



Hugh Macmillan, Frank Shapiro. *Zion in Africa: The Jews of Zambia.* London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 1999. ix + 342 pp. \$59.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-86064-405-4.



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From Yiddish-speaking cattle traders and adventurers in the nineteenth century to intellectuals and professionals in the twentieth, *Zion in Africa* chronicles the history and culture of the small Jewish community in Zambia and affirms that Zambian Jewry, as an ethnic group, indeed exists. The book is supplemented by maps of Zambia (also known before its independence in 1964 as Northern Rhodesia), with its eight neighboring countries in south central Africa, and central African cattle-trails (c. 1900s-1960). In addition to secondary sources, its eleven-page bibliography provides explanations on the sources, list of interviews, archives, and private collections. Photographs from the early 1900s to 1997 provide visual insights into the appearance of Zambian Jewry, their Synagogue, shops, and the like. The book also includes a list of abbreviations, copious endnotes, and a thirteen-page index.

The opening chapter provides a wide definition of the “Jewishness” of the people discussed in this book. Unlike the strict religious definition that values maternal descent, the authors provide an ethnic definition to include anyone of Jewish descent, including those who converted to Christianity, and others who consider themselves Jewish through paternal descent and for other reasons. Jews in Zambia are viewed by Macmillan and Shapiro as “a fairly common social phenomenon: an immigrant eth-

nic group which, through the force of historical circumstances, rather than heredity [specializes ...] in a particular field of economic and commercial activity” (p.1). For the benefit of future descendants, this book lists almost everyone in Northern Rhodesia/Zambia who falls under this category, including those who have emigrated to, were born or raised in, and those who settled for a while and then left. Macmillan and Shapiro’s fascinating in-depth research deals with Jewish settlers and refugees, both men and women, often with meager financial means, who have emigrated to the welcoming Northern Rhodesia/Zambia and became successful to a certain degree. Regardless of how secular or assimilated many of these immigrants were – be they Yiddish-speakers from eastern Europe, German-speakers from Germany, Ladino-speakers from the former Ottoman Empire, or Anglophones from South Africa, England and Ireland – all had in common their ethnic identity and their social position as a minority group. This resulted in building an infrastructure that included such institutions as Hebrew congregations, synagogues, and even a commitment to the secular national movement, Zionism.

The early grain or cattle-traders, risk-taking entrepreneurs, and farmers endured great difficulties, such as widespread anti-Semitism and local racism among the white population, blackwater fever, and bankruptcy. De-

spite these hardships, they established trading communities along the railway, in the geographic area known as the Line of Rail, and the copper mines on the Copperbelt, they built rural stores, developed farms and ranches, and they played a significant role in developing towns and in the new Zambian industries such as textiles or the Tranz Zambezi Industries (TZI). Macmillan and Shapiro state that “the status of the Jews as economic or political refugees did give them a greater commitment to the development of national interests, and national capital, than most other settlers” (p.291). What is undeniable is that a strong motivation to succeed, the predominance of close-knit family networks, and, what is most important, a system of direct links with London merchants, personal trust, and the extension of credit system were crucial elements that contributed, for instance, to the eventual success of the Diamond family’s business, or that saved the Susmans from bankruptcy. Zambian Jewry’s investment in the land may be simply summed up with the words of Helen Mohrer, a German Jewish refugee: “Northern Rhodesia was very good to us, and as Northern Rhodesia grew, so we grew with the country” (p.293).

Several chapters are devoted to the history of prominent families in a more explicit fashion. Chapter Two, for example, recounts the history of the Susman family from their humble beginnings as cattle traders to their contributions to the economic development of both Northern and Southern Rhodesia. Both brothers Elie and Harry Susman came from an Orthodox family in the Lithuanian shtetl of Riteve. As pioneer cattle-traders, they had overcome the risks posed by the tsetse fly, lions, and crocodiles when crossing the Zambezi river. Chapter Four provides information on Moss Dobkins, a Jewish trader who arrived from England in 1905 and died at the age of ninety in 1984. The information relies upon Dobkins’ diary and his partial autobiography. It describes his life and that of his family, his joining the Northern Rhodesian Volunteer Force, Mobile Column (known also as the Northern Rhodesia Rifles) in World War I, his relationship with Christian missionaries and Freemasonry, and “how it felt, and what it meant, to be an immigrant Jew in central Africa in the early years of the twentieth century” (p.70). Abe Galaun, discussed in the tenth chapter, is another example of economic success. This chairman of the Lusaka Hebrew Congregation and former member of the Lusaka Chamber of commerce arrived as an immigrant from the shtetl of Vorne in the Russian Empire. Abe Galaun and his siblings came to Africa “because the United States was effectively closed to them by the quota system” (p.182). With their agricul-

tural activities, the Galauns flourished economically in the country, even during the post colonial period of economic decline, as owners of eight farms totaling 25,000 acres of land, and of a vast amount of retail businesses such as butcheries, grocery stores, a hotel, and the first non-segregated movie theater in Lusaka. Their contributions to the economic development of Zambia manifested itself by supplying cattle, developing dairy production, and exporting tobacco, coffee, and horticultural items.

Macmillan and Shapiro give us some information, although not enough, about the Jewish women who emigrated to the area although they admit that women held a central role in the formation of a Jewish community life in the region. Their absence on the frontier in Northern Rhodesia in the early years may help explain the difficulties in observing religious customs. Macmillan and Shapiro tell us that “it was only with the arrival of Jewish women and the formation of families, which went together with the development of modern towns along the Line of Rail, that there was any attempt at organized religious activity” (p.207). Women such as Frieda Glasser, Helenne Illion, Peggy Rabb, or HESSIE Lowenthal, just to name a few, were active and independent. The devoutly orthodox Frieda Glasser, for instance, owned the first bakery and dairy in Lusaka. We learn that Peggy Rabb, the federal president of the Women’s International Zionist Organization (WIZO) and national president of the Union of Jewish Women, was also the former president of the Women’s Institutes of the Federation, and former member of the Northern Rhodesian Education Advisory Board. These women were clearly active in Jewish communal organizations and were important in the building of Hebrew congregations, but unfortunately we do not learn about them in this book as much as we do about the men.

In addition to the detailed accounts of the early days on the frontier, the strongest part of *Zion in Africa* is the in-depth examination based on archival documents and immigration files such as the 1930s Colonial Office discussions about Jewish immigration which opposed Jewish settlement in the area. The hardship involved in the settlement and absorption of Holocaust survivors in the region is another interrelated issue addressed in the book. Unlike the earlier settlers who spoke Yiddish, the newcomers spoke German and were assimilated into German culture resulting with a difficult period of adjustment. *Zion in Africa* includes Jewish involvement in politics and contributions to Zambia’s history, all the while not neglecting to provide the reader with a general history of central and southern Africa and providing details on sev-

eral riots on the Copperbelt and government mismanagement. Contributions to public life and involvement in local government are manifested in the position Jewish men held in this arena. Among them, just to mention a few, are Hyan Schulman, the first Jewish mayor of Ndola in 1937, Maurice Rabb twice mayor of Livingstone in 1951 and 1956, and Dennis Figov, twice mayor in Luanshya. In the national politics, the civil engineer Simon Zukas was appointed in 1991 deputy Minister to President Chiluba's Zambian government. This immigrant refugee resigned following political disagreements with the new constitution which "contained clauses debarring immigrants, or their children, from running for the office of President" (p.258). The book at times is too detailed. Nevertheless, its lucid style makes the fifteen chapters a pleasure to read.

Although mentioned briefly, more attention perhaps should have been given to the relationship between the Jewish minority and the African majority and other immigrant groups, or to the African shop-assistants' and customers' perceptions of the Jewish immigrants. But that may be a topic for a whole new book. Although Macmillan and Shapiro prove that Jewish immigrants were able to adapt quickly to tropical Africa in the years before and after independence, this volume emphasizes, and almost glorifies, the economic role of Zambian Jewry. Expressing their concern that such a book may be useful to anti-Semitic theorists, Macmillan and Shapiro say the economic roles of Zambian Jewry fits more closely with Braudel's view of "showing that their relationship to places of economic growth was as much symbiotic as catalytic" (p.287).

To our great benefit, Macmillan and Shapiro succeed in using their subject matter to the fullest and thus ful-

fil the book's potential. *Zion in Africa* is quite enlightening and accomplishes what it sets out to do with great skill and insight and provides a welcome addition to other books dealing with Jewish communities in Africa, such as B.A. Kosmin, *Majuta: A History of the Jewish Community of Zimbabwe* (Gwelo, 1980); M. Kaplan, *Jewish Roots in South African Economy* (Cape Town, 1986); G. Saron and L. Hotz (eds.), *The Jews in South Africa: A History* (Cape Town, 1955); G. Shimoni, *Jews and Zionism: The South African Experience, 1910-67* (Cape Town, 1980); I. Suttner (ed.), *Cutting Through the Mountain: Interviews with South African Jewish Activists* (London, 1997); S. Mendelsohn, *The Jews of Africa* (New York: 1920); and J. Williams, *Hebrewism of West Africa: from Nile to Niger with the Jews* (New York, 1967). *Zion in Africa* may be best categorized in the field of social history and the reader should find the biographical details valuable and interesting.

By the 1960s most Jews left Northern Rhodesia. Although the Zambian Jewish community of the 1990s is much smaller that it used to be following World War II, it still exists and should be recognized as Zambian Jewry. *Zion in Africa* makes a substantial contribution to our understanding of a Jewish community in Africa. Specialists in Jewish Studies may welcome this book for the information it presents on this little-known topic. This volume may be also valuable to readers interested in immigrant communities or to economic development on this continent. Finally, *Zion in Africa* should find its place in every college and university library.

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