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Article:

**Response to Shirli Gilbert**

Saul Dubow<sup>1,\*</sup>

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\*Correspondence: [shd28@cam.ac.uk](mailto:shd28@cam.ac.uk)

<sup>1</sup>University of Cambridge, UK

## Response to Shirli Gilbert

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SAUL DUBOW

Shirli Gilbert's survey article points to several shortcomings and challenges in the scholarship on South African Jewry. Yet, the strength of her supportive evidence and references also suggests the opposite: namely that the literature on South African Jewry is rich and mature, at least by comparison with the historiography on other minority immigrant communities in South Africa of comparable (and even significantly larger) size – Chinese, Indians, Greeks, Germans, or Portuguese for example. One difference might be that South African Jews are defined both by their distinctive religion and their “otherness”. Marginality, as well as a capacity for incorporation within white society, has afforded them outsize prominence in South Africa, lending Jews a status and standing that their strictly numerical presence would not necessarily suggest.

At its peak, the Jewish community in South Africa stood at around 120,000. It is now approximately 52,000, less than half that of Australia. As a consequence of this sharp population decline, South African Jews have in turn generated their own secondary diasporic communities in North America, Australasia, and Israel while maintaining ongoing ties to the old country through the powerful connective tissues of family and memory, which are personal, sentimental, and sometimes political.

Broader frameworks are needed to explore in sharp detail how South African Jews, especially in the apartheid era, struggled with issues of individual and collective self-identity. Primary affiliation and loyalty was sometimes posed in the following terms: are you/we Jewish South Africans or South African Jews? Focusing too closely on an internalist account of South African Jewry, as many communal-oriented histories are prone to do, is unlikely to elicit answers to such questions.

One way to rethink South African Jewish history might therefore be to rethink the problem in more global terms. Gilbert begins her essay with a reference to Dr. Joseph Hertz's 1905 address in Johannesburg, which she identifies as a key historiographical intervention in the promotion of scholarly self-awareness. Gilbert brackets this with a more extensive

discussion of the sophisticated scholarship, led by Milton Shain and Richard Mendelsohn, which has opened up new areas of enquiry and set high professional standards in doing so. This span of about a hundred years comprising three or four generations, corresponds quite closely with the era in which the settling and settled Jewish community of South Africa was at its most diverse and dynamic. It was over the twentieth century that this community of descent acquired critical mass.

Although there was a small Jewish presence in South Africa in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the community's expansion – like much else in South African history – proceeded in tandem with the explosion of commercial, mining, and agricultural output from the 1850s. Externally, imperial breakdown and pogroms in Europe provided powerful new “push” factors for immigration. The rise of fascism in Western Europe in the 1930s supercharged such processes, while also catalysing antisemitic sentiments within South Africa – the “perfect storm” described by Shain. Interestingly, this spike was not sustained. The advent of apartheid and the National Party's new determination to build a united if not a common white South Africa led to a perceptible decline in public antisemitism from the mid-1940s. Continued postwar economic growth provided new economic opportunities of which Jews proved highly adept at taking advantage. By the 1960s the age of Jewish pedlars and artisans was effectively over. Precarity gave way to more general prosperity. Jews had become well represented in all aspects of society: in industry, commerce, farming, universities, and the professions. There were by mid-century well-established, dispersed Jewish communities in all the major cities; schools, synagogues, and kindred communal organizations were swiftly established to cater to their needs.

It is likely that the pattern of this communal development corresponds broadly to the experience of new world societies like Australia, Canada, or Argentina where Jewish minorities could thrive. Yet, South Africa was unlike such neo-Europes as apartheid rendered the country an international pariah. After 1960 South Africa became a global problem, known more for apartheid than any other factor. This did not at first place direct pressure on the South African Jewish community; it did, however, raise acute questions of identity and political choice.

Jewish social and political radicals had been active in South Africa from the start of the twentieth century as syndicalists, trade unionists, Bundists, and communists. Many did not identify outwardly as Jews in

these early years (which is not to say that they were not defined as such by others). Ever careful to maintain the community's respectability and loyalty to the state, the cautious Jewish Board of Deputies worked hard to neutralize any association between Jewishness and radical dissent. This strategy proved difficult to sustain. The government's evisceration of internal political opposition in the 1960s rendered Jews highly conspicuous as leading political activists in the liberation movement. Defendants in the Treason Trial through to Rivonia (1956–64) featured a high proportion of identifiable – if not identifying – Jews, a fact that the government was more than happy to exploit. This became a source of concern for many Jewish communal leaders.

The crisis of the 1960s prompted a significant number of Jews to emigrate for a mixture of moral, political, and prudential reasons. Some, especially those of a religious and Zionist persuasion, chose *aliyah*. This story of diasporic emigration continued in waves through the successive political crises of 1976–77 and the 1980s. It continues unabated. Excepting Russia and Ukraine, it is hard to think of another top-fifteen country (in respect of significant Jewish population) where the timespan of immigration/emigration was so concentrated. Nevertheless, South Africa continues to cast a shadow or a field of attachment: the country has remained a strong source of attachment for emigrant Jews, not least in the 1990s as expatriates regularly returned at holiday time to the “alte” Medina in order to be among friends and family, and to celebrate the “new” South Africa.

Shirli Gilbert points to several themes which an internalist-oriented history of South Africa might usefully address. I might add my own suggestions for further research: to what extent did antisemitism in the late nineteenth century focus on the prominence of “cosmopolitan” financiers in the mining industry, and was this led as much by the capitalist circles around Rhodes and Milner as the anti-imperialist followers of Hobson and Hyndman? Is it meaningful to compare the treatment of South Africa and Israel as settler societies, and did Jewish political intellectuals identify – or fail to see – evident parallels between these two countries? Were patterns of secularization and religious observance among Jews in South Africa much the same as in other immigrant societies? These questions are internalist to an extent, but they also require adopting more globally oriented and comparative approaches. It would be useful to have detailed work on the formation

of the Southern African Jewish community, its contraction, and reconstitution, by reference to comparable new world countries and, closer to home, to Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Namibia.