

# THE ELDERLY IN AN AGING AND SHRINKING JEWISH COMMUNITY: CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA

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*The Jewish community [Cape Town] is currently declining in number as well as strength as every year it loses hundreds of members including key community figures but it still has the capability of laying the basis for comprehensive services to thousands of Jewish seniors who will remain in Cape Town. It is not certain the resources will be there a few years from now.*

## INTRODUCTION

Political and civil unrest have become a part of everyday life in South Africa today. Once confined to black residential areas, unrest has now become an urban reality. The spiraling events of the past two years in particular have had a resounding effect on all the communities of this country, and have contributed to a climate of uncertainty and insecurity.

Current events have also affected the Jewish community of South Africa. This community, according to the last census conducted in 1980, comprises about 120,000 people, 2.6% of the total white population. It would appear that within the Jewish community, more than among other white ethnic groups (of the white population 60% are of Dutch origin, 30% of English origin, and 10% other), there are growing fears and rising insecurity that reinforce a tendency to leave the country. And indeed, in recent years, the trend for Jewish emigration from South Africa has been on the increase.

Those planning to emigrate tend to be young singles, as well as young and

middle-aged families. Emigration of Jewish seniors appears to be very limited. Three principal reasons are:

First, many seniors are currently enjoying their "golden years"; they actually fear the start of a new life elsewhere and/or find distasteful the possibility of dependence on offspring.

Second, many of these seniors live off dividends and interest from savings, property and pensions that enable them to lead a fairly satisfactory way of life in South Africa. This income loses much of its value overseas due, mainly, to rigid exchange regulations that limit the amount of funds one may take or send abroad. Emigration would therefore entail a drastic drop in the standard of living or retirees.

Third, many seniors fear they may face difficulties in trying to join medical aid schemes overseas.

Even though it entails their detachment from children and grandchildren, many seniors encourage their children to move. Thus, the Jewish emigration from South Africa brings in its wake a substantial increase in the proportion of seniors within this community.

The "graying" of the South African Jewish community has a further dimension that needs to be addressed. South Africa is not a "welfare state" and state involve-

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ment in providing services to the elderly population is limited. Only some of the elderly receive modest government pensions, as well as free medical services. The allocation of this assistance is based on a strict means test thus ensuring that only the most needy benefit directly. Social security and all-encompassing state medical insurance do not exist in this country.

In contrast to the limited state intervention, South Africa has an extremely active network of voluntary organizations (VO's), providing a wide range of services including those that in other countries are generally provided by the state. Within the Jewish community, too, a wide variety of services to the elderly are provided by a broad spectrum of Jewish VO's.

The rising proportion of Jewish seniors as well as an increasing demand for expanded services vital for existence are occurring at a time when the Jewish community is shrinking due to emigration.

This situation raises several important questions. How does the emigration and the community decline affect the seniors? What are these seniors' needs at present? What are the services available to them? What are their needs likely to be within the next five to ten years? Has the Jewish community anticipated how they should be met? How does the voluntary nature of service organizations affect the quality of services rendered? How do the seniors themselves cope with these issues? These questions will be dealt with in what follows. The data and opinions are derived from the following sources:

- a. Population census data from 1970 to 1980.
- b. Interviews with approximately 80 seniors, living both within the community and in residential care.
- c. Participation in public meetings attended by approximately 150 seniors, where their needs were identified and discussed.

- d. Interviews with volunteers and professional personnel actively involved with seniors.

- e. Meetings with committees of VO's working with seniors.

- f. A report on the Jewish seniors of Cape Town prepared by S. Derman and submitted to the Jewish Welfare Board in Cape Town.

#### DEMOGRAPHY

According to the most recent census (1980), the Jewish population of Cape Town and environs totals 27,000 persons. This represents a rise in the number of city dwelling Jews since 1970. Apparently emigration from the city was counter-balanced by natural increase and by some Jewish immigration to the city mainly of seniors retiring elsewhere and gravitating to this area, and, as well, Jews from Zimbabwe and Israel. In the same period, the proportion of Jews over the age of 65 increased from 11 percent in 1970 to almost 19% in 1980, with those over the age of 75 constituting about 7%. Of note also is that the percentage of seniors within the Jewish community is almost double that of the seniors within the general white population (approximately 10%).

Further of note is the high proportion of women within the 1980 senior population—56% over the age of 65; two-thirds of those over the age of 75. It is probable that the proportion of Jewish seniors in Cape Town has continued to increase since 1980 and may well comprise about a quarter of the Jewish population in 1986.

The flow of young emigrants and their families has increased of late due to political and economic factors. We do not have exact figures regarding this emigration but a general impression obtained from teachers reporting departures of pupils from Jewish day schools and discussions with the *aliyah shaliach* and community leaders indicate a trend of increasing emigration. Countries of

destination include Australia, the UK, the USA and, in some measure, Israel. Many cities in these countries have become host to expatriate South Africans, who have developed family and social support networks. This in turn eases others' plight in joining them.

The phenomenon of aging Jewish communities is characteristic not only of Cape Town and other South African communities, but of other Jewish communities worldwide. However, in Cape Town, it takes on a different connotation in that it is mainly due to emigration of the younger members to faraway places, generally entailing total physical separation between children and their parents.

Information gleaned from interviews in Cape Town with 80 seniors (single or still married) indicated that close to half of them had all their children out of the country. About a quarter indicated that one or two of their children had left while the other had remained in South Africa, and the final quarter indicated that all their children remained in South Africa. In some cases the children still in South Africa do not reside in one area and may be dispersed among Cape Town and Johannesburg, Port Elisabeth and Durban. However, the shared feeling in the community is that a majority of the seniors is totally and distantly separated from their children.

#### THE PRINCIPAL NEEDS OF JEWISH SENIORS

*Income:* according to reports from the Jewish Board of Guardians, an organization that provides financial aid to the needy, most seniors tend to manage relatively well, with as few as fifty needing subsistence assistance. Most of Cape Town's older Jews were very successful financially in their active years. Property and funds were accumulated, enabling them to have a comfortable and honorable life in their retirement. Today, though,

many fear that their sources of income may be adversely affected by political and economic uncertainties. Although it is not a major issue in the short range, it is of vital importance in planning long-term programs for them.

*Accommodation:* the satisfactory levels of income of most seniors enable them to live in appropriate types of accommodation. Many remain in homes or flats they have resided in for years. Others move to smaller but comfortable flats, boarding houses or residential hotels, where the majority of residents are Jewish seniors. A small minority (about four percent of the total senior population) lives in residential care, mainly in Highlands House, the Jewish home for the aged.

*Health:* seniors, in particular those over the age of 75, have a variety of health problems contributing to a variety of basic needs that must be addressed in order to ensure as much independence and functionality as possible: appropriate medical care and followup, footcare, homehelp, assistance with shopping, laundry, home repairs and bathing, preparation of meals, as well as moral support, information about available resources and adequate transportation to specialists, hospitals and pharmacies.

*Security:* many seniors experience intense feelings of loneliness. These feelings have recently been compounded by anxiety over physical safety, particularly in residential areas. Muggings and breakins have been on the increase, thereby contributing to fear and loss of security. Many apartment buildings now have security doors but still the situation tends to reinforce an inclination to stay at home instead of socializing outside.

*Transport:* quite a few seniors have a limited physical mobility and can no longer drive or negotiate public transport and they may have no relatives able to assist. They therefore face extreme difficulties in getting to hospitals, doctors, pharmacies, chiropodists, theatres, the

*shul*, the local post office or bank, or social functions and visits to friends—greatly hampering their social life, as well as threatening their physical and emotional well-being.

*Social and cultural needs:* a number of seniors have an unfulfilled hunger for social interaction and cultural activities such as functions with a Jewish flavour, trips to the countryside, opportunities for other social and cultural experiences. These unmet needs are testimony to the loneliness and social isolation of many seniors.

*Utilization of services and information about them:* many seniors have inadequate knowledge of available resources and services in both the general and Jewish communities and underutilize them. There is an unsatisfactory dissemination of information regarding these services, but also seniors lack motivation and are reticent to depend on external organizations. The "Jewish pride!" There are seniors who are against involvement with organizations aimed specifically at older people; seniors who are comparatively healthy often resist mixing with those with frailties.

*Meeting the needs of Jewish seniors:* Mentioned earlier was the fact that the burden of meeting seniors' needs perforce rests on the Jewish community itself because state and local government provisions (e.g., pension and medical services) are limited and confined to persons with very limited financial resources (whose number among Jews is very small). The two types of voluntary organizations (VO's) within the Jewish community are those that employ professional workers (the Cape Jewish Board of Guardians, the Jewish Sick Relief Society, the Ladies' Hospital Kosher Kitchen, the Cape Jewish Seniors Association and Highland [aged] House) and those manned solely by volunteers (B'nei B'rith, Hebrew Order of David, Union of Jewish Women and synagogues).

Some of these organizations focus entirely on the seniors, whereas others cater to a broader spectrum of population.

1. *The Joint Welfare Board*—comprised of The Cape Jewish Board of Guardians and The Jewish Sick Relief Society. For seniors the Board provides by means test financial aid toward ensuring an adequate minimal income. The means test extends to the immediate family of the applicant. The level of assistance far exceeds that of government pension allowance. About fifty seniors benefit from this program.

The Board also determines eligibility of seniors for "Meals on Wheels." It also assists with procuring essential medical services and pays for them after determining eligibility.

Applications for assistance are made by the seniors and, on their behalf, by family, friends and neighbors. Altogether, only a tiny proportion of seniors make use of the Board's services.

2. *Ladies' Hospital Kosher Kitchen*—provides kosher meals to Jewish hospital patients and to those living at home who are unable themselves to prepare nourishing meals. Meals are freshly prepared in the kitchen of Highland House and are delivered daily to approximately 45 recipients who pay according to their financial ability.

3. *The Cape Jewish Seniors Association*—was initiated in 1984 under the auspices of the Jewish Welfare Council, an umbrella body which represents the Jewish community's welfare organizations. Its mandate is to plan and develop services for seniors living in the community. To date, the organization has launched the following projects:

a. Volunteer recruitment and training. Many of the volunteers are themselves seniors, and they meet regularly for training and informative sessions.

b. Mobile library. This service caters to readers no longer able to get to a library. Lifts to local public libraries, as well as the

delivery of books to the clients' homes, are arranged.

c. Social and cultural events. Lifts to various cultural and social events as well as monthly Sunday outings are organized.

d. Lift club. Lifts are provided by volunteers for those who need them to the doctor, hospital, bank, post office, shop or hairdresser.

e. Shopping. Either with or for a senior, this service is rendered on a regular basis, with a volunteer assigned to a particular senior.

f. Friendly visiting. Volunteers visit lonely seniors at their homes on a regular basis and provide companionship and moral support.

g. Information and guidance. Seniors and their families, as well as professionals in a variety of fields, are provided with guidance and information about available resources.

4. *Highlands House*—is the sole Jewish aged home in Cape Town. Multi-winged, this three-storey building is situated in a suburb, once the heart of the Cape Town Jewish community. Today, major Jewish suburbs are located elsewhere.

Although Cape Town has many residential care institutions, most Jewish seniors who have to or wish to reside in an aged home prefer to live in *Highlands House*. Currently, there are 230 residents. Approximately 50 are mentally frail and live in a separate specialised wing. About 100 are physically frail and require regular nursing care and medical supervision. The remainder enjoy relatively good health and are able to function adequately.

Most residents have private rooms but share other communal facilities. In addition to accommodation and meals, the House offers its residents a variety of services. Full-time nursing staff are on duty and although there is no resident physician, consultations as needed are undertaken at the request of staff or residents.

There are also a qualified occupational

therapist, a qualified physiotherapist and four social workers. The latter serve on admissions, facilitate entry into the home and retain personal contact with residents and their families. They also provide counselling and coordinate activities of a cultural and social nature including the formation of a residents' committee. They work closely with voluntary workers within the home, and they organize outings into the community. Since many admissions to *Highlands House* are of seniors either physically or mentally frail, the House has an image in the community of being essentially for the frail and infirm; this deters a number from applying for admission. The rate of admissions is consequently low and census below capacity. There are no long waiting lists so common in other institutions.

Situated on the grounds of *Highlands House* is *Highland Place* where approximately 30 seniors live independently in individual units. However, the House does not offer any services to seniors residing in the community. *Highlands House* has three main sources of support: residents' payments (which are adjusted to the residents' and family's economic means), government allocations and private donations.

5. *B'nei B'rith*—One of the lodges hosts a monthly film show for seniors in a Cape Town suburb and organizes necessary transport as well as refreshments; another lodge organizes outings for residents of *Highlands House*. Once a month, rotating lodges assist with the Cape Jewish Seniors Associations' Sunday outings. In addition, *B'nei B'rith* members act as "hoppers" for Meals on Wheels.

6. *Hebrew Order of David*—Brethren of this brotherhood host a monthly social gathering for Jewish seniors at the Jewish Community Center. Apart from the opportunity to socialise with peers, films, videos and amateur stage shows are organized, followed by refreshments. Transport is also provided.

7. *Union of Jewish Women*—Many of

this organization's active members are seniors and the Union sees its work with senior projects as one of its focal activities.

The projects offered by the Union include:

- a. Hot lunches. These are served twice a week for a low fee. About 20 seniors (mainly women) attend these meals.
- b. Social and cultural activities. These are held most weekdays and include morning and afternoon activities. They include bingo, bridge, videos, tea and chat as well as lectures on a variety of subjects.
- c. Library. Books are available free of charge for as long as needed.
- d. Bi-monthly socials. These gatherings provide a socialising opportunity for Jewish as well as other seniors.
- e. Shopping. Recently initiated, this service aids people unable to shop for themselves.
- f. Meals on Wheels. Assistance in funding as well as hoppers is rendered.

In addition, one of the Union's Friendship Clubs provides monthly socials at Highlands House for residents of the home as well as seniors living in the area.

8. *Synagogues*—The majority of seniors belong to congregations. They constitute about 40 percent of congregational membership. Nevertheless, only three synagogues have developed activities geared specifically toward their senior congregants, that is, apart from provision by all synagogues of regular communal meeting places for all their congregants and thereby fulfilling an important social function as well. One of the synagogues holds a weekly bridge game attended by about 20 players. A handful of volunteers also offer transport assistance to those who have difficulty getting to the synagogue. Another synagogue has recently formed a special subcommittee to focus on social activities for its seniors, the only congregation to date to have undertaken this kind of initiative. Another synagogue has a seniors' sewing circle that meets regularly.

All the synagogues arrange visits to indispensed congregants, a number of whom are of course seniors.

The Jewish community has several other organizations that relate to seniors indirectly. For instance, the Yiddish Cultural Federation, B'nai Zion Association and the B'nei B'rith Israel Lodge have many members who fall into the senior age bracket and who participate in functions and activities of these organizations.

#### OTHER COMMUNITY SUPPORTS

*Assistance provided by maids.* A unique source of assistance to the Jewish seniors typical in the South African context is the maids (all of them black or colored). Although an exact count is not available, our observation is that quite a few seniors employ maids on a regular basis. These are full-time live-in or full- or part-time non-resident workers.

Quite often, seniors living in the same block employ the same maid. The salary paid to the maids is relatively low and many Jewish seniors can afford it. The employment of a maid is not exceptional but rather has been a conventional and accustomed pattern in their lives. The assistance provided by maids can range from cleaning the house and cooking meals to bathing, nursing and shopping. It is impossible to understand the ways in which many seniors can cope with living in the community without one's taking into consideration this valuable aid.

*Informal support networks.* For the 50 percent of the seniors who have children living in Cape Town, family are able to provide some degree of support. Apart from family networks, many seniors live in large blocks of flats together with other Jewish seniors, mainly women. These blocks provide a potential framework for the formation of informal social support networks. Such networks do exist in several blocks. Neighbors spend time together, play cards and borrow from each

other. These networks help their members to get concrete assistance and provide moral support.

The existence of these networks consisting of neighbors and friends belie the myth that all seniors whose children have emigrated are left behind with no informal support whatsoever. However, only systematic research could determine the spread of this phenomenon, its viability and its effect on the seniors.

#### LIMITATIONS IN SERVICES

While some areas are duplicated by several organizations, there are certain areas where no services or activities take place. The Cape Town Jewish community lacks a *community center* that would function on a regular all-day every-day basis and provide a wide range of social and cultural activities. It also lacks a day-care center where a variety of medical, social, counseling and transportation services may be offered to seniors living in the community. The concentration of the majority of the Jewish seniors in one neighborhood of Cape Town (Seapoint) would enable the development of these central services in an accessible location.

Most organizations rely to a large extent on the *services of volunteers*, and face increasing difficulty in recruiting and retaining them. They also face difficulty in mobilizing the resources necessary for financing their activities.

Contact as well as *coordination of plans* and activities between the various organizations seems to be limited. Each organization has carved out its own "territory" and focused on its own projects without taking other organizations' activities into account. An exception is the provision of meals on wheels. This venture was made possible through the joint efforts of the Ladies' Hospital Kosher Kitchen, the Jewish Sick Relief Society, the Union of Jewish Women, Highlands House, B'nei B'rith and pupils from the Jewish High School.

The various organizations have only *sketchy current demographic information* on seniors: numbers, residence, needs. Nor are efforts being made to assess the future needs of the Jewish seniors and to plan projects to meet them.

Cape Town reflects both the advantages and the disadvantages of a community network of services essentially consisting of volunteer organizations. The advantages are that volunteers can fill the gap left by limited governmental provisions; VO's being small and local, they offer intimacy and warmth generally absent in large state or public organizations; being financed by donations and having unpaid manpower, they are cheaper to run compared with formal organizations; their smallness and intimacy motivate people the more to help others.

But these advantages also contain the roots of several problems of VO's. Each organization aims to preserve its unique "territory" and areas of action without considering that other organizations have embarked on a similar course of action. There is limited coordination between the various organizations despite rhetoric to the contrary; reliance on donations means limited financial resources are available; human resources are also limited as they rely on a core group of volunteers for whose services various VO's compete; because they are voluntary and necessarily limited in size and resources, the activities of these organizations tend to be small in scope, unsystematic and lacking in basic data collection, long range planning and evaluation of results. In general, the VO's are highly autonomous with relatively low accountability and an absence of arrangements for joint fund-raising and interorganizational planning.

#### SUMMARY

Our central premise is that within the next five to ten years, the needs of a growing Jewish senior population in Cape

Town will necessitate the development of new and comprehensive community-care projects. This development will entail financial investments, systematic planning and the creation of an appropriate organizational infrastructure. As we have previously indicated, the bulk of the load of care for the seniors must fall on the shoulders of the Jewish community. Neither government organizations nor other VO's will assume this responsibility. However, it is difficult to see how the present system of community services characterized by fragmentation, duplication, lack of planning, and low accountability can achieve this kind of projected community development.

The Jewish community is currently declining in number as well as strength as

every year it loses hundreds of members including key community figures, but it still has the capability of laying the basis for comprehensive services to thousands of Jewish seniors who will remain in Cape Town. It is not certain the resources will be there in a few years from now. The future does not hold promise for later development of community initiatives to build appropriate care systems. Yet the community leadership does not now respond to the challenges presented by the anticipated changes in the community, does not take the necessary steps to establish a solid infrastructure of community-care services nor a joint community effort to pool together resources that are still available.

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#### EDITOR'S MEMO

This is the last issue of this Journal in which Herbert Millman's column, "From Other Journals," will appear. Millman is leaving after serving more than two years as editor of that department. He will be succeeded by Ernest Kahn.

Millman had promised us two years of volunteer work as conductor of the column. He has overstayed to give us time to decide upon and appoint his successor. Many thanks, Herb, for a job superbly done. We reluctantly "release" you to your other professional undertakings in your "retirement."

And while saying "goodbye" to Millman, we look forward to Ernest Kahn's continuing the worthwhile reporting from other publications. He inherits the network of contributors Millman had assembled which immediately leads us to pay special tribute to three colleagues who have been the spine of that network for the constancy, depth — and amount — of their contributions: Donald Feldstein, Meier Ben-Horin, Charles Miller.

Ernest Kahn, the succeeding column editor (as of the Fall issue) is an executive of the Federation of Jewish Agencies of Philadelphia, a former member of the Publications Committee of this Journal.

Since this memo is turning out to be one of acknowledgements, with Mitchell Jaffe (also of JWB) joining the Publications Committee this year we are reminded to call our readers' attention to the fact that he was editor of our column, "Agency Publications," which, after several years, ended three years ago. Mitch slipped away so quietly we never got to give him a much deserved salute and farewell in these pages.

Finally in personal notes and "inside the house" news: we congratulate our Book Review Editor for honors won. Leivy Smolar was awarded an Honorary Degree of Doctor of Divinity by the Hebrew Union College—J.I.R in recognition of his scholarship and leadership. His tenure as B. R. Editor has been brief, so modestly we do not claim his editorial work on these pages was contributory to his being awarded so high an honor. Rather, we shall bask in a reflected glow. — SNS