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The Reb and The Rebel

Gwynne Schrire has an institutional knowledge that could sink a national archive. A prolific historian, researcher, writer and editor, her contribution to the canon of South African Jewish history is priceless. In this, her latest project: *The Reb and The Rebel*, Gwynne (Schrire) Robins and her cousin Carmel Schrire, Distinguished Professor of Anthropology at Rutgers University, USA, have edited translated manuscripts of Reb Yehuda Leib Schrire, originally written in Pre-Ben Yehuda Hebrew, and the humorous memoir of his youngest son, Harry, whose left-of-centre approach to life is as *dafka* in its irreverence as his father's was in its orthodoxy.

Below, Gwynne (Schrire) Robins introduces excerpts from the book

Here is the old man, the Reb Yehuda Leib, describing his passage to Africa, starting from the time he went to stay with his parents in Oshmany while he obtained specialist qualifications.

It is shameful for a person like me to ask for charity from poor people who are not [even] able to fulfill their own needs. I was very upset and my heart broke from the shame.

Then the ticket to South Africa arrives:

I stood in the middle of all this crying and horror and looked at the walls of my house and sometimes at my sweet wife, who was covered in tears, and all the ones around me clutching the edges of my clothes.

He takes a carriage to the station and catches the train:



Yehuda Leib Schrire, 1897, probably wearing the formal outfit made for him in Johannesburg five years earlier. (Credit: Shoshana Shapiro collection)

For about a whole day I sat at my place in the compartment with men and women. Most of them were going to America. Children and women wore torn clothes and lay down barefoot on bags, their clothes around me. This one stands and this one eats and that one drinks. My heart was torn to pieces from what I could see in front of me.

Then in Vlissingen Holland, he boards the *Dunbar Castle*: The bunks started to turn from side to side and the tables and chairs overturned. All the crockery and glass dishes broke to smithereens and their crates and bundles were shaken and moved from one end to the other. In a split second seasickness, like a destroying angel, hit them. This one was vomiting from his bed and that one opened his mouth to vomit. Great sounds



The Schrire family, Cape Town, 1911. Standing L. to R. Sam, Annie, Harry, Max. Seated L. to R. Gela with David, Yehudi Leib with Isidore (Isch) Rebecca with Theodore (Toddy) (Credit: C. Schrire collection)

of moaning and crying could be heard. Not one of us could stand on his feet to relieve his friend's symptoms by passing one another water or vinegar. Everyone was lying down sick and the boat was in turmoil because of the strong stormy winds. How horrible that night was! We saw with our own eyes how death was coming closer. In a little while we were all going to be food for the seal

Then a train from Cape Town to the terminus Vereeniging and then a mule cart to Johannesburg

They spread a covering over the wagon that turned and rattled from one side to the other upon the sharp slippery stones lying all along the way. The wings of the wind carried a very fine dust that covered the wagon and its travellers like smoke passing through an unsown field. I tried hard to hold my body tightly to the rail of the roof so that I would not fall to the ground After about 20 Russian *versts* we came to a station where they changed mules, only I could not see the light of day because I had about a finger's depth of dust on my face and on my clothes, my hair and my lips, and I could feel pebbles crushing my teeth.

Then he meets the Park Shul committee

The next day the heads of the community came to talk to me and see my face. They spoke to me in the Ashkenazi language to which they were not accustomed and they were all people of trouble. They were shaven! They had no payot! They asked me to cut my beard and my long hair!

I heard their words and I was amazed. My heart told me the future. These were not the kind of people with whom I should associate.

This is the voice of his son, the rebel, born in Cape Town:

My grandfather's brother in Oshmany, in the last century, was friendly with the local *Graf*, who would ask my great uncle to play a game of billiards. The genes of this uncle were passed on to me. I became a bit of a champion at the game in Edinburgh. My winnings at snooker and billiards helped to pay for my lodging.

After his mother caught the 1901 plague,

the family moved to Frankfurt, Germany

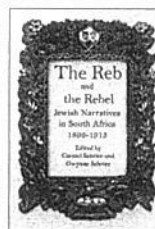
At kindergarten one of the lads called me "ein verdampfer Boer", and automatically received a punch from me. The next day my mother got a red *warnung tzett*. I was threatened with expulsion. It transpired that fighting was not encouraged at this high-class school, especially since this lad was a Rothschild.

There was a recession after the war, and they had to return to Cape Town — and bankruptcy

I was rather hot stuff, and was honoured with most of the important solos, until another alto, Halperin, stole some of my glory by alternating with me. This did not suit me. During one festival, when he was doing my part (pretty well, I admit), I stuck a pin into his soft parts. He jumped and yelled. The choir master caught hold of my ear, and that was the end of me. Besides the buffeting from him, I received another dose at home. I had my revenge the following Sunday. With the help of our Harrington Street gang, we hid in the narrow lane, opposite the coloured church, waiting for Leopold to come riding down our street on his bicycle, as usual. This lane was stacked with boxes of bad eggs, placed there by Mr Fagan the egg dealer, to be collected by the dirt cart on Monday morning. We let him have it. We did not stop to see the mess, but quickly disappeared. He lodged a complaint with my father but nothing was proven. Our gang and I had a rough time in the choir afterwards.

Harry was expected to conform to his family's religious standards, and when his parents went out, the housemaid was expected to check that he prayed. On his mother's return, the maid would often report, "Nee. Master Harry het nie gedaven nie."

Aside from its historical value the book offers a study of Jewish identity in South Africa both particular to its time and universal in its emotion.



The Reb and the Rebel: Jewish Narratives in South Africa 1892 - 1913 by Carmel Schrire and Gwynne Schrire is available at the SA Jewish Museum bookshop or from Exclusive Books.

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In August the Kaplan C for Jewish Studies Research at UCT will be the leading power couple in Jewish academia.

Ruth Langer and Jorjanna Sara are stars in their respective fields. Recently described by Jewish Telegraphic Agency as a "rock star Jewish historian" she is the foremost scholar in the field of American Jewish history, frequently asked to contribute by the New York Times and other media.

In addition to his prodigious winning output as a historian, he has had a major hand in the next generations of Jewish leaders as chair of the Program for Jewish Leadership at Brandeis University and seminars in Cape Town. A lecture on the plight of Jews in the United States they are likely to vote and another on the future of Jewry.

Ruth Langer, who teaches at Brandeis College, is a distinguished speaker in her considerable expertise in Jewish and Christian-Jewish relations. Her books have focused on the

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