

## Part 2: The decision to leave

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.*

The student protest was ostensibly about language. On the morning of June 16, 1976, thousands of South African black junior high school students in Soweto began a march to protest a new law that required their schools to use and teach the Afrikaans language instead of English.

Conflict began almost immediately, as police attempted to disperse the marchers by firing teargas into the crowd. Then, all hell broke loose. Stones were thrown and several policemen were struck. Police fired on the students with pistols and automatic rifles; as many as 11 students were killed.

Older students and adults reacted in anger. Random whites became a target, and two white officials from the municipal administration were beaten to death. Meanwhile, police continued to use live ammunition, often firing at will to quell the uprising. The official death toll was 575, with thousands wounded.

Protests, strikes and confrontations between young people and police spread to some 80 townships. For many South African blacks, after Soweto, the feeling was major changes had to come to South Africa. The questions were how they would come about and how much violence would be involved.

Among many in the South African Jewish community, the feeling was, that at some point soon, the situation would explode into bloody revolution.

Gerald Blumenthal immigrated to

# FROM CAPE TOWN



## The South African Jewish Community in Houston

Houston in 1978.

He said, "There was a tremendous fear that the black population would now be using force. You understood there was a threat.

"If you were Jewish and fairly liberal, you sympathized with the black movement. Some went to jail for their anti-government activities. Others emigrated because they saw the writing on the wall and didn't feel there was a future in South Africa for their children. The average age of the emigrant population was in their 30s. I had three children, 13, 12 and 8, kind of typical.

"But, I was also very attracted to the U.S., because there was no end to the economic opportunities. I owned my own business with 500 employees at that time. When you left South Africa, you were limited to what you could take out in terms of money. I had accumulated some capital, but that was not typical of the South African Jews who emigrated at the time.

Dr. Joel and Claire Berman left South Africa in 1974. He had completed his ENT surgical residency and had an opportunity for further study at Oxford. The couple and

their two children moved to England. Their original vision was to return to Cape Town after the year abroad.

"We had a good idea about the apartheid system when we lived there, but we didn't realize how bad the system was," Joel told the JHV.

How was that possible?

First, there was no television in South Africa until 1976.

Second, the media operated under a government censorship apparatus. The purpose of this censorship was to suppress information about the repressive tactics used to maintain the status quo in South Africa.

The state empowered itself to suspend newspapers, and contents of which it disapproved. Newspapers, with a few exceptions, like the "Rand Daily Mail," towed the government line. Under the 1963 Publications and Information Act, any material deemed "offensive or harmful to the Republic of South Africa" could be banned. The law was extended in 1974 to abolish the right to appeal, except through a government special appeals board. The Directorate of Publications was given the power to enter premises on the suspicion that "an undesirable publication" was being published. Thus, censorship became an integral part of South African society, accepted by most of the white population.

"When we left South Africa in 1974, there was no television. The government didn't want the population to be exposed to any outside influence. So, when we got to England, we had television for the first time, which was very exciting to have a set in your room. We watched BBC and suddenly saw what was going on in South Africa," Joel said.

"BBC was very critical about South Africa," Claire said

"We decided, at that point, maybe we shouldn't go back. We had family there, but no real estate. We had left with our suitcases and our two children and that was it," Joel said.

"We grew up with apartheid; that's how it was," said Claire.

"But, now we saw it from a different perspective," Joel said. "And, terrible things were happening."

One Jewish South African who had full knowledge of the extent of the apartheid system was Nat Levy. When nine of South Africa's leading anti-apartheid activists were indicted in the Rivonia trial, which took place Oct. 9, 1963, through June 12, 1964, Levy was the attorney of record in Pretoria for Nelson Mandela and eight of the accused.

Although they faced the death penalty, the defendants used the trial to tell the story of their struggle against apartheid, completely and uncensored, for the first time.

Levy and his family moved to Houston in 1979.

"Leaving South Africa was an evolution of thought," said Levy. "Our desire was that somehow South Africa would get the politics right and dismantle apartheid in an evolutionary manner. I belonged to the Progressive Party, whose aim was one person, one vote. We hoped universal franchise would come with a broad-based educational system.

"The only people who could vote at that time were whites, and there was no way the

whites would vote themselves out of power. Eventually, it became obvious the apartheid system would not change any time soon."

"The decision to emigrate came as South Africa was being attacked from the north."

The so-called Border War was fought between South Africa and the People's Liberation Army of Namibia, the armed wing of the South West African People's Organization, aided by Cuba. The South African government established universal conscription for all white males in order to meet the threat.

"A lot of young people were getting conscripted at age 18. We didn't want our children to fight for a cause we didn't believe in. So, we decided to leave in 1979," said Levy.

Another Jewish South African who had full knowledge of the extent of the apartheid system was Beverly Fanarof. Her mother went to prison for her anti-apartheid activities.

"In 1960, when I was 12, my mother, Gertrude Trudy Gelb, was active in the anti-apartheid movement with the ANC (African National Congress). She was working for Leon Levy, who was the secretary of the trade union movement. When I was a kid, I went with my mother to the homes of well-known anti-apartheid activists, among them Joe and Ruth Slovo, and Bram Fischer," Fanarof said.

At that time, the ANC was allied with the South African Congress of Trade Unions and the South African Communist Party in the Congress Alliance. Their goal: Build a non-violent, mass movement of resistance to apartheid. One of their major campaigns was opposition to the "pass" laws. Under the law, it was compulsory for all black South Africans over the age of 16 to carry the "pass book" at all times within white areas. A "pass book" was a kind of internal passport containing both personal information and details about one's employment.

On March 21, 1960, during a protest against the pass laws, several thousand protestors marched to the police station in Sharpeville. The police opened fire on the protestors. The official death toll was 69 people and 180 injured.

"After Sharpeville, the government declared a State of Emergency," said Fanarof. "Part of that was rounding up people they deemed 'enemies of the state.' My mom was arrested and kept in jail for 90 days. My dad went into hiding. My grandma and my aunt looked after us.

"When she was released, my mom was put under a banning order for 30 years. Every Monday, she had to report to the police station. She wasn't allowed leave Johannesburg. She couldn't come to my university graduation. She had to receive special permission to come to my wedding in 1970, because, under the ban, the wedding was considered 'a public gathering.'

"As a teen, it was very traumatic. Who could I have as a friend? I didn't know who knew, what they knew. I was so aware of what was going on, that we were living in the most iniquitous society. The Jewish community chose not to be involved for various reasons.

"I sunk myself into competitive sports: swimming, tennis, field hockey. I made friends with my teammates."

Fanarof and her family moved to Houston in 1977.

"I had married Gerald in 1970. We had two girls, and we didn't want our children growing up in that society. Gerald was an internist, so it wasn't hard for us to make the decision to leave. We were young, idealistic and wanted to live in a more integrated society.

"My mom was upset. She didn't want us to leave. She stayed and became part of the new South Africa.

"Coming to Houston was a cultural shock, after the idealistic image of America I had in my head. The Houston Jewish community welcomed us. The JCC was a stalwart for many in the South African community. Between camp for my kids and the Arts and Culture program for me, the J has given us the opportunity to participate in the most wonderful events.

"I started my own physical therapy pediatric clinic and my husband had a lot of success. We've got much to be grateful for.

"Even though I've been a U.S. citizen since 1983, I'm still South African in my heart."

Next week: Part 3: "The South African doctors"

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