

Part 4: Making a new home

By AARON HOWARD | JHV

Editors note: In metropolitan Houston, where 1.4 million people are foreign born, one untold immigrant story is that of South African Jewry. 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.

Integration is the process by which immigrants become accepted into society. There are two components to integration: the immigrants, with their characteristics and efforts; and the receiving society, with its interactions with these newcomers.

Institutions play a large role in the integration process. There are the public institutions, such as schools and workplaces. And, there are social institutions, such as religious and cultural organizations. These institutions can function to include or exclude immigrants.

Both types of institutions worked to welcome and include the South African Jews.

Basil Joffe and his family came here in 1978. "Within a relatively short time after we arrived, we joined UOS [United Orthodox Synagogues]. An Orthodox synagogue was all I was ever used to. American Jews tend to associate with streams of Judaism that correspond to their lifestyle. In other parts of the world, people are not accustomed to denominations like Conservative or Reform, because there are very few of those kinds of synagogues. Four of five years ago, there were approximately 80 Orthodox and, maybe, four Reform synagogues in South Africa.

"South African Jews took the position this [Orthodoxy] is what Judaism is. I, personally, may not be observant, but I'm not going to change the synagogue to conform with my lifestyle.

"So, UOS was what I was used to, although I wasn't *shomer Shabbos* back home. Nor was I, in Houston. We drove to synagogue on Shabbat and festivals. I'm a past president of UOS. It's one of those fabulous places where that isn't a divisive issue."

The *mechitza* (partition separating men and women) became a permanent feature in the main sanctuary of UOS during Joffe's presidency. The initiative was led by South African congregants.

Although a *mechitza* is not a specific law, the custom goes back to Mishnaic times. As late as the 1950s, a substantial number of American Orthodox synagogues did not have a partition. In

FROM CAPE TOWN TO OUR TOWN



The South African Jewish Community in Houston

some southern American cities, the debate on whether to install a *mechitza* did not occur until the 1980s.

"The *mechitza* in the main sanctuary went up during my presidency," recounted Joffe. "There were two services: one in the sanctuary without a *mechitza*, and one in the chapel with. The constitution stated if you wanted to hold a *simcha* in the sanctuary, the celebrating family could move a *mechitza* into the main shul. We said: Why don't we do one service for the new moon once a month with a *mechitza*? We publicized it but it wasn't in the constitution.

"The first time we did this, about six men came into the sanctuary and sat themselves in the women's section. Rabbi Joseph Radinsky asked them to move. They refused. So, he stopped the service and everybody went home.

"From that point onwards, there were attempts to entrench this arrangement. The constitution was changed to make it the way it is now. Today, you wouldn't know which families were opponents and which families were in favor."

John Goott began his emigration process in 1977.

"I flew here to 17 cities in 21 days trying to find a sponsor for a green card. I had been involved in the Jaycees, so I knew a few people in the States. I found a sponsor in Houston, but the process took four years. The immigration laws were changing. The idea was that you wouldn't put an American out of a job. When we got our green cards in 1980, we had almost given up.

"My wife's father escaped from Germany on one of the last boats out. So, when we first started the process, we weren't waiting. All of our group in Durban had the notion of leaving to go overseas. All did: to Israel, Canada, Australia, Holland, England and the United States.

"At the time, one was restricted as to

how much money one could take out of South Africa. We came with enough money to put down a deposit on a home in Houston, with 3 points and a 16 percent mortgage."

Unlike the majority of South Africans, Goott and his wife, Sue, grew up in the Reform movement. John met Sue when she was 12 in their synagogue in Durban.

It was just before Rosh Hashanah when they came to the U.S.

"Beth Israel had a practice: If you weren't in the phonebook, that meant you were new, and they'd let you attend services. That's where we spent our first Rosh Hashanah. But, South African Reform is much more traditional than Reform in the U.S. So, we ended up at Beth Yeshurun.

"When we first arrived, various South Africans were very kind to us. They collected boxes of all the basic things we needed to get by at the beginning.

"I think we're reasonably well-integrated. We left with a view that we could establish a better life in the U.S. Houston's been a great place for us and we're very grateful to be here.

"Today, being white and Jewish in South Africa has a lot of negative connotations. Israel and Jews have become a whipping boy for the present government – anything to distract from the corruption and lack of progress."

Jenny Tavor arrived in Houston in 1977. She married her husband, Sam, one week before immigrating here.

"Our original plan was to stay and work, in order to put aside enough money. But, my father told Sam: 'As much as I want you to stay, get the hell out of here. Time to go. Now!'"

Trained as a teacher, Tavor didn't use her teaching degree here. She first worked in her husband's business, then began catering on the side. She opened up a catering company full time in 1994.

"I never prepared food growing up," Tavor said. "We had cooks to do that. Coming from my princess life, I was shell shocked when I came here. I had never lived on my own before I left. People told me I'd be back. So, anytime things got difficult here, I'd say to myself: 'Damned if I'm going to prove them right.'"

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Next week: Part 5: Looking back



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