

# GOODBYE, ZIMBABWE

## The once-thriving Jewish community has all but disappeared

**BY MICHAEL ROSS** • "If Cape Town is the top deck of the Titanic for the Jews of southern Africa, then Zimbabwe is the boiler room below the waterline," my guide Malcolm observed during my last foray into Zimbabwe in 2001 as an agent of Mossad, the Israeli spy service. If that was so, then the boiler room is now empty.

Much attention has been paid to the plight of Zimbabwe's white and mostly Anglo farmers whose fields were seized under President Robert Mugabe's ill-conceived and disastrous land appropriation program. But the abject ruination the Mugabe regime has wrought on the small landlocked country has had other victims as well. As Zimbabwe's economy and quality of life have deteriorated, the number of Jews in a place once touted as the breadbasket of Africa and a showcase of interracial harmony and prosperity has been sinking, almost as fast as

the fated ocean liner now resting on the bottom of the North Atlantic Ocean.

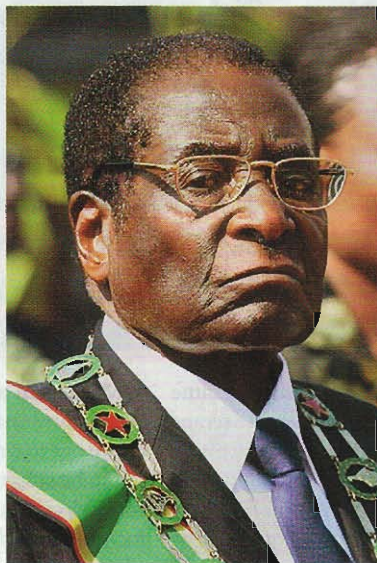
It's been a painful road to ruin, given how the community once flourished. During the time of the ever-expanding British Empire of the 19th century, Jews traversed South Africa into northern tribal lands, eventually settling into prosperous communities in cities such as Harare, Bulawayo and Kadoma, all in what is now Zimbabwe. They were the backbone of the business sector, establishing and owning commercial ventures ranging from retail stores to import-export firms. But then came the violent and turbulent period of Mugabe's fight to convert white-minority-ruled Rhodesia into the modern African state of Zimbabwe, and Zimbabwe's decline into an impoverished country that now has one of the lowest life expectancy rates and one of the worst HIV/AIDS infection rates in the

world, with some 3,500 people dying per week due to HIV/AIDS alone.

Zimbabwe's Jews, along with others, fled. From its peak of some 7,500 in the 1970s, the country's Jewish community today consists of some 200 souls, mostly in Harare but with a small core lingering in Bulawayo. The average age is over 70; some 25 of the eldest live in Bulawayo's Savyon Lodge, a Jewish geriatric centre that, remarkably, still serves kosher meals to its guests. Those that can still leave do, with most heading to families who have long departed for the less troubled for-

retrieve the Torah scrolls from the burning synagogue. Mugabe, once a comrade of the late Yasser Arafat, has added fuel to the already burning flames of anti-Semitism by allowing Palestinian and Iranian diplomats in Zimbabwe to exert a most undiplomatic influence on members of the government. Tag on the random muggings, violence, and property crime in a country with an unemployment rate hovering at around 80 per cent, and what's left of the community feels very beleaguered.

Zimbabwean native Dave Bloom, 54, describes the current situation in stark terms. "There are a handful of younger members," he says, "but within five to 10 years the majority of the older community will have passed. I cannot envisage a resuscitation even if a change of power were to happen." Bloom now lives in Israel, where he has become a sort of self-appointed archivist—maintaining a detailed database complete with multimedia



UNDER MUGABE, Zimbabwe has drastically deteriorated; (right) the Bulawayo synagogue in flames in 2003



mer colonies of Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, with others seeking sanctuary in South Africa and Israel.

The Jews that are left are not exactly made to feel welcome. The beautiful synagogue of Bulawayo was gutted by a fire in 2003, only to have the local press declare that Jews had been hoarding fuel and all sorts of treasures and foreign currency in the building. Unsurprisingly, the press made no mention of how some congregants risked death to

records, for future generations of Jews to whom Zimbabwe's community will be only a memory. "I'm trying to preserve as much of the story as possible, including pictures of every Jewish tombstone in Zimbabwe—a sort of virtual museum," says Bloom. He'll soon have very little work ahead of him. **M**

*Michael Ross's The Volunteer (McClelland & Stewart), about his years in the Mossad, recently appeared in paperback.*



### MAINE: HISTORY SUBJECT IS ANYTHING BUT DRY

Members of the Guilford Historical Society take their collection of old photos seriously. When it was learned that the father of society secretary Zarvin Shaffer took some to adorn a local restaurant, a heated meeting ensued. Tempers erupted. Shaffer allegedly punched society member Al Hunt and Shaffer's son reportedly pulled Hunt's wife's hair after she picked up a chair. The photos are back in the museum but a police probe is under way.