



PHOTO DOCUMENTARY ON THE BULAWAYO HEBREW CONGREGATION

By Tobi Asmoucha

From September 2003 to August 2007, Zimbabwe's only rabbi was a young Canadian man who originates from Vancouver, British Columbia. Rabbi Nathan Asmoucha's voyage to Zimbabwe is unusual, but fitting to a person whose parents immigrated to Canada separately from very different worlds. He is a product of the Canadian mosaic. Rabbi Asmoucha's father was from traditional Iraqi Jewish roots, while his mother was born into a traditional Jewish Welsh family and grew into an agnostic individual with a social conscience. Brought up with a public school education, he grew into an individual with strong religious and ethical beliefs. This led him to rabbinical studies in Jerusalem where he met his wife Kati, and eventually to Zimbabwe as the Rabbi of the Bulawayo Hebrew Congregation.

The Bulawayo Hebrew Congregation is a diminishing community of a hundred individuals with a rich and unique history. Jews began arriving in Southern Rhodesia in the 1880's, primarily from Lithuania, Latvia, and Russia in reaction to anti-Semitism. The community grew during the Thirties through Jews fleeing Nazi Germany. During the Fifties, when the congregation was most affluent, it numbered approximately three thousand. Since 1965 the congregation has been in decline in reaction to the strife in Zimbabwe. The Jews of Zimbabwe have also been involved with Zionistic causes and many fought with the Rhodesian Military during World War II. Currently, the Jews of Bulawayo face unique challenges existing within the social and political climate of Zimbabwe.

Most of the Bulawayo Jewish community is aging, with a third of the congregation residing in the only Jewish home for the aged in Zimbabwe, Savyon Lodge. The residents depended on Rabbi Asmoucha for his daily services and spiritual guidance, in addition to his friendly visits. Savyon Lodge has the feeling of apartment style living,

rather than a nursing home. Many of the residents have known each other since childhood, giving a strong sense of community. The environment has a sense of a place left in the Fifties, the city's development frozen in that time period. This visual has cracks as the outside world, along with the economics and politics specific to Zimbabwe, are affecting the way of life this community has maintained in over a century.

Although the synagogue burnt to the ground within the first month of Nathan Asmoucha's arrival to his first rabbinical posting, the congregation rallied together with additional support from outside the community and found a solution to the tragedy. The community chose to meet in the Sinai Synagogue and Hall, the old Reform synagogue. The ruins of the Bulawayo Shul, the former home to the Bulawayo Hebrew Congregation have been sold, and now functions as an open-air church. The connected mikvah survived the fire and is still available for use by the Jewish women.

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To this day, the Bulawayo Jewish community maintains a Jewish elementary day school called the Carmel School. This unique institution functions as a private school for the Bulawayo community at large. Of two hundred attending students, only five of them are Jewish, and two of the five are the Rabbi's children. The multicultural environment created houses students of Christian, Hindu, and Muslim faiths from Ndebele, Shona, Asian, and European descent. Carmel School has a regular curriculum of academic and leisure pursuits, although the school year revolves around the Jewish calendar. The students participate in Jewish holidays, and every Friday morning they perform a mock Sabbath service in the auditorium lead by the Rabbi, followed by singing the Israeli and Zimbabwe national anthems. Carmel School reflects the unique relationship the remaining Jewish community has with the surrounding cultures, its' flexibility enabling the society's survival.

The Jewish community in Bulawayo lives within the turbulent times of Zimbabwe. Even with the problems specific to an aging and diminishing society, there have been individuals that have connected outside their own congregation.

Ruth Feigenbaum, wife of the former president of the synagogue, has been instrumental in co-founding the Support Group of Family of Terminally Ill (SGOFOTI). This organization has found halls in many of the townships in Bulawayo where the grandmothers and aunts looking after AIDS orphans can meet. In Africa, these grandmothers are often stigmatized; by meeting, they can break this isolation and emotionally support one another with the assistance of a social worker. This organization also enables the women to create items for sale, helping support their often over extended families. Rabbi Asmoucha supported these social acts, built connections with other religious leaders in the region, and has participated in interfaith panels.

To learn more about the Jewish community in Zimbabwe, visit the following websites:

<http://www.jewishindependent.ca/archives/Dec05/archives05Dec23-01.html>

<http://www.zjc.org.il/showpage.php?pageid=272>

http://www.bulawayo-shul.com/memorial_service.html

<http://www.zjc.org.il/savyon/index.html>

<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/vjw/zimbabwe.html>



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