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Response to Shirli Gilbert

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Response to Shirli Gilbert

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Professor Shirli Gilbert has written an exceptionally comprehensive and instructive analysis of South African Jewish historiography, at the same time suggesting possible new directions in research. As Gilbert has observed, the problem with writing the history of South African Jewry pre-1994 was the fear of openly denouncing South Africa's structural racism. Whereas in 1955 Gustav Saron and Louis Hotz were in the service of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies, in 2008 Richard Mendelsohn and Milton Shain were able to reflect independently on all the latest academic research, while aiming their "illustrated history" at a popular audience.¹ Otherwise the most important critical assessments of South African Jewry remain Gideon Shimoni's *Jews and Zionism* (1980) and *Community and Conscience*, published in 2003 after South Africa's transition to democracy.²

As a child of a large family of Boerejode, country Jews, although raised in the city, I particularly value the six-volume series (the seventh and final volume is in the works) *Jewish Life in the South African Country Communities*.³ However, this series does not account for the closeness and the strength of the Jewish identity of these small communities, whose population constituted only nine per cent of South African Jewry, but which punched far beyond its weight. I suspect that this relates to their involvement in the surrounding Afrikaans communities, a topic that requires further research.

A comparison of the contents of the *Bibliography of South African Jewry* of 1997⁴ with the updated bibliography as it stands today yields some

1 Gustav Saron and Louis Hotz, eds., *The Jews in South Africa: A History* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1955); Richard Mendelsohn and Milton Shain, *The Jews in South Africa: An Illustrated History* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2008).

2 Gideon Shimoni, *Jews and Zionism: The South African Experience, 1910–1967* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1980); Shimoni, *Community and Conscience: The Jews in Apartheid South Africa* (Hanover, NH, and London: University Press of New England; Cape Town: David Philip Publisher, 2003).

3 A. Kollenberg, ed., *Jewish Life in the South African Country Communities* (Johannesburg: South African Friends of Beth Hatefutsoth, 2002–).

4 Veronica Belling, *Bibliography of South African Jewry* (Cape Town: Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research, University of Cape Town Libraries, 1997).

interesting results that generally confirm Gilbert's historiographical analysis. The bibliography has not only been updated but has also been backdated with the indexing of the Yiddish periodical *Dorem Afrike* (1948–95). Yiddish books but not articles were listed in the previous edition. Other than selected articles, the Hebrew periodical *Barkai* has not been indexed. While "Politics" remains by far the largest section, in contrast the topic of the Holocaust has seen the largest percentage growth, no doubt owing to the establishment of the Holocaust and Genocide Centres in Cape Town in 1999 and in Durban and Johannesburg in 2008. With new attitudes to sexual identity, the category of "Women" has been replaced by that of "Gender". Besides the theses and dissertations in this field, cited by Gilbert, this category has also been enhanced by entries in the *Shalvi-Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women*, as well as by the newly published history of the Union of Jewish Women, *Women of Action* by Karen Kallman.⁵ Another new category, related to that of "Gender", is that of "Foodways and Cookbooks".

In the section "Internal Organisation", the category of "Religion" has seen the largest growth. Gilbert has cited the most significant works in the field, by Irwin Manoim and David Fachler.⁶ In "Contribution to South Africa", "Art", one of the largest sections in 1997, the main focus remains on the artist Irma Stern. Although Stern's art focuses on people of colour, she was not a political activist, and a recent book by LaNitra Berger, an African American, *Irma Stern and the Racial Paradox of South African Modern Art* (2020), adds a new academic dimension to our understanding of Stern's work.⁷ Causing a stir in the world of Afrikaans literature is the largely anecdotal *Searching for Sarah: The Woman who loved Langenhoven* (2021): Dominique Malherbe, Sarah Goldblatt's niece, relates the fascinating story of the Jewish woman behind the recognition of Afrikaans as the national language of South Africa.⁸

5 <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia>; Karen Kallman, *Women of Action: A History of the Union of Jewish Women* (South Africa: Union of Jewish Women, 2023).

6 Irwin Manoim, *Mavericks inside the Tent: The Progressive Jewish Movement in South Africa and its Impact on the Wider Community* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 2019); David Fachler, "Tradition, Accommodation, Revolution and Counterrevolution: A History of a Century of Struggle for the Soul of Orthodoxy in Johannesburg's Jewish Community, 1915–2015" (Ph.D. diss., University of Cape Town, 2022).

7 L. M. Berger, *Irma Stern and the Racial Paradox of South African Modern Art: Audacities of Colour* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020).

8 Dominique Malherbe, *Searching for Sarah: The Woman who loved Langenhoven* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2021).

An investigation into research as reflected in theses and dissertations submitted to universities in South Africa and abroad also yields interesting findings. In common with that of published works, the topic of the Holocaust leads the way, closely followed by Jewish education, South African Zionism, South Africa-Israel relations, and politics. The majority of the research is still generated in South Africa by the Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research (at the University of Cape Town), followed by the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. Overseas theses and dissertations on South African Jewish related topics are currently most numerous in the United States (16), followed closely by the U.K. (15); the latter, with the popularity of the degrees offered by the London School of Jewish Studies in conjunction with the University of Middlesex (10) is set to overtake the United States. Lagging behind is Israel (8), followed by Australia (5), and Canada (2). European theses and dissertations have been written at the University of Leiden (2), the University of Notre Dame in Paris (1), the Vilnius Academy of Arts in Lithuania (1), and the University of Iceland (1).

Owing to the natural attrition of native Yiddish speakers, the literature itself has remained static. The only new book that was not published in time to be listed in the 1997 edition of the *Bibliography* is the two-volume autobiography *Ikh un mayn velt – I and My World* (1995–97) by David Wolpe, the Itsik Manger prize-winning poet. This field suffered a huge blow with the death in 2009 of Joseph Sherman, who first opened this field to researchers with his 1987 groundbreaking *From a Land Far Off*.⁹ It was the first publication of the Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research. Despite new contributions by Astrid Starck-Adler, Hazel Frankel, and Cedric Ginsberg,¹⁰ this remains a field that is woefully under explored. From my own research, deeply rooted in the South African Yiddish press, I must disagree with Gilbert's optimistic pronouncement as to the availability of archival resources in this field. By far the majority of the early Yiddish newspapers have not survived, and even the last and longest enduring of the newspapers, the *Afrikaner idishe tsaytung* (1931–85), was

9 Joseph Sherman, ed., *From a Land Far Off: South African Yiddish Stories in English Translation* (Rondebosch: Jewish Publications, 1987).

10 A. Starck-Adler, "Europa vs. Afrika: David Wolpe: *Ikh un mayn velt. Oytobiografishe bleter*", *Acta Germanica* 33, ed. Anette Horn (Johannesburg, 2005): 81–91; Hazel Frankel, *Holocaust and Home: The Poetry of David Fram from Lithuania to South Africa* (Oxford: Legenda, 2021); C. J. Ginsberg, "End of an Era? Forty Years of Dorem Afrike and Yiddish Kultur in South Africa," *Journal for Semitics* 20, no. 1 (2011): 44–86.

not systematically collected by either the South African Jewish Board of Deputies in Johannesburg or the National Library of South Africa in Cape Town. Despite these limitations, this is a rich and unexplored field that, from my own preliminary research, reveals observations and opinions by formerly neglected personalities, such as the editors Boris Gershman and Levi Shalit, which add a fresh new dimension to our understanding of our predominantly Litvak origins, and how they shaped the nature of the South African Jewish community.