

FROM KROONSTAD TO KILIMANJARO

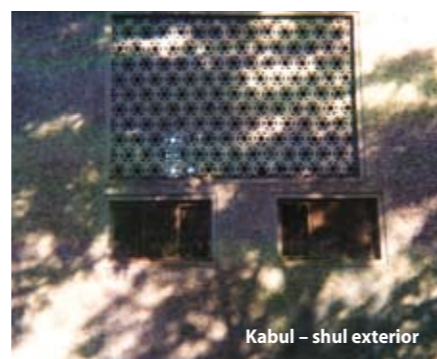
Solomon Gerber has travelled the world, literally!



Iraq – Ur – Where Abraham came from



Solomon Gerber



Kabul – shul exterior

SOUTH AFRICAN BORN SOLOMON Gerber immigrated to Australia over 20 years ago, and until about two months ago, he claimed the record of being the first, and possibly the only South African and Australian, to have been to every one of the 192 countries in the world. There have been a number of articles in the Australian press over the years about this. When South Sudan became the 193rd independent country, for a few months Gerber could no longer claim this record. To once more claim it, he travelled to SA on a recent trip via Nairobi, and made a trip from there to Juba, the capital of South Sudan.

“I was born in Kroonstad, where three generations of my family lived and were prominent members of the once thriving Jewish community in Kroonstad, which at one stage comprised 126 Jewish families. The last two Jewish male residents of Kroonstad, one of whom was Wally Goldsmith, my cousin, ran

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the family business there, which was established about 75 years ago. He passed away recently, leaving only four Jewish widows and one small family in the town.”

The large Kroonstad shul, which was built in 1936, was sold a number of years ago, and largely through the efforts of Goldsmith, part of the proceeds were used to purchase a small property that was converted into a small shul to accommodate about 40 people, Gerber

says. “The seats, the bimah, the ark, the foundation stones and all the memorabilia, particularly photographs and documents from the old shul, were transferred to the small shul. Services were held there from time to time, when a minyan could be obtained, and Goldsmith looked after it lovingly, and was there on most Friday nights, even though he may have been the only attendee.”

Gerber was concerned about the future of the new shul, and spent three days in Kroonstad investigating the possibility of it being retained as a memorial to the past members of the community. He is concerned that its fate will be the same as all the other shuls in small towns in SA, and be sold off and the artefacts stored, effectively ending the last remaining relic of the Jewish community in Kroonstad.

Gerber was returning to Australia after Yom Kippur, through Nairobi, and he planned to climb Mount Kilimanjaro as a side trip from

Nairobi. “As the planned climb and descent over six days was to take place during Sukkot, and the accommodation on the mountain during the climb was in either huts or tents, it occurred to me that it would be fitting to observe the festival as fully as possible by taking a lulav and etrog on the climb, and performing the mitzvah every day, and particularly on reaching the summit.” He purchased the lulav and etrog in Johannesburg before his departure.

“The weather during the first three days of the climb was very challenging and it was overcast, raining, windy and cold, and the sun and the summit of Kilimanjaro were not visible. Just before reaching the summit, the weather cleared for a cloud-free and sunny morning.

“On reaching the summit of Kilimanjaro, I put on my tallis and took the lulav and etrog and said the brochas and performed the ritual. I think I am the first person to have done this on top of Kilimanjaro, the highest mountain in Africa, and the highest free-standing mountain in the world, at over 19 000 feet.”

Gerber says summiting Kilimanjaro with lulav and etrog in hand was a momentous occasion. “I believe the change in the weather at that time, with views stretching endlessly in the distance, and looking down from a great height to the world below, in the brightest of sunlight, was to make the experience of the ritual even more meaningful.”

He says that although it is referred to as a climb, no particular climbing or mountaineering experience is necessary to reach the summit of Kilimanjaro. The 62-year-old, who says he is not very fit, describes it as a walk up a very steep gradient. “The ascent is about 1 000 metres a day, with the last 1 000-metre ascent to the summit typically, as in my case, commencing at about midnight and arriving at the summit at about 8am. This last part of the ascent is particularly steep and strenuous, as it is typically commenced after little or no sleep, and takes up the whole of the night. In addition, at that altitude, the air is very thin and oxygen-depleted, which can cause severe and life-threatening headaches and extreme nausea. The guides are instructed to ensure that climbers suffering these symptoms abandon the climb immediately and descend.”

During the climb, Gerber encountered numerous climbers who were much younger than him, who had abandoned the climb and were descending past him, either because of exhaustion, or because of the symptoms mentioned above. “Although I found it particularly strenuous, I fortunately did not have the slightest symptoms of a headache or nausea, even though most of the approximately 60 other people who made it to the summit were complaining of slight headaches and/or nausea.”

Gerber is particularly proud of his achievement. He concurs with the often expressed view that to successfully reach the summit requires as much, or more, mental than physical stamina. He ascribes a great deal of the fact that he reached the summit to his mental resolve to reach the summit and perform the mitzvah of the lulav and the etrog there. “It was this thought that was at the forefront of my mind as I trudged painstakingly slowly throughout the night to the summit.

“The sense of achievement after successfully having climbed Kilimanjaro is indescribable and is something that will last for a very long time. Although physical fitness is clearly an advantage, >

PHOTOGRAPHS: SUPPLIED

KILIMANJARO: HIGHEST MOUNTAIN IN AFRICA

Elevation: 19 340 feet | **Location:** Tanzania, east Africa

First Ascent: Hans Meyer (Germany), Yoanas Kinyala Lauwo (Tanzania), and Ludwig Purtscheller (Austria) on 5 October 1889



Solomon on top of Kilimanjaro



Baghdad – Shul exterior

“I HAVE VISITED SHULS THROUGHOUT THE WORLD, AND FOUND INTERESTING JEWISH CONNECTIONS IN THE MOST UNEXPECTED PLACES.”

determination and a positive attitude and frame of mind are the essential requirements, as many younger and more fit people are often less successful than older people. I hope that others will follow in my footsteps to enjoy the achievement, and I’m considering organising kosher climbs of Kilimanjaro in future years.”

Gerber has always had an adventurous spirit, and has experienced every conceivable adventure activity, from scuba diving below the sea through boating, sailing, bungee jumping, hang gliding, skydiving and everything in between, and even walking to the top of some of the other of the world’s high mountains. “I have now virtually completed my ‘bucket list’, leaving me to complete my pilot licence and PhD, both of which I have been working on for numerous years.”

Other than for interest, a large part of his travels throughout the world have been in search of Jewish history, roots and connections. “I have visited shuls throughout the world, and found interesting Jewish connections in the most unexpected places. For example, the second last country I visited before South Sudan was Afghanistan. There I met the last two male remaining Jews, who were looking after the shul, which was in a reasonable condition, taking into account the state of the country. I was given a 200-year-old shofar from the shul, which is now one of the treasured possessions of my travels through Jewish history.”

Having travelled extensively in Africa, Gerber has similarly found Jewish connections in places throughout the continent. “I

FAST FACTS:

- The name Kilimanjaro is thought to be a combination of the Swahili word Kilima, meaning “mountain”, and the KiChagga word Njaro, loosely translated as “whiteness”, giving the name White Mountain. The name Kibo in KiChagga means “spotted” and refers to rocks seen on snowfields. The name Uhuru translates as “freedom”, a name given to commemorate Tanzanian independence from Great Britain in 1961.
 - Kilimanjaro, the highest mountain in Africa and fourth highest of the Seven Summits, is considered the tallest freestanding mountain in the world, rising 15 100 feet from base to summit.
 - Kilimanjaro is composed of three distinct volcanic cones: Kibo 19 340 feet; Mawenzi 16 896 feet; and Shira 13 000 feet. Uhuru Peak is the highest summit on Kibo’s crater rim.
 - Kilimanjaro has 2.2 square kilometres of glacial ice and is losing it quickly due to global warming. The glaciers have shrunk 82% since 1912, and declined 33% since 1989. It may be ice-free within 20 years, dramatically affecting local drinking water, crop irrigation, and hydroelectric power.
 - It is mandatory to climb Kilimanjaro with a licensed guide and have porters carry your equipment.
- Source: *About.com*

was particularly interested in the work done by Rabbi Silberhaft throughout southern Africa, through the activities of the African Jewish Congress, as I have been to most of those places.”

The last country he visited before South Sudan was Iraq, after the fall of Saddam Hussein. He claims to have been the first “tourist” to the country. “I found two shuls in Baghdad and a handful of Jews still living there. I visited Babylon, which features so prominently in Jewish history. The last place I visited in Iraq was Ur. This is the place in the bible where our forefather, Abraham, is mentioned as coming from.”

Gerber often quips that his travels into Jewish history and places ended where it all began – Ur! **IL**