

# A rare find from the Boer War

DAVID SAKS

For most of the decade, a major project has been underway to document the history of South Africa's rural Jewish communities before it is irretrievably lost.

The project has been headed by the South African Friends of Beth Hatefutsoth, whose members, mainly volunteers, have pursued it with remarkable thoroughness and zeal. In the course of their work, much important documentation has been unearthed, most recently a collection of around 20 Boer War letters written from the front by the young Jeannot (John) Weinberg, a Jewish boy from Bloemfontein, fighting for the Boers.

Weinberg would have had no idea that the letters he was regularly sending off to his anxious parents would one day become the object of scholarly scrutiny. Numbering some 20 in all, they would seem to be the only surviving body of correspondence by a Jewish soldier during the war, certainly from among the 300 or so who served on the Boer side.

Weinberg wrote not in Dutch, but in German, until April 5, 1900 and thereafter in English (the former have since been translated). They are also, with one or two exceptions, comparatively legible, which is a bonus: many an historian well knows the teeth-grinding frustration of being confronted with handwriting so illegible as to render primary documents effectively worthless.

Weinberg's war did not last very long, but he had a busy time of it while it did. There is a touch of swagger in his early letters from the front ("I have smelt the powder and it does not appear all that dangerous"), but they become more serious as the true face of warfare reveals itself. He served in the western sector, centring around the siege of Kimberley, and took part in the famous battles of Modder River and Magersfontein.

**Listed as  
one of  
'seven brave  
Bloemfontein  
boys'**

Following the former engagement, he was listed as one of the "seven brave



Jeannot Weinberg (standing, arms folded) as a Boer POW in Cape Town, 1900.

Bloemfontein boys" who defended a koppie against an entire regiment in the local paper. Weinberg himself commented that it was not a case of bravery, but of sheer stupidity since, had a cavalry detachment suddenly stormed in, all seven brave boys would have been easily captured.

He also showed considerable sympathy for his beaten opponents, following the Magersfontein battle ("It's really terrible how the English military are being treated") and claimed that the British had thrust their most inexperienced troops right into the firing line like lambs to the proverbial slaughter.

**On the POW  
list his name  
is given as  
'Johannes  
Weinberg'**

Unfortunately, there is a gap in the correspondence between December 17 (just after Magersfontein) and April 5, by which time Weinberg was sitting in a Bloemfontein jail, courtesy of the British occupation force.

It is not known, therefore, how he saw or was involved in the eventual relief of Kimberley, the capture of General Cronjé and 4 000 Boers at Paardeberg and the fall of Bloemfontein.

From the official British POW list (where his name is given as "Johannes Weinberg"), we do know that he was captured shortly before the surrender of the capital. From his sister, Bertha Sieradzki, we learn that he

was released on parole and then rearrested when he was overheard making cheeky remarks about British soldiers. A copy of Bertha Sieradzki's memoirs, written nearly 60 years later, has also been obtained from the Friends of Beth Hatefutsoth and is useful in filling in some of the gaps:

Things went from bad to worse for young Weinberg, as he was sent first to the POW camp in Green Point, Cape Town, and then, following an

unsuccessful attempt to escape, to Ceylon, where over 10 000 Boer prisoners were being held. He does not refer much to his unsuccessful bid for freedom, but we know from his sister that he and several others tried to dig a tunnel under the barbed wire fence during feigned visits to the camp latrines and were discovered after one of their number rattled on them.

**Remainder of  
correspondence  
deals with  
Weinberg's  
internment**

The remainder of the correspondence - nearly two-thirds of the total - deals with Weinberg's internment. A high-spirited and capable young man, he took imprisonment in his stride at first but as time wore on the boredom and futility of the POW's life, not to mention homesickness,

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began to make itself felt. He was also, to his dismay, classified as "Russian" by the British because of his place of birth and moved to Ragama Camp with the rest of the foreign volunteers, whom he thoroughly disliked ("They are, without exaggeration, the scum of the scum," he wrote, "and it is my unfortunate lot to have to mix with them now that I have avoided them since our arrival here.")

Second World War, already in his 60s, was in the Home Guard. He died in 1961, aged 80.

Weinberg's letters, together with sundry documents and photographs from the period, have been lent to the Friends of Beth-Hatefutsoth by two of his children, Albert Weinberg and Brenda Blumberg, both of Johannesburg.

Apart from Boer War material, they include several items relating to his First World War service and even three letters concerning the now practically forgotten Swaziland uprising of 1898, in which he served as a volunteer.

The latter event was Weinberg's first time in uniform, although no fighting

actually took place and his letters, short but full of the boastfulness and exuberance of youth, make up a rare and engaging slice of Africana in their own right.

Copies of all the correspondence have been made and the collection as a whole will form part of an exhibition on the role of Jews in the Anglo-Boer War, a pro-

ject of the SA Jewish Board of Deputies, with input from the Friends of Beth Hatefutsoth.

The official opening of this exhibition will be on Sunday evening, November 7, with Professor Richard Mendelsohn, of the University of Cape Town, delivering the keynote address. Anyone interested in attending or viewing the exhibition can contact the Board of Deputies for details.

While Weinberg, like most Jews in the Boer forces, was a somewhat assimilated Jew, there are nevertheless several references to Jewish issues, in particular the virtual impossibility of keeping Yomtov in captivity. "Passover is near and no matzos," he remarks for example in February 1901. "I am becoming a regular heathen, all the cause of the British."

After a short spell in Germany, where his family had relocated in the latter stages of the war, Weinberg returned to South Africa and entered the hotel business with considerable success. He ran hotels in De Aar, Kimberley, Vryburg and eventually Kuruman, where he was mayor for four years.

His military career was by no means ended. During the First World War, he served in the South West Africa campaign as a captain in the Kalahari Horse Regiment and during the