

Origins of the Jews in Zambia

“One of the forces that kept Jews together in extreme adversity was their common belief in the value of family – that unbreakable circle of affection, security, ritual.”

How We Lived – Irving Howe.

Most Jewish immigrants into Southern Africa arrived from the Baltic states of the Russian Empire in Eastern Europe. These included areas in Latvia, Lithuania, Ukraine, East Poland, and Belarus, collectively known as the Pale of Settlement. Established by Catherine the Great in 1791, the Pale was designated as the only area of the Empire wherein Jews were allowed to live, and for hundreds of years. Jews lived there under conditions of extreme poverty and persecution. They were usually forbidden to own land, and were severely handicapped economically. Surviving as best they could they engaged in minor trades and by and large had to live off their wits. Most of them lived in *shtetls*, a small town or village.



*A shtetl pedlar sells haberdashery to a discerning customer.
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Boy with kindling in a basement dwelling, Krochmalna Street, Warsaw, ca.1935-38. © Mara Vishniac Kohn, courtesy International Center of Photography



Young Jewish boys study under the watchful eye of their teacher, circa 1924. © Mara Vishniac Kohn, courtesy International Center of Photography

Eastern Europe was nevertheless famed throughout the Jewish world for its religious piety and scholarship. For Jews, the Bible, and its classic commentaries, was more than a source of wisdom; it infused the very reality of their day-to-day living.

At the start of the 1920s, many thousands of Jewish children orphaned by pogroms roamed the streets of the Pale of Settlement. Yet salvation is sometimes found in unlikely places. A successful Ukrainian Jewish immigrant to South Africa, Isaac Ochberg, embarked on a rescue mission: he travelled to Eastern Europe, and brought back to South Africa nearly 200 Jewish orphans. They were settled in the Oranje Jewish Children's Home in Cape Town and the Arcadia Jewish Orphanage in Johannesburg, while Ochberg took a continuing personal interest in their wellbeing. Cynthia Zukas, wife of Zambian freedom fighter and politician Simon Zukas, is Isaac Ochberg's granddaughter.



During World War One Lithuanian Jews are expelled and given three days to move to Russia.