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# High praise for SA Jewry at Mauritius reunion

SUZANNE BELLING AND DAVID SAYS

**A**mid scenes reminiscent of *Schindler's List*, an emotional reunion of 50 former Jewish detainees and their families on Mauritius brought to life the plight of over 1 500 Jews who had been interned on the island, having been refused entry into Palestine by the British during the Second World War.

The reunion last week took the form of a memorial service outside the Jewish cemetery, a visit to the original place of detention - a forbidding prison built in Napoleonic times - and a Yom Ha'atzmaut reception, hosted by Menashe Zippori, Israeli Ambassador to six African countries, including Mauritius.

The role of the South African Jewish community, as chronicled by one of the detainees, Dr A Zwerghbaum,



*An emotional Naphthali Talmann at the grave of his grandfather, whose yahrtzeit was on the day of the reunion. He is comforted by his wife and Rabbi Moshe Silberhaft.*

was quoted by Mervyn Smith, national president of the SA Jewish Board of Deputies: "More than material... it was the readiness to help, the sympathetic and friendly attitude that made us happy."

"One can readily say that the South African Jews took better care of us than we really deserved. "...If all Jews had done their duty as the Jews of South Africa had, then the situation of the

Jewish people today (1941) would have been a different one." During the five long years that the Jews were kept on Mauritius, awaiting entry into

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Palestine, the Board of Deputies formed a committee to look after their interests, sending food, clothing and other provisions, especially copies of the *Zionist Record* newspaper, to keep them informed of developments in what was to be the Jewish State.

"They were absolute Zionists," Smith told *Jewish Report*. "They hung onto every word printed about Palestine

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and most of them came from Israel, where they made their home, for the reunion."

During the first three years of incarceration, men and women were separated - a woman was not permitted even to see her dying husband. Only after three years was the policy relaxed, followed by the birth of 80 babies on the island.

A total of 127 people died in detention, mainly from tropical diseases. The cemetery where they were buried was later handed over by deed of grant to the Board of Deputies, which has supervised its maintenance to date.

Rabbi Moshe Silberhaft, spiritual leader of the African Jewish Congress, who was present at the reunion, told of his discovery of the deterioration of the old tombstones, with the lettering on them about to be lost for posterity.

He left the old stones intact, but also affixed new small granite stones, bearing all the updated information. Nineteen of the stones were consecrated during the ceremony - the remaining 108 require additional research, including Hebrew names, for consecration at a later date.

The maintenance and updating of the cemetery are being funded by the South African Jewish community through the Chevrah Kadisha.

The visit to Beau Basson, the prison where the detainees had been held, was for many emotionally shattering.



**Mervyn Smith, national president of the SAJBD and chairman of the AJC, meets Ruth Sitton, a former detainee who ironically survived the Holocaust through the intervention of Adolf Eichmann.**

*Report* that several women began crying hysterically as the

trauma of those times was forcibly brought back to them.

Only the men's concrete cells remain today. Women were kept in tin shackles which have long since been demolished. In total, the detainees spent four years and seven months living in these circumstances.

The day abounded with poignant reunions and everyone seemed to have a story to tell.

Perhaps the most remarkable was that of Ruth Sitton (formerly Flesch), who lived in Vienna during the Nazi occupation. Jews were being deported from Europe on Nazi instructions, but there had been no place on the transport for three-year-old Ruth to leave with her father.

"No more young children," the father had been told. He refused to leave without his daughter. When he went to the Jewish communal agency, he was asked by Adolf Eichmann, who was then in charge, why he had not left.

When Flesch explained the situation, Eichmann gave an immediate telephonic command that both father and daughter should be accommodated. This ironically saved Ruth from the

Holocaust and led to her subsequent relocation to Mauritius. One elderly woman returned to Mauritius solely to visit the grave of Dr Oscar Wagner, a fellow detainee who had treated her when she had diabetes.

During the day, detainees were reunited with one of the doctors who had tended them and who still lives on the island.

The reunion - largely organised by the Friends of Israel in Mauritius (*Amicale leMauricie de Israel*) - was attended by numerous local and foreign dignitaries, including the Acting President of Mauritius, Anjimi Chettiar, and Israel's honorary consul-general for Mauritius, Naphali Regev, who was one of the children born to refugees in detention on the island.

**Shabbat times**



7 May/21 Iyar

Starts	Ends
17:16	18:06 Johannesburg
17:42	18:34 Cape Town
16:59	17:50 Durban
17:19	18:10 Bloemfontein
17:14	18:06 Port Elizabeth
17:06	17:58 East London

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