South African Jews enjoy safety, freedom, opportunity in Austin

By Tonyia Cone
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M irroring the increase in Austin’s population, the city’s Jewish community is enjoying expansion. Likewise, as Austin’s technology industry and the University of Texas at Austin attract residents from around the world, many members of the city’s Jewish community hail from outside the United States.

Ron and Barbara Goldkorn

PHOTO BY CHAD HARLAN
Ron and Barbara Goldkorn in their Austin shop, Sew Much More.

When Ron and Barbara Goldkorn’s children were 12 and eight years old, the couple no longer felt their family was safe. Surrounded by crime and racial tension in Johannesburg, South Africa, the family felt they were constantly under a cloud of the threat of violence, so they began looking for a new home.

Ron Goldkorn had a friend in San Antonio and, while visiting that city, had the opportunity to check out Austin. The weather and landscape reminded him of South Africa, he found people here friendly and he thought it would be a great place for his family.

His only hesitation about moving here came from a visit to the Jewish Community Center. While the family was used to being surrounded by Jews and could easily find Jewish food like teiglach, a dessert, and kigel, a sweet cracker served with chopped herring, in South Africa, they moved here.

Ron Goldkorn was told there was no active Jewish community in Clerksport, a town of 100,000 people about two-and-a-half hours from Johannesburg, gave him a sense of being Jewish, explained that her family had taught Bible and Jewish studies at a convent, and while Jewish students were taught Bible and Jewish studies by a parent when other students went to church, she once had the opportunity to perform the role of Jesus in a school play.

“My best friend, who was also Jewish, was Mary,” Kahn said.

The Jewish community in Clerksport was cohesive. An Orthodox and a Reform synagogue were available to those who wished to worship, and Kahn’s family belonged to the Orthodox congregation.

“My parents were aware of how assimilated our lives were so they insisted that we attend synagogue at least once a week,” Kahn said.

Fridays were an important family night at her synagogue, and Kahn’s family always had Shabbat dinner. She was also a member of Habisnon, a Zionist youth group.

“I had a strong sense of being Jewish, even though many of my friends weren’t Jewish,” Kahn said, explaining that her sense of Jewish identity came from her home environment.

When Kahn was 16, her family moved to a very Jewish neighborhood in Johannes- burg. She dated Jewish boys and experienced a big difference in her social life in the city. She also began attending a secular private school.

Due to the uncertain future of the nation, Kahn’s parents encouraged their children to leave South Africa, and in 1985, at age 21, she moved to London.

“It wasn’t deliberate emigration,” she said. “It was more an adventure.”

At the time, many Jewish South Africans were leaving the country, and most went to the United States, Israel, Canada, Australia and England.

While in London, Kahn reconnected with her best friend, who was also Jewish, and they moved to Chicago.

Until a year ago, Kahn returned to South Africa. Her year to conduct business, and 18 months ago her husband and sons accompanied her. The family visited Kruger National Park and Cape Town, and the trip was a good opportunity for the boys to see where their parents grew up.

The boys, their mother said, have a sense of pride in their South African roots. While visiting there, the children enjoyed tasting differences in foods, like chocolate, and brought cricket bats and a love for rugby home with them. After her son’s bar mitzvah last year, family members and friends watched South Africa win the Rugby World Cup together.

“It was just the most incredible atmosphere,” she said.

While Kahn said she misses her roots and is sad that her children seldom get to see their grandparents or cousins, she has no regrets about moving here and has made connections in the local Jewish community. Her children attended the Austin Jewish Academy and her husband was the board president. She has been involved in the school, and the family belongs to Congregation Agudas Achim.

“What’s been wonderful about Austin is, we’re not the only ones with no family ties here,” Kahn said. “We have a relationship with other Jewish families. We’re each other’s surrogate families. It’s a unique community in that way. It makes it easy to integrate and get close.”

LARANE LASDON

Born and raised in Johannesburg, Larane Lasdon’s family members were at the top levels of government and brought a Jewish approach to South African arts, politics, business, medicine and law.

“We were at the top of the heap, being white in the (apartheid) days,” she said. “Jews took it even further, we especially.”

Jewish life in Lasdon’s community revolved around the boys and men. Her brothers attended Hebrew school and became b’nai mitzvah; she did not. Her family observed Shabbat together at home and attended High Holiday services. When about eight years old, Lasdon began school at a convent because private Catholic schools offered the best education.
Despite what she describes as a largely secular upbringing and having attended non-Jewish schools, Lasdon said being Jewish permeated her being.

“The idea of Jewishness never left you,” she said. “You couldn’t avoid feeling Jewish in an environment where your family was thoughtful. Being Jewish is in my consciousness even when I’m not doing anything Jewish.”

Jews played a leading role in dismantling apartheid in her home country, Lasd. said. Politicians Helen Suzman and Selma Brodie and artist William Kentridge are just a few of the Jews who touched many lives and made a personal impact on Lasdon while fighting apartheid.

All Lasdon’s Jewish friends were activists, she said, and as a student activist herself, Lasdon participated in marches, protests, sit-ins and anti-apartheid rallies and worked as a volunteer with children in crèches, or day-care centers. She worked for Suzman, a member of parliament, and Brodie, who was then the mayor.

“How can I stand here as a Jew and let people be segregated, herded, have to panicking every time his children play near each other, and neighborhood stores provided anything they might want to buy. Most of the people in Silver’s community observed kashrut, and the Jewish values of family and treating others with justice and kindness were important, especially during the era of apartheid (1948-1994). Observing Shabbat was important to her family, who also celebrated holidays together.

When Silver accepted a job at the Austin Jewish Community Day School (now called Austin Jewish Academy) in 2000, she was surprised at the different Jewish denominations present locally at “The J” by the Jewish Community Day School (now called Austin Jewish Academy) in 2000, she was surprised at the different Jewish denominations present in the Ahim community. They belong to Congregation Agudas Achim and Tiferet Israel, so she does not have to drive on Shabbat. She is also a teacher in the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School program, an international Jewish education program presented locally at “The J” by the Jewish Community Day School (now called Austin Jewish Academy).

As a volunteer, Silver said she had heard about Orthodox Jews and had preconceived notions of what she would be like. She received a letter from a seventh grader saying, “I thought you would be tied by the shackles of Orthodox Judaism, but I realized it wasn’t true.”

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