabbi Israel Lipkin, who was the founder of the Mussar stream of learning which is still taught in the many Yeshivas today. Lena Abelson (Spiro) told me on several occasions that her grandfather Meir Moshe Chasan had studied under the Salanter Rebbe. She was quite firm on this point. Lena was born in Salant, and lived there until she was six, before immigrating to South Africa. We are not certain whether Meyer Moshe was still alive (although he was still living in 1903). If he and possibly Ita were still alive, then Lena most likely knew aspects of the life story of her grandparents directly from them, as well as from her mother or from other "Salanters" who emigrated to South Africa.

Rabbi Yisroel Lipkin, better known as "Rav Yisroel Salanter", was born in 1810. Records show that he was married in 1823 to Esther Fega Eisenstein (if correct he would have been 13 at the time, and married just after his bar mitzvah!). After his marriage Rabbi Lipkin settled in Salant, where he continued his studies. He was a tremendous Torah scholar, and around 1842 Rabbi Lipkin was appointed Rosh yeshiva of the Rabbi Meile yeshiva in Vilna, and left Salant. In 1848, he left Vilna and moved to Kovno, Lithuania, where he again established a yeshiva. He retained charge until 1857, then left Lithuania.

Meyer Moshe was born in about 1830, and together with all other Jewish children would have certainly been attending cheder in Salant, possibly from the age of 6 or 7 and certainly beyond his Barmitzvah (around 1843). This corresponds exactly with the timeframe in which Rabbi Lipkin was studying at the Salant Yeshiva. It is very likely that he and other students were the main teachers at the cheder classes in Salant.Mitzvah. He would have had to have left home and moved to Vilna to further his studies as a young man

It is therefore entirely possible that Moshe Meyer may have been his student until around the time of his Bar under the Salanter Rabbi. This is not substantiated, but is feasible.

Frances Suzman Jowell wrote: "My father, Moses Meyer Suzman . . . told me that his own mother (Rivke Chasan) - in her younger days in Salant - used to teach in the school run by Meyer Moshe." Charles Abelson explains this: "In the world of the shtetl of the 19th century, the concept of "school" did not have the same meaning as we understand it. It is highly unlikely that boys and girls attended the same school and even less likely that Rivke would have taught boys".

It appears that Meyer Moshe was the principal, at least for a cheder school for girls and that Chaim Abelson taught at this school (under his father-in-law). This would have been part of an extended number of institutions that constituted the Jewish education system of Salant. Meyer Moshe as the community Rabbi would have had overall responsibility for Jewish education, and both he and Chaim Abelson may have taught at these others as well.

In the world of the shtetl, the younger children would have attended cheder, the teenagers would go to a yeshiva, and adults to a higher level yeshiva or, if a married male, a kollel. In most of the cases the teacher would have studied as, or be studying to be a rabbi. If Meyer Moshe and Chaim Abelson were teachers at a kollel or post-"school" age yeshiva, it indicates that they had reached almost the highest level of learning possible and almost certainly were rabbis. They were teaching potential rabbis as well as learned adults.

**The First Marriage of Meyer Moshe Chasan to Lipe Gutkin.**

Meyer Moshe's first marriage was to Lipe Gutkin, the daughter of Elias Gutkin. Their own daughter Rieva(Rebecca) was born in 1866, when Lipe was 35 years old. She died at the time of or soon after Rieva's birth (by 1868 he had already remarried). An unconfirmed historical account relates that during the Polish rebellion in 1831 a rich Salant man, Eliyahu (Eliash) Gutkin, helped by the local priest, saved 12 Jews from being hanged by the rebels. Eliyahu was in fact Rieva's grandfather.

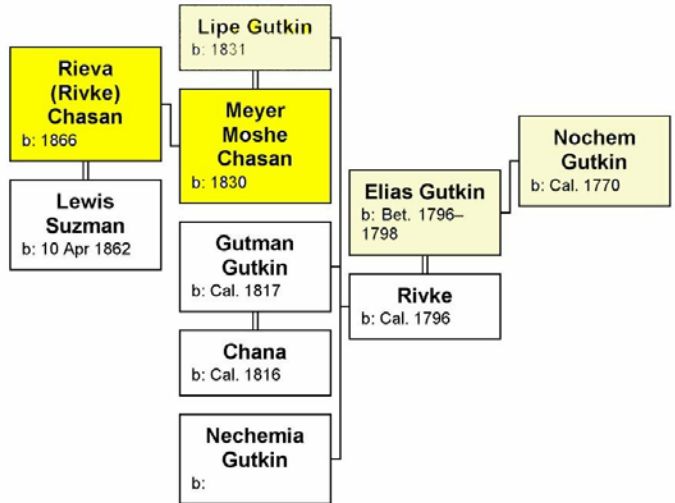
other; it is certainly possible that the marriage of Rieva to Lewis was arranged between their families.

Lewis and Rieva, together with their children Barnet and Polly (Pesche), immigrated to South Africa in 1894. He was 32 at the time, and she 28. They had a further 6 children in South Africa. Having settled initially in Cape Town, they later moved to the Transvaal, where Lewis was to become a successful businessman.

Rieva was to marry Lewis Suzman (Zusmanowitz), also of Salant. (*Jac Herberg writes that although his tombstone gives his origin as Salant, he was probably born in Gorszd*). As we know that Rieva's father was initially the chazzan in the Shul in Gorszd, the families would most certainly have known each

His company, L. Suzman Ltd. became the largest tobacco wholesalers in the Transvaal, and was to employ members of the Suzman, Bernitz and Chasan families. He was later to significantly influence the lives of his sister and brother-in-law, Sara Tsipe née Chasan, and Chaim Abelson.

**Descendants of the First marriage of Meyer Moshe Chasan to Lipe**



## The Descendants of Rieva Chasan

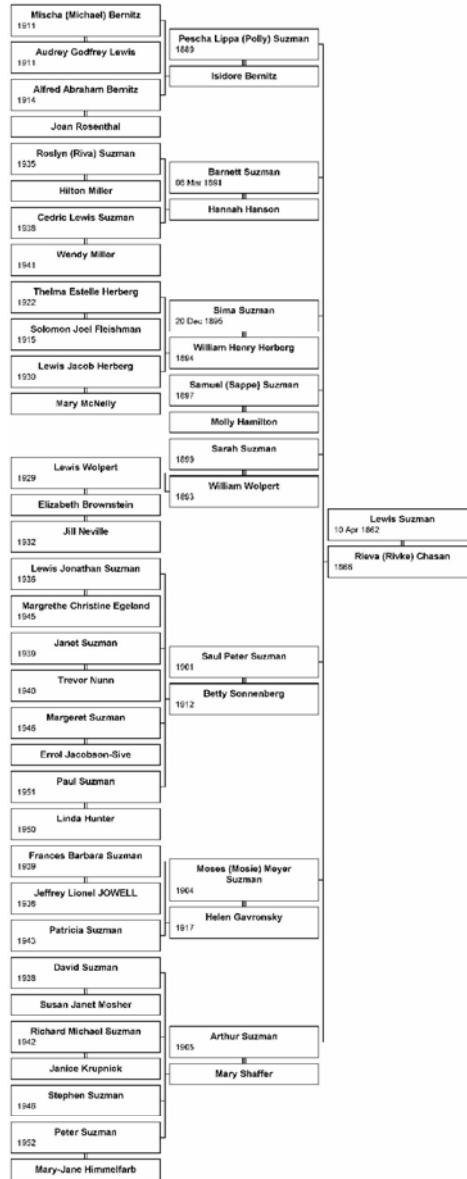
The Suzman family which is descended from Lewis and Rieva Chasan and their children is large, with many well known and talented individuals amongst their ranks.

It is noteworthy that there are multiple different connections between the Bernitz, Abelson, Chasan and Suzman Families.

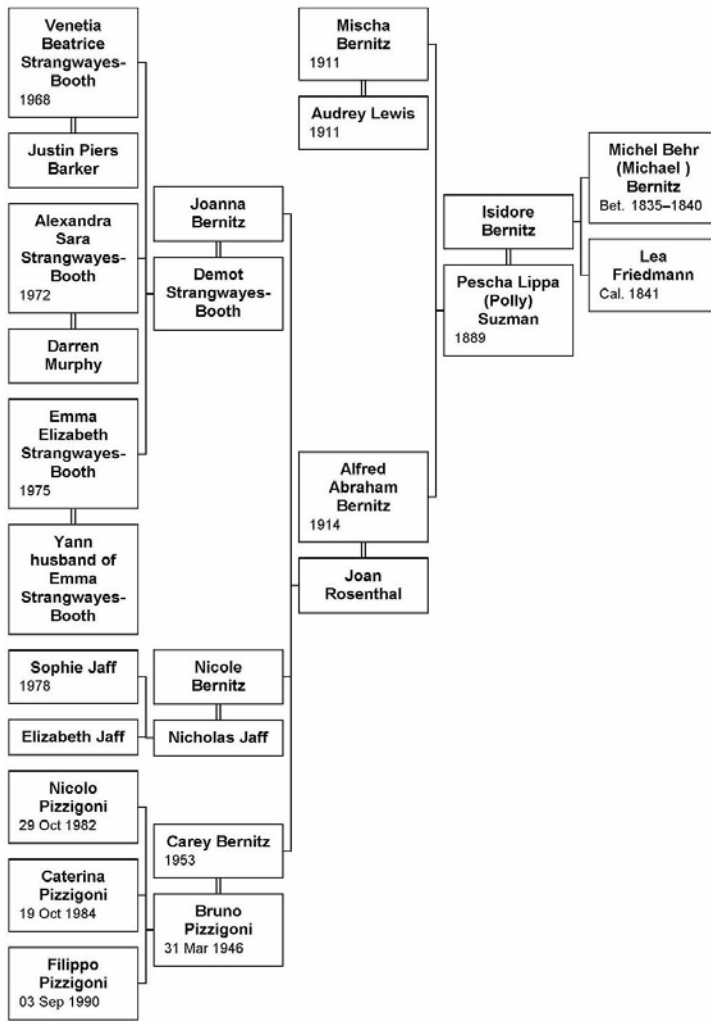
Rieva Chasan, half-sister of Sara Tsipe Abelson née Chasan (my grandmother) married Lewis Suzman - see diagram above. Jac Herberg is a grandson of Rieva

Polly Suzman (Rieva's daughter) married Isidore Bernitz (half-brother to my grandfather Herman Bernitz) - see descendent chart following.

Idel David Chasan, the brother of Sara Tsipe Chasan (my grandmother) was married to Frida Bernitz, sister of my grandfather Herman Bernitz.



**The Descendants of Pescha (Polly) Suzman and Isadore Bernitz**

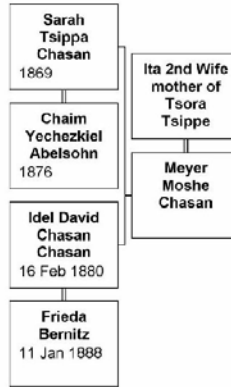


**Second Marriage of Meyer Moshe Chasan to Ita (my great-grandmother).**

After his first wife died, Meyer Moshe remarried. His second wife was Ita (unknown surname). Their first child Sara Tsipe was born in 1869. We can assume they were married before this ca.1868. Their son Idel David was born 11 years later, in 1880 (Idel would go on to marry Frida Bernitz).

We know from tax documents that in 1892 Meyer Moshe was also a shopkeeper, besides his community duties with the shul and school. There were 7 family members living in his house at the time. It was typical then that that up to three generations would live in one house. The seven would probably have been Meyer and Ita, Rieva, Sara Tsipe and Idel, Meyer's father Osher, and one other – possibly a surviving parent, uncle or aunt of either Meyer Moshe or Ita.

**Descendants of Meyer Moshe Chasan and Ita**



*Third Generation- my grand-uncle.*  
**Idel David Chasan (1880-1945)**

Idel (Tzvi Hirsh ben Meir Moshe) was born in Salant on the 16th February, 1880. He immigrated to South Africa in 1895 (aged 15). This could have been to avoid conscription, and was made possible by the fact that his half-sister Rieva was already living in Cape Town, where her husband Lewis Suzman had established a business dealing in tobacco products. Idel was to

remain employed in the Suzman businesses for the rest of his life. Lewis and Rieva were instrumental in introducing Idel to his future wife Frida Bernitz (the sister of my paternal grandfather).

They were married in February 1916. They had 3 sons, Neville, Selwyn and Alfred (see chart opposite).



**The wedding of Frida Bernitz and Idel Chasan, Feb. 1916.**

On Ground (in sailor suits): Mischa & Alfie Bernitz

Seated: Isidore Bernitz, Rivke Suzman, Lewis Suzman, Sima Suzman

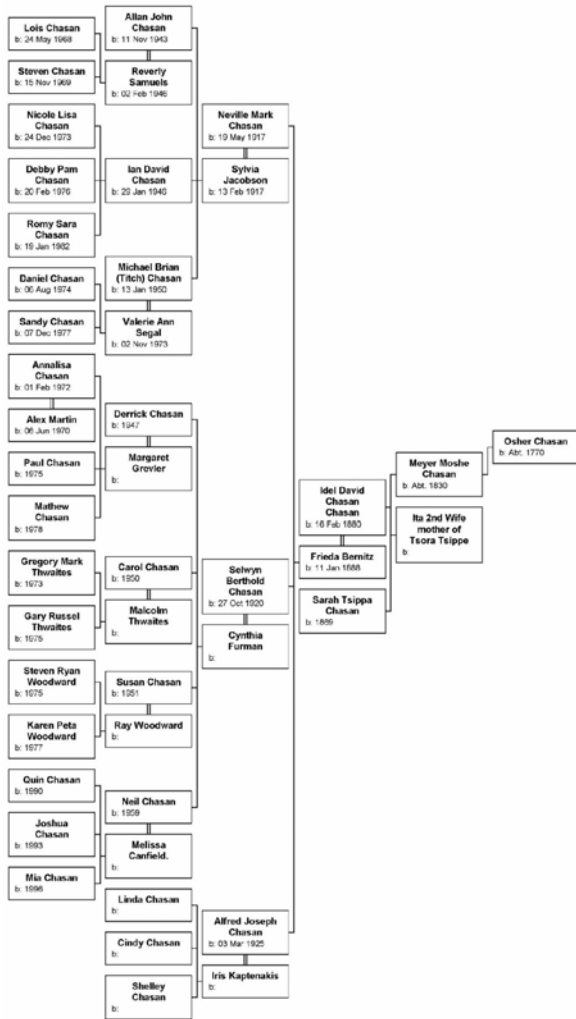
Standing Children (on left): Arthur & Mosie Suzman

Standing Adults: Unknown male, Saul Suzman, Polly Suzman, unknown female, Idel Chasan, Frieda Chasan (née Bernitz)

Sarah Suzman, Sappe Suzman

Back: Row: Unknown female, unknown male, Barney Suzman

# The Descendants of Idel David Chasan and Frida Bernitz





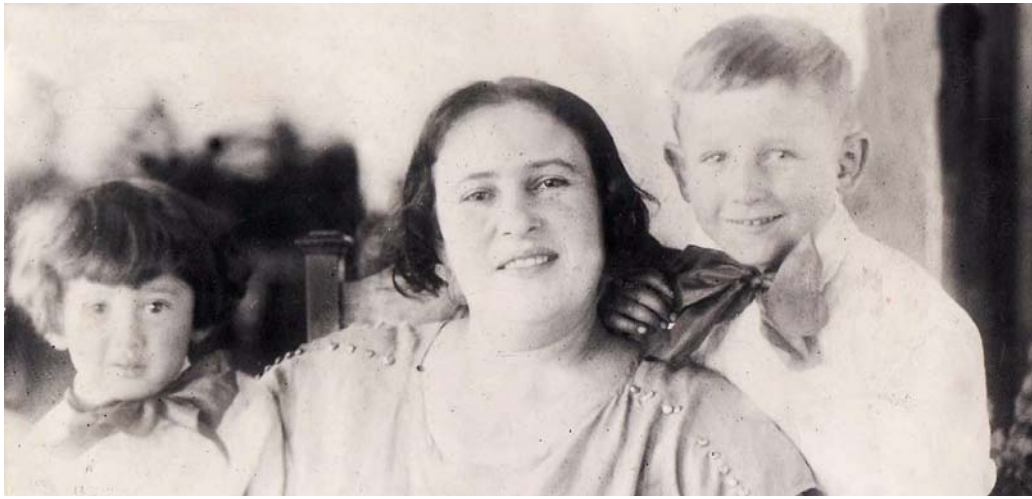
Above; Frida with her dog Zulu.



Frida, with Selwyn.

Right Top: Neville and Selwyn Chasan.  
Right, bottom: Selwyn, Frida, Neville.







# Appendices and Documentation

## APPENDICES

### Appendix I

#### Translation of the Court Proceedings

Title Page:

#### The Case against the merchant Meierovich.

The managing board of the Kovno Guberniya makes a complaint against the Deputies of the Nemokshti community, who were elected from each group of 5 houses (so called courts) - for the dishonest activities of the member of the communal board (of the family) Meierovich.

Case commenced 22nd June 1893 Case concluded 4t December 1894 25 pages.

To his highness the Kovno Governor

From the deputies of each 5 households, residents and settlers of Nemokshti, Raseiniai district, 4th station.

Application:

I have the honour to inform your lordship that the member of the petit bourgeoisie board of our community Iosel Elias Meierovich, who was elected into this position by the majority of his brothers Movsha Meierovich, Elias Meierovich, Leib Natkin, Leib Abelson, Leibe Berman, Avner Sieff, has been acting against us as follows:

He has prevented other people from being elected;

Without our participation in the process, and on his own volition he has levied excessive taxes on the community.

We deputies should participate in the collection and management of these excessive taxes. However we are prevented from doing so by the petit bourgeoisie Meierovich and his relatives. This causes debate, complaints and inconsistencies. We therefore add a letter (as evidence) which was sent to the petit bourgeoisie management and the board, together with a sum of 3 roubles. This was to renew the validity of an annual passport. The passport was indeed issued, but the price should have been 1 rouble 45 kopecks. (The balance was not returned).

Similarly, and for the same sum, a passport was issued to the petit bourgeoisie Nottel, son of Velvel Liebkin, who lives in Shilel, 4th station of the Russian district. He lives at the brewery, therefore he does not belong to the Nemokshti district and he should obtain his documents from the Shilel district. There are many similar cases. This was done (by Meierovich) for his personal benefit. There are other cases where the charge made was even as high as 15 and 20 roubles. But because this was a long time ago, we can only swear this under oath.

We therefore humbly request your Lordship to exclude Meierovich from the position of member of the management board and not to allow him to be re-elected. Also the same should apply to all of his relatives that were elected as deputies on the 31st December.

*Complainant* - Leib Katun (aged 28) As requested (by Leib Katun)

Signed on his behalf by S Gordon

*Deputies* - Leib Rat (no 24), Jankel Judelovich (122), Itzig Ratnousky (1), Shmuel Shlomo Alt, Leiser Wulf, Shlomo Jankel Wulf, Boruch Paglinski (27), Leib Meier, Ber Vigdor, Eliash Gering (illiterate, on his behalf by B Natnowski).

#### Reply from Iosel Eliash, to the Police Chief of the 4th station of the Raseiniai district.

To your honour the chief of police.

From the member of the 4th station of the petit bourgeoisie board, Iosel Eliash, son of Berel Meierovich.

In response to the baseless case which has been brought against me, I state the following:

1. The election of deputies from each of 5 households that took place on the 31st of (*unclear*), took place in the presence of, and under the personal supervision of your honour (*the Chief of Police*) and there could not have been any dishonest activities as these would have been prohibited by your Honour.

2. I declare to your Honour that I did not receive, nor have I ever taken any bribes in issuing passports. The slanderous report given to you was not given by the deputies of the 5 household (*as stated*) and I would certainly not have been able to hide from those deputies such dishonest acts. It was actually signed by a majority of people who did not know what (*they had been asked*) to sign for. As for the others, their signatures were affixed without even informing them that this had been done (*i.e. forged*). From the interrogation which you conducted, you were able to prove that.

3. It is true that the petit bourgeoisie board received 3 roubles from Chanoch, son of Chaikel from Rostovonon, to issue him an annual passport. But Chaikel Levithal, son of Chaikel, who was the same person, was indebted to the board for the sum of 2 roubles and 90 kopecks.

We withheld 1 rouble 45 kopecks against the passport, and utilised the remaining 1 rouble 55 kopecks against this debt. The remaining balance of 1 rouble 45 kopecks was requested from him through the police, so that the full sum was eventually paid. This is written in the debit book under the numbers 30 and 150. Your honour can verify these records.

4. We received 85 kopecks from Nottel Lipke of Shild, for a passport valid for 6 months. We have his signature for the receipt of the passport and the payment is registered in the cash book.

From the abovementioned facts your honour can see that I did not carry out any dishonest acts, nor did I take any bribes. The slanderous accusation was provoked by persons acting unreasonably against me.

The signature of Iosel Meierovich is attached, and is confirmed by the Chief of Police of the 4th station of Raseiniai.

**A Further explanation was requested**

To your Honour the Chief of Police, etc.

From Issel Meierovich

An explanation

As requested by your honour, I am presenting you with a further explanation against the slander which is incited against me by the Nemokshiti Jews Nottel Lipkin, Leibe Katun, Leibe Rat, Shlomo Jankel Wulf, Leibe Meier and Jankel Movsha Judelovich.

1. Nottel Lipkin in his application given to the petit bourgeoisie board and signed personally by him paid only 85 kopeks for a half yearly passport. He personally signed the receipt in the cash book for 1892. The reason that he accused me of taking an additional 15 kopeks is that he was very angry at being levied with a penalty of 300 roubles because his brother Zelig Lipkin had escaped the draft in the conscription of 1892. As a result his property was confiscated.

2. Leibe Katun *did* indeed obtain a month ticket (*purpose not clear*) from the board in June of 1891, for which he presented 25 kopeks, of which 10 kopeks was taken for the stationery and registered in the cash book of 1891, under entry 120. The remaining 15 kopeks were applied as part of the tax collection and this is also registered in the book of 1891, entry no 36. It should be noted that he initially owed a total of 60 kopeks. He had paid 45 kopeks in February 1891, entry no 13.

3. In March 1891 Leibe Rat applied for a legitimization certificate (that he had completed Military service). He paid 60 kopeks against his tax debt, half in January 1891 (entry no 3) and the rest when he received the certificate in March (entry no 20).

4. Shlomo Jankel Wulf when receiving his legitimisation certificate in June 1892 paid 30 kopeks. Entry 44 in the cash book of 1892.

5. Leibe Meier and Jankel Movsha Judelovich received their legitimization certificate in May and June of 1892. 20 kopeks was collected from each of them for communal taxes (entries 30 and 32).

This completes my explanation which justifiably absolves me from the profanity of this false accusation. I have the privilege of asking your honour to check the accuracy of these records at the petit bourgeoisie board.

When you have done so please compile the protocol (required) to hold those responsible accountable for this slander, and add it to this interrogation.

July 1893

Nemokshiti

(Signed) Issel Meierovich

I verify this signature.

I have checked the facts and I confirm that all references made by Meierovich regarding the entries in the cash book for 1891 and 1892 are absolutely correct.

July 1893

Chief of Police, 4th Station, Raseiniai, etc.

**The Decision of the Court**

Dec 4th 1893

Order of the Imperial Ruler of all Russia

from the Kovno Guberniya Board

to the Police board of Raseiniai District

According to the order of His Imperial Highness the Guberniya board after reviewing the case following the complaint of Leibe Katun, S Gordon, Leibe Rat Jankel Judelovich, Itzig Ratnousky, Shmuel Shlomo Alt, Leiser Wulf, Shlomo Jankel Wulf, Boruch Paglinski, Leibe Meier, Ber Vigdor, Eliash Gering, in all 21 persons to the Governor General, which was registered on 12th January of this year (the complaint) against member of the board Meierovich, and against the deputies of the board who are his family members (requested that) they should be excluded from the board and should be excluded as a result of their (alleged) dishonest acts.

They are accused of taking additional monies for the annual passport of Honnel Heike Levich. Instead of 1 Rouble 45 kopeks they took 3 roubles. For the half yearly passport of Nottel Liebkin instead of 85 kopeks they took 1 rouble, from Leibe Katun 25 kopeks instead of 10, from Leibe Rat 60 kopeks, from Shlomo Rat 30 kopeks, and from Leibe Meier 20 kopeks.

The (complaints regarding the) legitimization certificates should not be taken into consideration, because the election of the 5 household deputies which took place on the 31st December 1892 was supervised by the police chief and according to his report of 12th August No 3424 they were legalised by the Governor General on the 14th February.

Concerning the allegations of dishonest acts (we find) they are also not true, because the excess sums were applied to tax arrears. These findings result from the audit of cash books by the police chief.

No attention should be paid nor any action taken as a result of this application (complaint). The applicants should be so informed by sending a copy of this report to the police board of the Raseiniai district.

November 1893.

Указъ ЕГО ИМПЕРАТОРСКАГО ВЕЛИЧЕСТВА, САМОДЕРЖЦА ВСЕРОССИЙ-  
СКАГО, изъ Ковоноваго Губернскаго Правленія, *Воспитаннику*  
*Князю Павлу Павловичу Урусову*  
По указу ЕГО ИМПЕРАТОРСКАГО ВЕЛИЧЕСТВА, Губернское Правленіе

на Высочайшии Ръки по жалобѣ матушки Княгини Катерины Павловны, Шенши Анисы Вулицы и другихъ, въ числа 21 января на имя Императорской Материальной Травы Князя Павла Александровича Морозова за переѣздъ личнаго грена за паспортъ прислуживши. На сего удостоверяется, что грена Князь Александровичъ Морозовъ Императорскому Обществу Княгини Катерины Павловны, Шенши Анисы Вулицы и другихъ, въ числа 21 января на имя Губернскаго Правленія, представивши въ Губернское Правленіе и сего, о представлении на Высочайшую волю Князя Павла Александровича Морозова и Травы Морозова, и представивши на сего представивши, матушка Княгиня 31 января, и тинета съ Александровичемъ Морозовымъ отъ Императорской Травы, въ виду представившии переѣзда, при представившии вторично, представившии въ переѣздъ личнаго грена за гренаи паспортъ отъ Князя Александровича Морозова 31 января, и представившии отъ Княгини Катерины Павловны, Шенши Анисы Вулицы и другихъ, представившии при доставленіи, а паспортъ отъ Княгини Катерины Павловны за личный паспортъ 25 января, выданный Шенши, отъ Княгини Катерины Павловны, Шенши

28  
1121.

Right: page 23 of the case documents; this is the first page of the courts' judgement - handwritten in Russian.

**Appendix II**

**Translation of the Court Proceedings Case before the Kovno Governing Board (*The Orphans*)**  
Second Board, Fifth Table.

**Requesting the appointment of Gershon Meierovich as legal guardian of David and Etta Meierovich and the dismissal of Mordchel Abelman as their guardian.**

Case started: 20th December 1901 Case decided: 20th May, 1903

To your honour Sir, the Kovno Governor:  
David and Etta Meierovich, children of Zelig Meierovich, now deceased, make this application to the court.

After the death of our father Zelig Meierovich, real estate in the form of a wooden house located in the village of Taurage, Raseiniai district was bequeathed to us in common ownership with our mother Sara. Sara sold her share of the house to the petit bourgeoisie Mordchel Abelman. Because the house is constructed in such a way that he could not use only the part that had belonged to our mother, he also took over our share.

A decision of the Raseiniai Orphans court had appointed our true uncle Gershon Meierovich as our guardian (*note: the Russian wording uses the word uncle here. Later in the document he is correctly called their grandfather*). Because our mother remarried and left us to the fate of the Gods, we have no one to defend us. This means that our guardian should receive the profit that (Abelman) derives from our share of the house. Abelman only gives a small portion to our guardian, who has difficulty in collecting this money.

We do not know the reasons why the orphan court has removed the responsibility of our guardianship from Gershon Meierovich and appointed Mordchel Abelman instead. He does not spend any money on our maintenance. Our grandfather who is still taking care of us is struggling to maintain us, whilst Abelman keeps the profits from our share of the house.

Because we, the underage children therefore find ourselves in an insoluble situation, we are requesting that the court act as a natural father to us and correct the situation by restoring our previously appointed guardian, our grandfather Gershon Meierovich whom we trust and who is bringing us up.

We wish to add that it is obvious (*to us*) that Mordchel Abelman made his application to the Orphan court requesting the dismissal of our grandfather Gershon Meierovich with the sole purpose of retaining for himself the profits from our property.

November 25, 1901.  
Signed David Meierovich Etta Meierovich.

**Journal of the Raseiniai Orphans Trial**  
**March 8th, 1902.**  
**Proceedings**

The court has reviewed the order of the Kovno Governing Board of 17th Dec 1901. David and Etta Meierovich are requesting that their grandfather be appointed as their guardian in the place of Mordchel Abelman, whose guardianship should be cancelled.

**Decision**

The application is rejected

**Reasoning**

In the case of the guardianship and property of the minors it is clear that

1. The guardian Gershon Meierovich is excluded from guardianship because he does not live in Taurage, where the property of the minors is located. Therefore Girsh Zimmel, a resident of Taurage was appointed (by the court) to replace him as guardian in May, 1901.
2. No objections were raised against either the appointment or the duties of the guardian (at the time of his appointment).
3. Gershon Meierovich applied to the orphan court on 23rd June 1901, on the 9th August 1901 and again on 4th September 1901 to be appointed as guardian of the minors. All of the applications were rejected by the court on the grounds that it had the right to uphold the original decision, according to case law 1728.
4. No application was ever received by the co-owner of the house Mordchel Abelman to have himself appointed guardian.
5. The grandfather was dismissed as guardian because he was unable to take care of the property. Moreover, the guardian Zimmel is not known for any kind of doubtful behaviour, and may be trusted. He has the ability to manage the property and to collect the income o time; so no harm will come to the children. Gershon Meierovich can continue to take care of their personal humanitarian wellbeing.

This decision is (based on) case law of 1886.

**Decision**

The Orphan Court has decided to reject the application of the minors and to report this to Governing Board, sending a copy of this decision to Abelman.

Signed: Chairman of the Court.

COLONY OF THE CAPE OF GOOD HOPE.

Immigration Act, 1906.—Application for Permit or Certificate.

by Ch. Abelsohn (Name of Applicant)

Application for a Permit or Certificate to enable his wife Zippa Sherg Abelsohn and two children at present residing at Kovno to enter the Colony at Cape Town from Russia within a period of \_\_\_\_\_ from date.

(If any reply to these questions is in the negative, this should in each case be clearly stated.)

1) Name in full: <u>Zippa Sherg Abelsohn</u>	Documents and References submitted in support of this application: <u>Passport</u>
2) Age: <u>31</u>	Country of birth: <u>Russian</u>
3) Nationality: <u>Russian</u>	Country of origin: <u>Russia</u>
4) If married (a) Name of husband: <u>Ch. Abelsohn</u>	(b) Name of wife: <u>Zippa Sherg</u>
5) If married (c) Name of children: <u>two children</u>	(d) Name of children: <u>one 5 yrs and one 2 yrs</u>
6) If married (e) Whether party to this marriage: <u>yes</u>	(f) Whether party to this marriage: <u>yes</u>
7) Total period of residence (a) in the Colony: <u>20 Feb 1905 to 26 Feb 1905</u>	(b) Name of place: <u>St. Helena</u>
8) Particulars of land property or other interest in the Colony: <u>no other business</u>	(c) Name of business: <u>Wholesale</u>
9) Occupation: <u>Wholesale</u>	(d) Name of business: <u>Wholesale</u>
10) Whether able to write in a European language: <u>yes</u>	(11) Name of language: <u>Yiddish &amp; German</u>
11) Whether ever prohibited from entering the Colony or expelled therefrom: <u>no</u>	(12) Name of authority: <u>no</u>
12) Whether of any race in any country: <u>no</u>	(13) Name of race: <u>no</u>
13) Particulars of any permit or certificate previously obtained: <u>no</u>	(14) Name of authority: <u>no</u>
14) Any other particulars relevant to the case: <u>I wish my wife to join me. It should be like to have a permit</u>	(15) Name of authority: <u>no</u>

I, Ch. Abelsohn, hereby solemnly and sincerely declare that I fully understand the above questions, and that I have answered them voluntarily and truthfully.

Signature (or Mark) of Applicant: Ch. Abelsohn

Declared before me at Cape Town this 21 day of April 1919

A. Dale  
Immigration Officer

COLONY OF THE CAPE OF GOOD HOPE.

Immigration Act—Declaration by Passenger.

Wm J. Abelsohn

DECLARATION to be completed and signed by every Passenger from outside the Cape Colony bound for a Cape Port, except a wife accompanying her husband, and a child under 16 years accompanying a parent or guardian.

NOTE—A Member of the Aborigines' Naval or Military Forces is not required to answer Questions 13, 14, 15 and 16.

WARNING—Any person knowingly giving false information, or making a false declaration, is liable to penalties of law and imprisonment.

Name of Ship: Blaver Castle

Class Travelled: 1st

1) Name in full: <u>Zippa Abelsohn</u>	2) Name in full: <u>London</u>
3) Port of embarkation: <u>Cape Town</u>	4) Port of intended disembarkation: <u>Yokohama</u>
5) Age: <u>31</u>	6) Sex: <u>Female</u>
7) Name: <u>Abelsohn</u>	8) Nationality: <u>Russian</u>
9) If accompanied by wife, state her name: <u>Leah S. Bella</u>	10) If accompanied by children (or other dependants), state name and age of each: <u>Ch. Abelsohn 22 Sir Lewis Rd. C. T.</u>
11) Address at destination in full: <u>London</u>	12) Period of stay of passenger there: <u>at least 14 days</u>
13) Occupation: <u>at home</u>	14) What means can you procure, your own, to defray the cost of your passage: <u>Permit</u>
15) Have you ever been prohibited from entering the Cape Colony or expelled therefrom: <u>no</u>	16) Have you been convicted of any crime in any country: <u>no</u>

I hereby declare that I understand the above questions, and have answered them truly.

Signature (or Mark) of Passenger: Wm J. Abelsohn

Place of Examining Immigration Officer: London

Date: 1919



COLONY OF THE CAPE OF GOOD HOPE.

# THE IMMIGRATION ACT, 1902

## PERMIT TO ENTER.

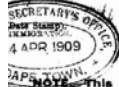
Fee: ONE POUND (£1).

Wife of Shoro Abelsohn, wife of C  
Abelsohn 22 Ezz Kenny Road  
present of Troms, S. Russia

I be allowed to enter the Cape Colony on production of this  
Cape Town within a period of twelve months fr  
e hereof and on satisfying the Examining Immigration Officer  
her identity accompanied by her children da  
ys. and took also about 4 yrs.

This Permit is granted on an application made by Ch. Abels  
on the 24<sup>th</sup> day of April

09, and is conditional on the accuracy of the statements made therei



C. W. Cow  
Chief Immigration O

**NOTE**—This Permit should be retained by the Examining Immigration  
Officer on arrival of the holder in the Colony, and is valid only for a  
period of one year from date of issue, and at the expiration thereof  
the holder will be required to satisfy the provisions of the Immi-  
gration Act.

### DESCRIPTION OF HOLDER.

No.	Sex.	Nationality.	General Description.
1	F	Russian Swiss	

Immigration Act, Form No. 7A.

## “IMMIGRATION ACT, 1902.”

### PERMIT TO LAND.

The Bearer of this M. Abelsohn  
Passenger by GALFKA  
and disembarking at CG

is permitted to enter the Colony

Cape Town,



(Signed)

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**Bibliography**

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Jewish Life in Lithuania. The Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum, Vilnius.

Jewish Vital Records, revision Lists and Other Jewish Holdings in Lithuanian Archives Avotaynu Monograph Series.

The Jews of Lithuania. A History of a remarkable Community 1316-1945. Masha Greenbaum. Gefen.



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Many people have contributed towards my research, and towards this history, and I am indebted to them all for their help, assistance and advice. In no particular order, my thanks to

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Jac Herberg, whose research on the Abelson, Chasan, Bernitz and Suzman families provided a framework, and much of the detail, for my own search for our story.

Charles Abelson, my cousin and named, like me, after our grandfather Chaim Abelson. He got the full name, and also (and deservedly) a number of our grandfather’s books. Charles’ translation and interpretation of the handwritten notes from these books has provided a treasure trove of information on the early Chasan family.

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My mom, for the steady stream of family stories and pictures. And who, at the age of 90, guided me around all of her childhood haunts in Cape Town.

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