Part 3: South African doctors

By AARON HOWARD | JHV

Editors note: In metropolitan Houston, where 1.4 million people are foreign born, one antediluvian immigrant story is that of South African Jews. The core of the community, estimated at 600 families, has lived here four decades. Nearly all brought with them the highest levels of formal education, English proficiency, and skill sets. They have become U.S. citizens and have significantly contributed to the local Jewish and greater Houston communities. This is their unique story.

One of the groups most likely to emigrate from South Africa in the late 1970s was that of Jewish physicians. By the early 1960s, governments in Western industrialized nations recognized the severe shortage of physicians was insufficient to provide an increasing demand for services.

During the mid-1960s, most Western countries revised immigration policies to focus on attracting highly trained professionals. The Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, also known as the Hart-Celler Act, established a new immigration policy based on reuniting immigrant families and attracting skilled labor. It permitted relatives of U.S. citizens to immigrate. Although no precise figures are available, Western industrialized countries licensed a huge number of physicians trained outside of their national boundaries. The United States, alone, accepted more than 60,000 foreign medical graduates between 1965 and 1979. The South African Medical Association estimated that 5,000 of these physicians, more than 50 percent (approximately 90 percent) of its domestically trained doctors were living abroad. Another study, from 2004, reported 5,334 South African-trained doctors were working in the U.S.

Dr. Louis Berman and his wife, Dr. Margaret Spitz, came to Houston in 1978 with their three small children.

Spitz recalled, “We were concerned about bringing our children up under apartheid. Louis began looking at opportunities in the U.S. The reason so many South African doctors ended up coming to Houston was that one of the Texas Medical hospitals placed advertisements in the South African Medical Journal looking for doctors.”

“Any doctor who wanted to come could see the advertisements,” Berman said. “They would be those ads that simply said they were recruiting doctors to come to work in Houston. If you answered the ad, they would immediately follow up.

“I was recruited in South Africa by The University of Texas Health Science Center. I had a firm job offer before I left.”

The South African medical system was based on the British model. Our went from high school straight to medical school for six years. Berman said the clinical training was excellent, but there were very few non-white students in his class.

“Included blacks, Indians and mixed-race students,” Berman said. “It was much harder for them, because they couldn’t go on rounds in white hospitals, or even attend postmortems on white corpses. It was to shame of none that some of us spoke up about the conditions.”

Berman’s wife, Dr. Spitz, was also a physician and initially stayed at home in Houston to take care of their children, ages 4, 8 and 10.

“We got our green cards at the airport in New York,” said Spitz. “Looking back, it’s remarkable how naive and optimistic we were. We didn’t worry about any financial issues or social network. That’s the ignorance and confidence of youth.”

“At the UT School of Public Health,” Berman continued. “I became interested in cancer epidemiology. I took a part-time, non-tenured track assistant professor position at M.D. Anderson and ended up founding the chairman of a newly created department of epidemiology with over 200 staff and faculty. I became the first woman in the UT system to be awarded a distinguished university chair position.

“I’m a proud patriotic American. My children have thrived here. They thank me for bringing them to America.”

Dr. Cyril Wolf arrived here in 1977. He recalls sitting on a bench, reading a newspaper in Cape Town in 1976.

“I said to my wife, ‘Do you know there’s a secret war in Angola?’” [Border War, detailed in Part 2]. “We have to get out of here.”

“We’ll go to America,” was her reply.

Wolf, who was a general practitioner at the time, embarked on a fact-finding trip to the United States in October 1976.

“There was a small ad in the South African Medical Journal. Physicians needed in Houston. When I arrived here, I went to the Heights Hospital. I met the administrator at Heights, who had 100 applicants on his desk in response to the ad, all from South Africa.

“Was it so crowded in South Africa? That one of the Texas Medical hospitals placed advertisements in the South African Medical Journal looking for doctors.”

“My world was initially limited to the medical environment. I began connecting with Jewish pediatricians, who were warm, caring and helped me out a lot. Houston allowed many of my wife’s family, and my family, to come and get jobs. It was overwhelming to leave my parents, but my dad always knew we would leave.”

Dr. Kagan also came in 1977. He had a training program in pediatrics set up in Orlando. When I arrived at the airport, there were 140 South African physicians on that flight. [President] Jimmy Carter had signed legislation restricting entry of doctors and other physicians into the U.S. In December 1976, the U.S. Embassy in South Africa processed some 400 physicians, and all of us got green cards to come here.

“We all had to fly here between Jan. 1-10, 1977. The trip was a week and set up by the U.S. Embassy in Orlando. I went back because the program run by the South African Medical Association was going to be in New York,” said Spitz. “Looking back, it’s remarkable how naive and optimistic we were. We didn’t worry about any financial issues or social network. That’s the ignorance and confidence of youth.”

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