

# High praise for SA Jewry at Mauritius reunion

**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 took the form of a memorial service in 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 Zwergbaum, 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 in Mauritius, awaiting entry into 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 said "They hung onto every word printed about Palestine.

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. Then followed 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 updating of the cemetery was funded through the efforts of Chief Rabbi CK Harris by the various Chevrah Kadishas.

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

Rabbi Silberhaft reported 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 shacks which have long since been demolished. In total, the detainees spent four years and seven months living in these circumstances.

The day abounded with



Mr Mervyn Smith, National President of The SAJBD and Chairman of the AJC, Rabbi Moshe Silberhaft Spiritual Leader of the AJC & Mr Baby Soopaya Curpens, Honorary Consul General of Israel in Mauritius at the gates of the St Martin's Jewish Cemetery.



Mervyn Smith meets Ruth Sitton, a former detainee who ironically survived the Holocaust through the intervention of Adolf Eichmann.

## What we need ...

Inspiration not irritation, education not seduction, appreciation of the good that is not assumption that all is evil. We need respect, not cynicism, faith not hopelessness. What we need today is stability in our homes and not merely stop-overs to eat, change our clothing and sleep. We need values that are lasting, and not those that only have instant glamour.

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modated. 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 Maurice de Israel) - was attended by numerous local and foreign dignitaries, including the Acting President of Mauritius, Anjini Chettiar, and Israel's Honorary Consul-General for Mauritius, Naphtali Regev, who was one of the children born to refugees in detention on the island.



Dylan Slome, flanked by his proud parents, Andrew & Cheryl and his sister celebrating his Barmitzvah - Mauritius.



Former Detainees and their families outside the Beau Basson Prison Camp where they were held during their detention in Mauritius.

Just before Rosh Hashanah, a team of terrorists invades the shul and takes the rabbi, the cantor and the shul president hostage.

Hours later, the governor stands tough, he won't give them a million dollars, nor a getaway car nor a Jumbo jet. The terrorists gather the three hostages in a corner and inform them that things look bad and they're going to have to shoot them. Nevertheless, to show that they're not really a bad bunch, they'll grant each hostage one wish.

Please, "says the rabbi, "for the last two months I've working on my Rosh Hashanah Sermon. What a waste to die now without having delivered it before an audience. I'll go happily if you let me recite my sermon. It's an hour - ninety minutes long, tops."

The terrorists promise to grant the wish "Please," says the cantor, "after 50 years I've finally gotten the Hinneri prayer just right. What a waste to die and not sing it to an audience. It's only about 45 minutes long-then I'll go happily."

The terrorist promise to grant the cantor his wish, too, and they turn to the shul president. "Please," says the president with tears in his eyes. "Shoot me first!"

## Joke of the year

The results of a computerized survey indicated that the perfect Rabbi preaches exactly 15 minutes. He condemns sin but never upsets anyone. He works from 08:00 until 24:00 and is also a janitor. He makes R300 a week, wears good clothes, buys good books, drives a good car and gives about R300 weekly to the poor. He is 28 years old and has preached for 30 years. He has a burning desire to work with teenagers and spends all of this time with senior citizens. The perfect Rabbi smiles all the time with a straight face because he has a sense of humour that keeps him seriously dedicated to his work. He makes 15 calls daily on congregation families, shiva houses and the hospitalized and is always in his office when needed.

If your Rabbi does not measure up, simply send this letter to six other synagogues that are tired of their Rabbi too. Then bundle up your Rabbi and send him to the synagogue on top of the list. In one week you will receive 1 643 Rabbis and one of them will be perfect. Have faith in this procedure. One congregation broke the chain and got its old Rabbi back in less than three weeks.