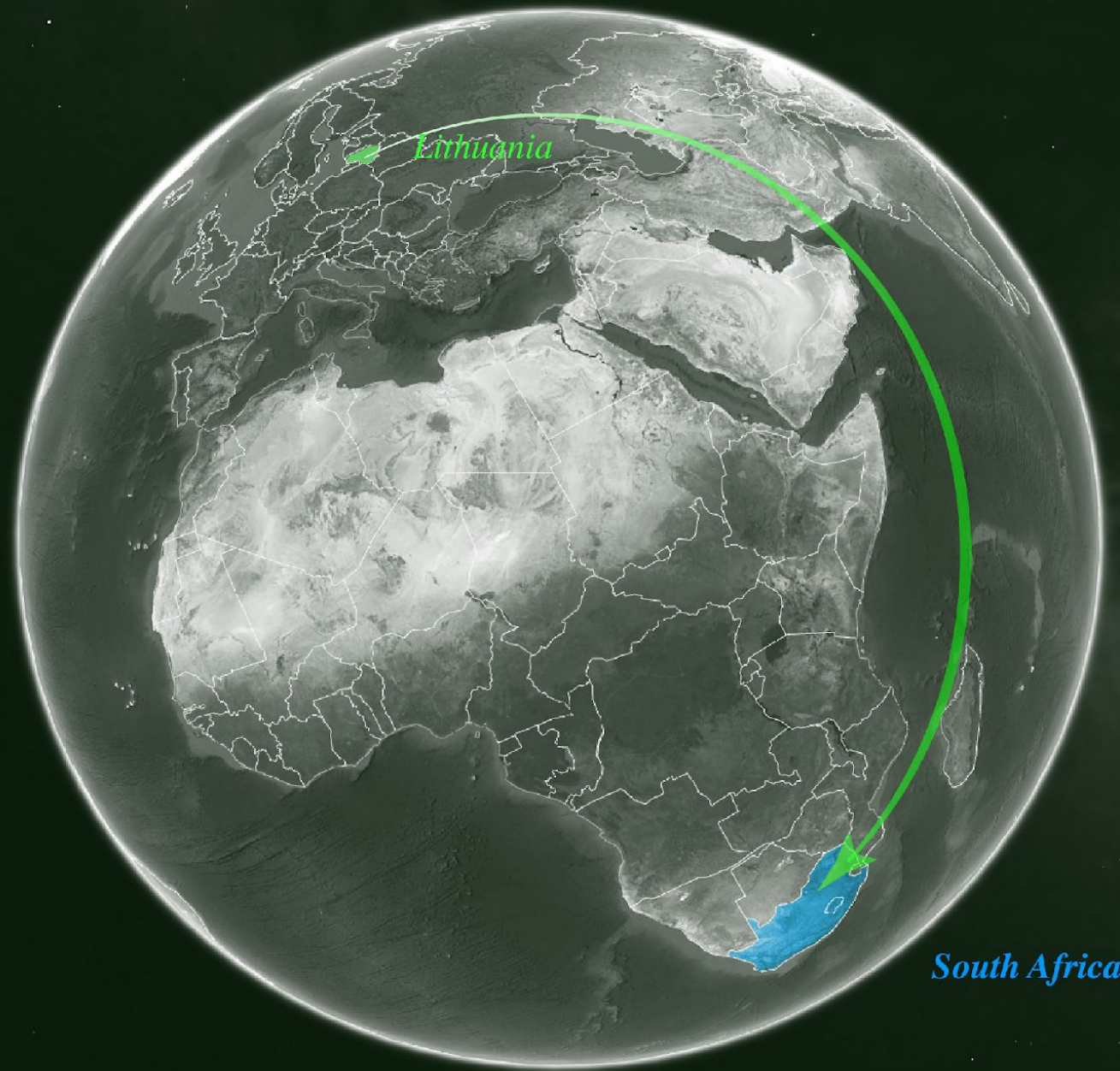


“Mattering Map”
Dan Jacobson and the
Mapping of *Heshel’s Kingdom*:
A Split / Screen Family Album

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Lithuania

South Africa

*...in leaving Lithuania for South Africa,
[this family] had exchanged an anonymous
death
at the hands of murderers for life itself.*

Heshel's Kingdom

— a family, a people, a divided fate —



DAN JACOBSON

Immigrant Arrival in Kimberley

Jacobson's mother – one of Heshel's nine children – grows up as a refugee immigrant in a suburb of Johannesburg; she marries, and “becomes the mother of three boys, the youngest of whom [Dan Jacobson himself] has just turned four years old.”

The family now moves to Kimberley, South Africa. Her husband, who has preceded her to Kimberley in order to find accommodation for his family, now waits “on the platform as the train pulls in.”



The older boys are greatly excited and start trying to pull pieces of luggage down from the racks overhead. My mother tries to calm them. In order to free her hands, she takes hold of her youngest son and passes him through the open window of the compartment into the arms of his father.

British Subject

This liminal image captures the moment of immigrant transition; the young boy passed through the window settles into his father's arms, and is thus ensconced into the opportunities of this new expansive culture – now we can see him as an incipient British subject.

Modern British Empire

For all the hardships they went through in the new country, and they went through many, they did not doubt that in leaving Lithuania they had exchanged night for the promise of day, superstition for the promise of reason, limitation and frustration for a hitherto unimaginable degree of personal freedom.



Kimberley, Early Morning Market

No. 5465 Published by R. O. Füsslein, P. O. B. 2282, Johannesburg.

Varniai Nowhere

Kimberley Somewhere

Nowhere to Somewhere

*To put it bluntly: like most Jews of my generation I believed that our parents and grandparents had come from Nowhere. They might occasionally refer to **der heim** in affectionately sentimental terms; they might even try to remind us that Vilnius had been so great a centre of Jewish learning it had gone by the name of the 'Jerusalem of the North.' Yet none of them wanted to go back there. So we knew we were right to think of it as we did. In migrating from Lithuania to South Africa they had moved from Nowhere to Somewhere.*

Somewhere not Nowhere

*It never occurred to us that in certain respects the opposite may have been true: that they had actually exchanged **Somewhere for Nowhere**. We could not imagine that Jewish Vilnius and Kaunas...might have been centres of a high civilization, compared with anything the immigrants would find in Johannesburg and Cape Town. Let alone in comparison with what awaited them in the tiny lost-in-space **dorps** in the **backveld**, where so many of them first made their homes.*

Ironies

Though culturally and linguistically diverse, the South African experience that matters in this account is English, while the Lithuanian part of Heshel's Kingdom, exists in Yiddish. What counts is now only English – even though the immigration of Lithuanian Jews to South Africa was facilitated by the designation of Yiddish as a European language, by a British Empire eager to bring more Europeans to settle there.

Personal Discoveries

Jacobson will now bring the now-gone world of Varniai to life in English prose. College-bound Jacobson himself will leap from margin to center, and spend the rest of his life in England.

A Common Patrimony

If one can discern anything resembling a common cultural patrimony in South Africa, it is to be found, I would suggest, precisely in a shared sense of dislocation, disruption, and confusion. The liveliest and most distinguished elements in the cultural self-consciousness of the country are by their very nature interstitial and reactive...

This hybrid cultural experience grows out of the encounter of peoples, and it subverts the 'official doctrine' that 'a "true" culture emerges only out of a jealously preserved separateness' that 'manages to keep itself inviolate,' and without contact with others.

Soundscape

Jacobson layers the visual mapping that generates a family album, in an auditory Soundscape, that elaborates the nuances of his narrative.

He begins with a familiar childhood sound experiment in front of the Kimberley diamond mines.

Kimberley Mining Pits



Aerial photograph of the Kimberley's Big Hole, 1937, Kimberley Mine. grahamlesliemccallum.wordpress.com.



Downtown Kimberley Seen from the West 2015. [Wikipedia](#).

I could never visit one of these pits without looking for something to throw into it. [Most] of these objects –stones, lumps of earth, bits of branch – simply went straight down; others I would throw up in the air, for the pleasure of seeing how they appeared to hang momentarily over the middle of the shaft before falling.

[Once] I tossed in a book I had been carrying in my jacket pocket. Call it an act of literary criticism. [Then] I waited for the sound [when] it hit the bottom.

Falling into the Pit Without Reverberation

Now try to imagine a man dropping a stone into a pit and waiting for a reverberation which never comes back to him, no matter how long he stands there. The thing that had been in his hand, that had hung briefly above the vacancy below, is dropping silently into a deeper silence. Let him leave the shaft, go elsewhere, sleep, work, eat, travel, watch television.

The stone is falling still, dropping further and further from the square of darkness which had yawned under it, before being transformed instantly into a square of light receding above it. Dwindling rapidly in size from something like a room to a box, a book, a postcard, a stamp, a pinpoint, the light has long since vanished. Still the stone drops, never meeting any resistance, never producing the sound of having at last come to a halting place.

*That is what the past is like:
echoless and bottomless.*

*Below them is a darkness
that gives back nothing.*

*Whatever was once Somewhere
has now become Nowhere.*

Split Screen / Hybridity

The Half-Light of Memory: Literature?

*Since I never met my grandfather, Rabbi Heshel Melamed,
I never lost him. For me he has always been one of the dead.*

Yet this grandfather he never met, – and never lost –
by the power of **the presence of his absence**, will launch
the narrator into the construction of the past.

[Grandfather Heshel] *always belonged to that region where shadows give way to unchanging darkness. How could we have met? I was born more than a decade after his death, in a country he never visited.*

With this account the narrator repays a debt for:

In fact, if he had not died prematurely, I would never have been born.

The emptied landscape becomes filled with history,
not in it's physical but in it's textual representation.

Memorializing the Cemetery

The granite memorial near the gate carries a strange message; one which is unlike those on the stones of similar size and shape at the 'mass massacre' sites. Below the Star of David appear the following words in Yiddish and Lithuanian:

UNTIL 1941 IN THIS PLACE [OYF DEM ORT]

THERE USED TO BE [IZ GEWEZEN]

THE JEWISH CEMETERY OF VARNIAI

*[In effect this memorial now] serves as a gravestone
for nothing less than the cemetery itself.*

*Here the inscription is telling us, where so many of the dead
have lain for generations, my grandfather among them,
there **had** been a cemetery once.*

*Though they lie there still, it is not to be described as
'the Jewish cemetery of Varniai' now.*

*It had ceased to be that in 1941,
when the community which 'it used to' serve was destroyed.*

In 1941 the people who should have been buried here went to their deaths anonymously, indiscriminately, and were thrown into the common pits and pyres which their killers had made them prepare beforehand.

*Since then – **no one**. That is why it is a cemetery no longer.*



Old Lithuanian Jewish Cemetery, January 1, 1970. [James and Sarah Talalay](#).

Mattering Map

Accident of Chronology

Rather than taking "credit for the accident of chronology," Jacobson acknowledges that:

*...encoded in the loops of DNA in every cell of my body
are discrete physical, mental and emotional potentialities
which are my grandfather's as much as mine;
mine because they were once his.*

I was no longer alone.

*I was in the middle of a group of children whom I knew
to be my mother's brothers and sisters.*

The sound of their voices as they speak reminds him
in his dream that:

Yet they were my children too.

תינוקות של בית רבן

Do we not hear an echo of the rabbinic comment

that it was the voices of the children in the village school

that God accepted as the guarantors of the Jewish people?



Heshel's Kingdom

- a family, a people, a divided fate -



DAN JACOBSON

For Murray + Sheila

with many thanks and
warm good wishes

Jan

Santa Cruz

5 February '98

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