

## CHAPTER ONE - CONGO JOE ROLLNICK

Congo Joe!

We always knew that Congo Joe Rollnick was some sort of cousin of our mother Lily, the daughter of Wolf Rollnick of Wynberg, and that Joe had made a fortune in the Congo. And we knew that he had broken the bank at Monte Carlo, twice, and then gambled it all away, and committed suicide.

And it wasn't just our branch of these Wynberg Rollnicks that knew this. If you had Googled "Congo Joe Rollnick" a few years ago (before I started uploading things about him) you would have made only two hits. One was the following, from Jake Rollnick<sup>1</sup>:

*My great (great?[great?]) ) uncle was called Congo Joe Rollnick. He travelled up to the congo poaching elephant and selling their tusks around europe.*

*He had left his wife and kids in Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) and became an obsessive gambler.*

*Here comes my one claim to fame.....he broke the bank of Monte Carlo twice, and on both occasions lost it ALL.*

*I know, he may not sound like a very pleasant man. I once heard him being talked about (briefly) on the discovery. But they only called him Congo Joe, no Rollnick!*

*Cheers,*

*Jake*

Now Jake is the great-grandson of Lily Rollnick's brother, Roman. So if Lily was a sort of cousin so was Roman Rollnick, and Congo Joe could be a sort of great, great, great uncle of Jake.

But what sort of a cousin was Congo Joe to Lily and Roman and how did he make his fortune, only to lose it again?

You would have got some help from that second Google hit, material scanned from Eric Rosenthal's unpublished book "Rhodesia Jewry and Its Story"<sup>2</sup>.

Rosenthal's first Rollnick reference is to a report<sup>3</sup> that the Jewish

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bushcraftuk.com/forum/showthread.php?t=1438>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.zjc.org.il/images/RHODESIAN%20JEWRY%20AND%20ITS%20STORY%20%20Part%20Three.pdf>

Eric Rosenthal, (July 10, 1905 – 1983) was a South African historian and author. He was born in Newlands, Cape Town. He graduated with a law degree, later becoming a journalist and writer of many corporate histories. He was a member of the *Three Wise Men* on Springbok Radio's long-running quiz show, *Test the Team*.

<sup>3</sup> dated November 17, 1905 in the Bulawayo Chronicle

community of Bulawayo (then in Northern Rhodesia, now Zambia) had started a Relief Fund on behalf of distressed Jews in Russia, following the pogroms in Kishinev and Bialystok.

*“Within a few days a sum of £210 had been collected, including several outside gifts, £11. 11s from S. Robinson in Gwelo, £7.12.6. from Que Que, collected by H. M. Liptz [sic], and a third from far-away Kalomo, Northern Rhodesia, where Mr. Rollnick raised ten guineas.”*

Then, in the second reference Eric Rosenthal writes *“The fate of J.L. Rollnick is typical of the ups and downs of the pioneer settlers. Coming to Northern Rhodesia in the early 1900’s he entered into a trading partnership with Charles Solomon, but was almost ruined when his premises burnt down uninsured. Moving over to the Congo, he became associated with Lever Brothers, for whom he built up a business in vegetable oil and similar products, that helped to make him one of the wealthiest, if not the wealthiest man in Central Africa. At one time he was credited with owning over 1,000,000 (pounds) and, even if this were an exaggeration, there was no question of his ability and enterprise as a business man.*

*Of enormous physical strength, one of his favourite tricks was to tear in half a whole pack of playing cards. With his newly-won fortune he went overseas, to tour the most spectacular gambling spots in Europe, actually achieving the proverbial feat of breaking the bank at Monte Carlo! But alas, his fortune changed and, at that same resort, he ultimately speculated away every penny he possessed.*

*Confronted with the prospect of complete ruin, poor Rollnick committed suicide. It is a tribute to his personality that Lever Brothers both paid for his funeral and put up a memorial stone in his honour.”*

You might think that this is all one needs to know about Congo Joe but the reality is that Rosenthal’s book went unpublished for good reason.

Commissioned by the Rhodesia Board of Jewish Deputies<sup>4</sup>, the book was found to lack accuracy and to require a “tremendous effort of correction”.

The manuscript was shelved and found again only decades later. Even in the few lines above there are some errors. The first, trivial one is that Joe was J R Rollnick and not J L. But more important, when I

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<sup>4</sup>[Note from the Hon A E Abrahamson explaining the background to the manuscript]: The Rhodesia Board of Deputies established a Historical and Archives Committee in 1949/50 which was chaired by myself. Eric Rosenthal was commissioned to write a history of Rhodesian Jews. There was a long delay before we received it and the consensus was that to a great extent it lacked accuracy and it required a tremendous effort of correction. It was, therefore, decided to pend and shelve the manuscript. <http://www.zjc.org.il/showpage.php?pageid=16>.

enlisted the help of Diane Backhouse, archivist of Unilever, the successor to Lever Bros, she could find no trace of any relation between Joseph Rollnick and the Company, and no record of any monument having been set up nor any funeral having been paid for. And we now know that Joe died in Ostend, so maybe even the Monte Carlo story is out.

But a diligent search of the available records can add a great deal to what we know about Joe.

In the first place, we can easily solve the problem of his cousinhood with the Wynberg Rollnicks. I had found, searching for Joseph Rollnick on the web-site Ancestry.com, that Joe had married in 1910 a Mrs Rita Harris. I knew already that a marriage certificate often lists the names of the parents, so I decided to risk the £ 30 needed to get a copy of the certificate. The gamble paid off. The actual document appears on the following page.

Our Joseph Ralph Rollnick is the son of Myer Rollnick, merchant. Joseph was born in Lithuania in 1880<sup>5</sup>.

Now, a search of the Jewish Genealogy Lithuanian web site<sup>6</sup> shows only four references to a Meyer or Meer Rolnik in all of Lithuania. (We shouldn't worry about the spellings of Meer versus Meyer, or Rolnik versus Rollnick. The names become Anglicised from the Yiddish.) One of these references is adventitious, being a citation of a Meer, the father of Dina Rolnik, but this was her married name. The remaining three references are to the same person, Meer Rolnik, son of Josel. Here is one, recording the circumcision of Joseph's younger brother, Itsyk Leiba, "a circumcision did Benjamin Shakhnovich":

ROLNIK,	Meer, Josel	17/2/1885	Babtai	Circumcision date 24-Feb-1885, a circumcision did	Babtai	2288940 / 3
			Kaunas	Benjamin	1885	992
Itsyk Leiba	Leia	2 Adar 1 5645	Kaunas	SHAKHNOVICH. Father was a Taurage,Raseiniai district resident	M 3	LVIA/1226/1/1834

<sup>5</sup> According to a 1922 Belgian visa application, 31<sup>st</sup> October 1881

<sup>6</sup> <http://data.jewishgen.org/wconnect/wc.dll?jg-jgsys-allcountry2>



CERTIFIED COPY OF AN ENTRY OF MARRIAGE

GIVEN AT THE GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE

Application Number COL891682

1910. Marriage solemnized at *the Central Synagogue* in the Parish of *Marylebone* in the County of *London*

Column	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
No.	When Married	Name and Surname	Age	Condition	Rank or Profession	Residence at the time of Marriage	Father's Name and Surname	Rank or Profession of Father
42	<i>Thirteenth of December 1910</i>	<i>Joseph Robert Robinson</i>	<i>30 Years</i>	<i>Single</i>	<i>Superior Merchant</i>	<i>141, Dorset Street, Portman Square, London, W.1</i>	<i>Myer Robinson</i>	<i>Merchant</i>
		<i>Robert Morris</i>	<i>27 Years</i>	<i>Widow</i>		<i>141, Dorset Street, Portman Square, London, W.1</i>	<i>David Angelstein (deceased)</i>	<i>Banker</i>

Married in the *Central Synagogue* according to the *rites* of the *Jewish Religion* by *Leicester Charles Stone*  
 in the presence of the *Wedding Witnesses* *Charles Stone* and *Madame Stone*

This Marriage was solemnized between us  
*Joseph Robert Robinson*  
*Robert Morris*

CERTIFIED to be a true copy of an entry in the certified copy of a register of Marriages in the Registration District of St Marylebone Given at the GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE, under the Seal of the said Office, the 24th day of May 2010



MXE 917511

CAUTION: THERE ARE OFFENCES RELATING TO FALSIFYING OR ALTERING A CERTIFICATE AND USING OR POSSESSING A FALSE CERTIFICATE. © CROWN COPYRIGHT

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The second reference is to the parents' subsequent divorce (again, Meer's father is given as Yosel):

	Father, Grandfather	Date of Birth DD/MM/YY  Hebrew Date	Town	Comments	Place Recorded	Microfilm / Item
	Mother, Grandfather		Ujezd		Year	Image
	Mother Maiden Surname		Guberniya		Record #	Archive / Fond
Kedainiai Kaunas Kaunas	ROLNIK, Meer Yosel	Upina [Upynas]	35	Agreement;	Kedainiai  1886	2290147 / 1 137
11/5/1886 18 Iyar	TSVI?, Leya Dvora Orel Tsvi?	Darshunishok [Darsuniskis?]	25	wife's surname may be patronymic	Divorce	LVIA/1226/1/1717

The third reference is to the burial of Yitzchak Leib Rollnick, son of Meir, in the Kovno section of a New York City cemetery in 1913, at age 29<sup>7</sup>. This is the Itsyk Leiba whose circumcision record appears above. Meer is the father of Itsyk, while Josel is Itsyk's paternal grandfather.

Our Joseph is obviously named after his grandfather, Yosel, Meer's father. Now a great-grandson of our Wolf Rollnick had sent me a copy of my grandfather Wolf Rollnick's death certificate. Wolf, too, was recorded as a son of Yosel Rolnik, the same Yosel as had fathered Meer<sup>8</sup>. So Meer and Wolf were brothers and hence Lily and our Joe were true first cousins. Jake Rolnick is then a first cousin thrice removed from Joe, rather than a great-great-great-nephew, but he got pretty close.

And so then, how did Joe get from Lithuania to Rhodesia, and what about the Congo and all that money-making stuff? What happened to Joe after he married Rita, and who was Rita, anyway?

We need to go back to the beginning..... which is that Joseph's mother must have died soon after he was born (in October 1881) and that in 1884 Meer married again. Itsyk Leiba's mother Leya was this second wife, and Meyer and Leya had clearly a troubled relationship. As we saw above, they divorced only 15 months after Isaac was born. This is strange, after all. The usual reason for a divorce in such Jewish

<sup>7</sup> Name: J. Louis Rolnick. Hebrew Name: Yitzchak Leib Ben Meir. Birth Date: abt 1884 Death Date: 24 Sep 1913 Age at Death: 29 Burial Place: Queens, New York, United States. Comments: in memory of our beloved father/father of Libbie Other Comments: Cong. Nachal Itzchok Dorshe Tov Bobt Kovna / Path 8 Left, Gate 8 Cemetery: Mt. Zion Cemetery

<sup>8</sup> There was no other Yosel Rolnik of suitable age at that time in Lithuania to have been a father to these two young men.

families was if the marriage was childless. This marriage was not... a son, Itsyk, had been born to Leya.

Presumably Meer and Leya Dvora just did not get along. Maybe Leya Dvora was in a relationship with some other man. Indeed, Itsyk's mother re-married not long after the divorce, to a younger man, as the next item from JewishGem shows:

Babtai Kaunas Kaunas	VITEK, Yovna	Shimel 26		Movsha Eliyash	Babtai	
1/12/1887 27 Kislev	ROLNIK, Dvera	Pusolatas 28	wife divorced, ROLNIK could be profession	BURSHEIN Benjamin	1887	2231538 / 5
				SHAKHNOVICH Nisen ADLER	marriage	LVIA/1226/2107/671
					6	

So six-year old Joseph might have been living with a stepfather, in perhaps not as easy a relationship as he would have had with his own father, and this might explain why Joseph, as we shall see, left home so early.

Our next record is the single hit for "Rolnik" on the South African Rootsbank Web site<sup>9</sup>: Surname: Rolnik Data Source: Shipping Manifest 1895-1905

Official Number	76844
Ship's Name	Pretoria
Departure Date	12/12/1896
Contract Ticket Number	
Title	Master
Surname	Rolnik
First Names	J
Type of Passenger	Foreign
Class of Passage	Steerage
Destination Port	Cape Town
Occupation Nil	
Age Category	Male over 12
Age	15

This is our Joseph Rolnick arriving in South Africa at the end of 1896, having left home at age 15 and hoping to seek his fortune.

His uncle, my grandfather Wolf Rollnick, had arrived in Cape Town a few years before and was now settled as a dairyman and shopkeeper a few miles from the city in Wynberg, an independent town in pretty surroundings and with a rapidly growing community. Wolf's five daughters and three sons, most of them still at home at that time, would have provided a warm home and a refuge for Joseph. But he

<sup>9</sup> [http://chrysalis.its.uct.ac.za/CGI/cgi\\_RootWeb.exe](http://chrysalis.its.uct.ac.za/CGI/cgi_RootWeb.exe)

had his fortune to make, and like so many of his fellow immigrants, he soon moved north where the diamonds and gold were.

I found a file in the Transvaal Archives<sup>10</sup> containing an Extradition Order, written in High Dutch, that tells what happened next. Joseph Rollnick entered the Transvaal, then still an independent Republic, on 13th March 1897, that's just four months after he arrived in South Africa. The Entry Certificate in the file describes him as 6 feet 5 inches tall, scrawny, blue-eyed, with no beard or moustache. My mother, brother and one of my sons have those blue eyes. Well over six feet tall at 15½ years of age is quite the opposite of what one might have expected for a child from the shtetls of Lithuania. Oddly enough, he seems to have described himself as a German, born in Tilsit, just over the border from where his birthplace is given on his passport, Pagegai in Lithuania<sup>11</sup>. In another doubtful entry he is described in the Entry Certificate, presumably by his own attestation, as an apothecary. Already, not yet 16? Maybe he had merely been enrolled as an apprentice to a pharmacist, as all three of his male Wynberg cousins would later be.

Poor young man, he soon got himself into an awful scrape. While working on the Van Rhyn Estates<sup>12</sup> in Boksburg<sup>13</sup>, a mining town outside Johannesburg, a fellow worker Carl Praefke gave him £14.5s and his bicycle so that Joe could ride to the nearby town of Elandsfontein and buy for Carl an International Post Order. This £14.5s was a huge sum of money in those days, some £2,000 to £5,000 in today's terms<sup>14</sup>.

The temptation was too great for Joe. Carl never saw him again, nor the money nor the bicycle. That was on 7th November 1898. There followed a warrant for Joe's arrest and an order for his extradition to the Transvaal from the Cape Colony, where Joe was hiding, in Wynberg with his uncle Wolf. Luckily for Joseph, relations between the Colony and the Transvaal Republic were not too good at the time,

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.national.archsrch.gov.za/sm300cv/smws/sm300ds?20120521081800E65DB686&DN=00000000 depot tab sr/sn ssa type 0 system 01 reference ra3966/99 description staats procureur Pretoria. minute 6212/99 publieke aanklager Boksburg, re uitlevering van j rollnick.>

<sup>11</sup> On the records I have found for his later travels, he always describes himself as Lithuanian. Perhaps at that time in the Transvaal, with the President of the Republic negotiating with Kaiser Wilhelm against the British, it was better to be thought of as a German.

<sup>12</sup> Van Rhyn Estates: Charles Taylor Saner, born 1850 in Yorkshire, emigrated to Natal in the early 1870s and farmed at Verulam. After the Anglo-Zulu War, Saner joined a gold-mining company in the Transvaal and became manager of Van Rhyn Estates. His four sons served in the Anglo-Boer War.

<sup>13</sup> Boksburg: East Rand Mine is one of the deepest gold mines in the world, located in Boksburg South Africa. It has become one of the most important gold-producing towns on the Witwatersrand.

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.measuringworth.com/ukcompare/result.php>

with the Second Boer War soon to break out. The extradition order was rebuffed, with the Colony asking for affidavits from both the Elandsfontein and Germiston Postmasters. By the time the legal side of the extradition had been arranged, July 1899, Joe had already left the Colony for Bulawayo in Rhodesia. There was no Treaty of Extradition between the Transvaal and Rhodesia, so Joe was out of reach of the law.

Did Wolf Rollnick put his troublesome nephew on the train with a sigh of relief? Indeed, Joseph had another stroke of luck in that a regular train service from Cape Town to Bulawayo had only recently been established, else Joe would have had to use his bicycle to get from Mafeking, the end of the line a few years before, to Bulawayo.

But the outbreak of the Boer War detained Joe. Like many, but certainly not all, of his fellow Jews, Joe joined the British Army which the British forces under Colonel Baden-Powell had mustered in Mafeking<sup>15</sup>. Joe took part in the famous Siege of Mafeking, which lasted from 14th October 1899 to 16th May 1900 and he was wounded on 16 January 1900, just over 18 years old at the time<sup>16</sup>:

After the War, Joe returned to Bulawayo<sup>17</sup>, but he was still searching for his fortune and for adventure. By 1903 he is noted<sup>18</sup> as being in Lealui, and soon after (as we saw from Eric Rosenthal's account of him) in Kalomo (See the map on the next page). Joe's journeys from Bulawayo to Lealui and to Kalomo would not have been easy, since the railway got to Kalomo, in what is now Zambia, only in 1905. Until then, there was neither a train nor a regular stage coach service from Bulawayo to Kalomo, so Joseph had to walk across a rough terrain

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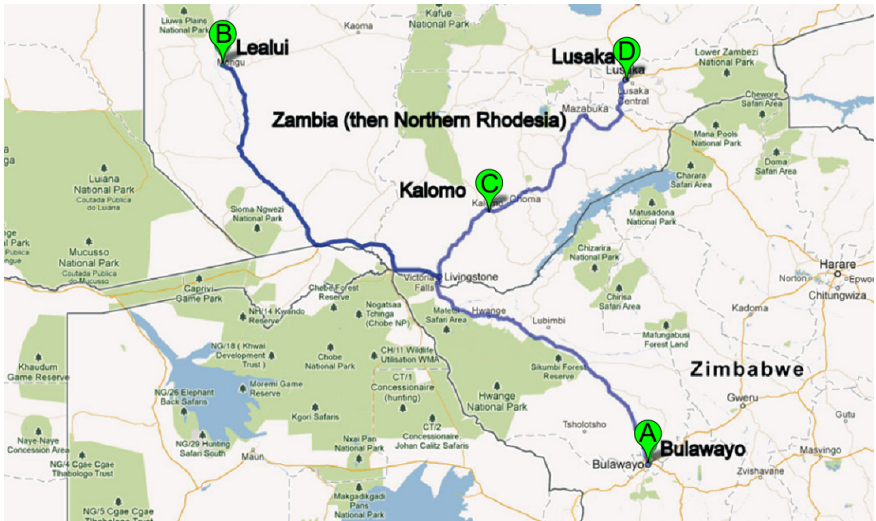
<sup>15</sup> Mafeking is a town in the Cape Colony, on the main railway line from Kimberley northwards through Bechuanaland (Botswana), 67 km southwest of Zeerust. On the outbreak of war, the town was garrisoned by some 1,200 British: from Rhodesia, from the Protectorate Regiment, British South Africa Police, Cape Police, Town Guard, Bechuanaland Rifles, Railway Detachment and Cape Boy Contingent - commanded by Col R.S.S. Baden-Powell. The town, well supplied with defences prepared for a siege, was under the immediate command of Lt-Col C.B. Vyvyan, Base Commandant. They were besieged by a force of some 7,000 burghers from the Potchefstroom, Lichtenburg, Marico, Wolmaransstad and Rustenburg commandos under Asst Cmdt-Gen P.A. Cronje. And see: <http://www.britishbattles.com/great-boer-war/mafeking.htm>

<sup>16</sup> The "notes" in the casualty list cite "Medical Staff". Does that mean that Joe was working as a member of the medical staff, or was it that they filed the report?

<sup>17</sup> Already in 1895, 92 Jews were living in Bulawayo and discussions to build a synagogue had begun. Cecil John Rhodes was quoted as saying at the time: "My country is all right if the Jews come, my country is all right!" "For he knew, that the presence of Jews meant they had faith in the commercial prospects of the new country. ...", writes Eric Rosenthal citing a Colonel Johnson.

<sup>18</sup> *An African Trading Empire :The Story of the Susman Brothers and Wulfsohn, 1901-2005*. International Library of African Studies (Volume 16) Hugh Macmillan: London. I.B. Tauris 2005





teeming with wild animals, using river crossings guarded by crocodiles, and be exposed to insects, snakes, ticks, sleeping sickness, and malaria.

Joseph is credited<sup>19</sup> with being the first trader in Lusaka (now the capital of Zambia), living there from 1906 to 1908 until he sold his pole and dagga store<sup>20</sup> to a fellow Jew, Benjamin Glasser. The difficulties of living in Lusaka at that time were well described by Benjamin's wife Frieda, who ran there a kosher home, when even the only supply of water was from a pool a long distance away or from the twice-weekly train.

Joe returned from Lusaka to Bulawayo only to run into further difficulties.

You will remember Rosenthal's description of the fire that destroyed the store that Joe and Charles Solomon had built and run. In the "Bulawayo Chronicle" of 10 July 1908 there is an official notification that Salomon<sup>21</sup> & Rollnick (a partnership with C. Salomon in Broken Hill, a trading post 90 miles north of Lusaka, and elsewhere in North Western Rhodesia) had been dissolved, with Rollnick taking over all the assets from Salomon. The next firm date we have for Joe is 7th March 1909 when, in Broken Hill, he was a witness to the will of his

<sup>19</sup> Zion in Africa : the Jews of Zambia; Hugh Macmillan and Frank Shapiro. London: I.B. Tauris 1999.

<sup>20</sup> The traditional housing material of the African population. See [http://www.zambia-travel-guide.com/bradt\\_guide.asp?bradt=498](http://www.zambia-travel-guide.com/bradt_guide.asp?bradt=498)

<sup>21</sup> Here recorded as Salomon, not Solomon as Eric Rosenthal wrote. My search of the Minutes of the Bulawayo Jewish Congregation (in the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People, Jerusalem. <http://sites.huji.ac.il/cahjp/>) showed the names of both C. Solomon and C. Salomon as playing an active part in the little community, Solomon mainly before 1903, Salomon thereafter, but never the two of them at the same meeting. Perhaps these were the same person.



*What would be Pioneer Street,  
Salisbury (Harare) as it was in 1892*



*Main Street, Salisbury 1915*

friend and co-trader, Eli Susman<sup>22</sup>. This early contact with Eli Susman was to play a big part in Joe's future<sup>23</sup>.

Joe's first step towards that future was to marry a rich widow. You will remember that in that £30's worth of Joe's marriage certificate, his wife was recorded as the widow Mrs Rita Harris. Her late husband, Henry Harris<sup>24</sup>, had arrived in Rhodesia in 1893, aged 35, and had soon built up a successful business in Salisbury (now Harare), the southern centre of Rhodesia, trading as H. Harris and Company.

Henry was listed amongst the Salisbury residents who met in 1895 to discuss the building of the first synagogue and he contributed ten guineas to the building fund. He had been active in other local affairs,

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<sup>22</sup> Described in "An African Trading Empire :The Story of the Susman Brothers and Wulfsohn, 1901-2005". The book treats Elie Susman's spectacular life and history in great detail. Susman was gravely ill at the time of his will but recovered to live out a long life. Macmillan speculates that Joe may have been the first trader also at Broken Hill (in addition to Kalomo and Lusaka, as noted previously).

<sup>23</sup> Eric Rosenthal (*loc. cit.*) writes: "When in 1908 the town of Livingstone [see the map above..wds] was founded, the original inhabitants included the brothers Eli and Harry Susman who set up as "Susman Brothers & Davis", the first butchers beyond the Zambezi. The venture was a success, and led not only to the expansion of the export business in cattle, but to the gradual building up of a chain of shops, mills and other businesses extending right across Northern Rhodesia. The first Jewish wedding in the territory was that of Harry Susman to Miss Grill in 1910. Twenty years later Eli moved to the Union [of South Africa...wds], where he and Max Sonnenberg started the South African Woolworths organization. Harry passed away at the age of 76 in 1952, followed in 1958 by his brother, at the age of 78. Both left considerable amounts to public purposes, Jewish and non-Jewish."

<sup>24</sup> Henry was one of (at least) two brothers who had emigrated from Kovna, Lithuania to England. From there Henry went, as we have seen, to Rhodesia while his brother Samuel went first to the USA and then to Canada. One of Samuel's sons, Sydney Harris, became a judge in Toronto and was very active in Jewish causes in Canada, National President of the Canadian Jewish Congress from 1974 to 1977. A grandson of Samuel, Jeff Rose, provided me with much information about the family in Canada. The UK and Canadian families were in close contact over the years. Joe's granddaughter writes: "Yes I once met Sidney Harris from Toronto – a rather large and friendly man."

a member of the Chamber of Commerce and a City Councillor of Salisbury. In 1901 he returned to England and at the Royal Hotel in Cardiff, Wales, married Rita, the youngest daughter and 12th of the 13 children of Louis and Henrietta Fligelstone of that town. Rita was born Rebecca in Cardiff in 1877<sup>25</sup>. In the UK Census of March 1901, Rebecca was listed as living single, aged 23, in the Grand Central Hotel in London (presumably preparing for her marriage on the 29th of May)<sup>26</sup>. A contemporary newspaper records that the bride wore a dress of ivory duchesse satin trimmed with chiffon and Honiton lace and pearl embroidery, and wore a diamond pendant and bangle, the gift of the bridegroom, and that their honeymoon was to be spent on the continent.

This afternoon were celebrated the nuptials of Mr Henry Harris, of Salisbury, Rhodesia, and Miss Rita Fligelstone, youngest daughter of the late Mr L. Fligelstone, of Canton. The ceremony, which was attended with all the picturesque Hebrew ritual, was performed at the Royal Hotel, Cardiff, the officiating rabbis being Rev. P. Wolfers and Rev. H. Hamburg. The bridesmaids were Miss Stella Margolies, Leicester, and Misses Annie and Beatie Ford, London. Mr J. Ford acted as best man, while Masters Reggie Ford, Ralph Fine, and Theo. Fligelstone attended as page boys. The bride wore a dress of ivory duchesse satin trimmed with chiffon and Honiton lace and pearl embroidery, and wore a diamond pendant and bangle, the gift of the bridegroom. The bridesmaids wore white china silk dresses, with lace insertions, and picture hats trimmed with chiffon and white feathers.

Following the ceremony a reception, attended by the leading Hebrew residents of Cardiff, was given in the banqueting hall of the hotel. The presents, of which there was a large number, were very choice. The honeymoon will be spent

Their first child, Moss Leslie Harris was born in London in June 1902. Perhaps Rita hesitated to give birth in far away Rhodesia. Nevertheless, Henry, Rita and little Leslie returned to Rhodesia where a daughter, Natalie, was born in 1904.

The family went back to the UK for a visit in July 1907, but soon after their return Henry suddenly died<sup>27</sup>. On the fly leaf of the Siddur

<sup>25</sup> The Fligelstone family, originally from Poland was well established in Cardiff, living at 110 Cowbridge Road. Rita's father Louis and her mother Hannah were already in England in 1861. Louis was a pawnbroker, and the family lived surrounded by other Fligelstones. Rita's brother Isidore had extensive mining interests in South Africa and Rhodesia and had lived in Rhodesia for a time. It was presumably through him that Rita and Henry were brought together. And from Joseph and Rita's granddaughter: "Now I always understood that Isadore Stone (Fligelstone) had been to Rhodesia when the diamond mines were being opened up. He certainly made money from them. Whilst there he would have met Henry Harris and probably thought he should introduce his sister! He certainly visited whilst Rita was married to Henry." For this, see the Jewish Chronicle May 1 1903.

<sup>26</sup> Henry was staying in the same hotel on the night of the 1901 census, as were the Fords, Rita's brother-in-law and sister. They were the owners of the hotel.

<sup>27</sup> From the Rhodesia Herald Friday 6 November 1908, "The late Mr Harris had only some five weeks ago returned to Salisbury from a trip to Europe apparently in the best of health. A few days ago he was not feeling very well but was able to get about, and it was not until Tuesday that he took to his bed. Yesterday [4 November] his illness took a serious turn and in spite of every attention by Drs Moore, Appleyard and Eaton he died soon after 5 o'clock." The death certificate states that Harris died of heart disease, having suffered from this for many years and from uraemia (duration of illness eight hours).

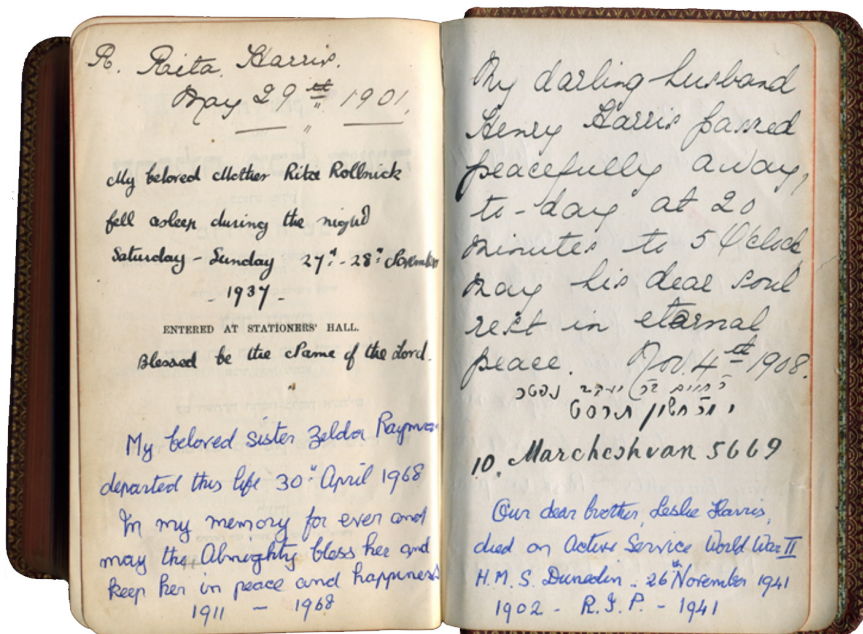


Henry Harris and his two children with servants in Salisbury 1908



The two little Harris children and their nurse-governess, 1906?

(book of Jewish prayers) that Rita had received on her wedding day, she writes sadly "My darling husband Henry Harris passed peacefully away, today at 20 minutes to 5 o'clock. May his dear soul rest in eternal peace. Nov 4th 1908." And she adds in Hebrew his name and patronym, Chaim ben Yaakov.



(Later entries are by Zelda Rollnick (top left) and by Natalie Harris, Rita's children).

The Rhodesia Herald reported that, on the day of his funeral, all the flags in the town were at half-mast and the leading people of the town including the Mayor came to the graveside.

Rita was left with the two little children, aged 6 and 4, to bring up alone in a wild country.

Her two brothers, Charles and Isidore, (Fligelstones who had dropped the Fligel's wings to become simple Stones) were well-to-do financiers in London. They were living splendidly at 19a Lower Belgrave St with a valet and housekeeper and had extensive business interests in South Africa and Rhodesia. To comfort his little sister after receiving the news of Henry's death, Charles took what must have been the first available boat to Cape Town<sup>28</sup>, sailing on November 14th. Isidore left England for the Cape a few months later. The two set about finding their sister a new Jewish Husband - and soon found Joseph Rollnick, a handsome and able bachelor, in business as a soft goods merchant. Joe had already met Rita in Salisbury but was now in Cape Town. Joe was brought up from Cape Town and, despite Rita being a few years his senior, and her having two Harris children, he agreed to marry the rich widow. (According to a letter that I have from an official then working with H. Harris and Company<sup>29</sup>, Henry had left property worth about five million pounds in today's equivalent<sup>30</sup>). In September 1910, Rita, and in October, Joseph, returned to England where their wedding took place in the Central Synagogue of London on the 13th December, with, as that famous marriage certificate records, Charles and Isidore Stone<sup>31</sup> as witnesses. On the marriage certificate, Joseph is living at the Waldorf Hotel, while Rita was at the Portman.

They must have been abroad, perhaps on a honeymoon trip, on the 3rd April 1911, the night of the UK census for that decade, for there is no trace of them in that record. But little Leslie and Natalie Harris had been left in England at Cranford College in Maidenhead<sup>32</sup>.

In a perfect world, the Rollnicks and the Harris children should have lived happily ever after. But Joe was always a restless fellow. Already at the end of May 1911 he returned to Cape Town, perhaps to close up his affairs in Africa, returning to England in August in time for the birth of their daughter Zelda at the end of November, in the

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<sup>28</sup> Union-Castle named most of their ships with the suffix "Castle" in their names. They were well known for the lavender-hulled liners with red funnels topped in black, running on a rigid timetable between Southampton and Cape Town. Every Thursday at 4pm a Union-Castle Royal Mail Ship would leave Southampton bound for Cape Town. At the same time, a Union-Castle Royal Mail Ship would leave Cape Town bound for Southampton.

<sup>29</sup> Written to J. Ford, another of Rita's brothers, with another change of name.

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.measuringworth.com/ukcompare/result.php>

<sup>31</sup> Of Isidore Stone, Joseph's granddaughter, Rita Adler, writes "I knew Isidore Stone very well. No one left nowadays though."

<sup>32</sup> A Jewish boarding school attended by children from all over the world. It was obviously a boy's school since Natalie aged 7 and the Headmaster's daughter of the same age were the only girls at the school.

Fligelstone family home in Cardiff.

They moved to London, settling into 8 Arkwright Mansions, on Finchley Road in Hampstead, where Rita would live for the next twenty years, bringing up the three children, Leslie and Natalie Harris, and Zelda Rollnick. But soon after they moved into Arkwright Mansions, Joseph went again to South Africa, returning only in June of 1912.

Joseph and Rita parted, for ever, later that year. The history of the rupture is found in two documents from 1922 and 1923, filed in the Pretoria, Transvaal archives<sup>33</sup>. There, Joseph sues for restitution of "conjugal rights"<sup>34</sup>. He alleges that Rita deserted him in November 1912. She counters that he had committed adultery on the night of the 7th November 1912, citing the clerk of the Waldorf Hotel, (George Conrad Hards) and the fireman Alfred Iddenden as witnesses, and also a nurse, Mary Ann Jones. (I actually found Alfred in the 1911 UK census, listed indeed as a fireman, but could find neither George Hards nor a suitable Mary Ann Jones). In any event, from that date in November 1912, Rita and Joseph no longer lived together.

We saw from the shipping record that Joe had returned briefly to Africa after his marriage to Rita. On 14 June 1912, Joe took out a mortgage bond<sup>35</sup> in Rhodesia, through James Robert Townsend, "Duly Authorised Agent", for 750 pounds, with interest of 12% (!). It is hard to know exactly what Joe had in mind with this mortgage. After all, at the time the mortgage was set up, Joe was again in London, having arrived there on the 1st of June 1912. Was he already thinking of leaving Rita and the children? In any event, the rupture with Rita came in November of 1912 and Joe presumably then went back to Africa, although I have no record of that sailing. On 19 March 1913 the Salisbury Court called on him to repay the mortgage debt that was by now 746 pounds 19 shillings. The Deputy Sheriff certified that he had "personally handed the Court's Summons to the Defendant," who was J.R. Rollnick<sup>36</sup>. Joe failed to repay the debt and the African Banking Corporation lawyers took possession of the mortgage bond.

But, on the basis of that Court Summons, we can be confident that Joe was indeed in Africa in 1913. Then, on the 10th of December 1914, Joseph signed up with the East African Mounted Rifles. He served as a

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<sup>33</sup> [http://www.national.archsrch.gov.za/sm300cv/smws/sm300ds?20120521143657969B5D86&DN=00000000 Volume\\_no 5/417 reference 1240/1922 ex parte application. Joseph Ralph Rollnick 1922. Volume\\_no 5/436 reference 585/1923 opposed application. Joseph Ralph Rollnick versus Rita Rollnick \(formerly Harris\). 1923](http://www.national.archsrch.gov.za/sm300cv/smws/sm300ds?20120521143657969B5D86&DN=00000000 Volume_no 5/417 reference 1240/1922 ex parte application. Joseph Ralph Rollnick 1922. Volume_no 5/436 reference 585/1923 opposed application. Joseph Ralph Rollnick versus Rita Rollnick (formerly Harris). 1923)

<sup>34</sup> a legal device, generally prior to divorce proceedings

<sup>35</sup> Rhodesian Civil Case of 1913: African Banking Corporation vs Joseph Ralph Rollnick of Salisbury - Archives ref. S 1/3388

<sup>36</sup> I have a copy of that hand-written document.

private, in “Theatre of War 4A,” which is East Africa<sup>37</sup>, being awarded, as were his fellow soldiers, the Victory, the British, and the 15 Star medals.

The register of Rhodesian men who served in World War I states that J R Rollnick was of Bulawayo, and served in the Uganda Rifles.

Name	Rollnick	Rank	Private
Corps	East African Mounted Rifles		
Medal	Joseph P		
Victory	col/136 B2	11	1916
British	do	do	
15 Star	Col/5/1	49	
Theatre of War first served in	4A		
Date of entry service	10.12.14		

Joe’s WW1 medals

On the announcement of the outbreak of the First World War, there had been a rush of volunteers to Nairobi, the capital of British East Africa (now Kenya). The volunteers, armed with hunting rifles, organised themselves into a number of irregular units of mounted horse. They were amalgamated into one regiment, the East African Mounted Rifles. The fact that Joe joined this regiment suggests strongly that he was already in the region of Kenya rather than Rhodesia when the War started. In all probability, he had started to work in the Congo, and in Elizabethville.



The East African Mounted Rifles on parade.

<sup>37</sup> [http://www.1914-1918.net/soldiers/theatre\\_codes.html](http://www.1914-1918.net/soldiers/theatre_codes.html): 4. African Theatre.—Included all operations set forth below but excluding local military operations against native tribes or rebels:—

(a) In British East Africa, German East Africa, Rhodesia, Nyasaland and Uganda, from the 20th August, 1914, within an area bounded as follows:—

On the north by the Uganda Railway from the sea to Port Florence and Kisumu (including the whole of all towns actually on the railway), thence along the northern shore of Lake Victoria to the mouth of the Katonga River, thence along a line of that river to Lake George. On the west by the western shores of Lake George, Lake Edward, Lake Kivu and Lake Tanganyika to Moliro; thence by the Northern Rhodesian—Congo border to Lake Mweru and along the Luapula River to the 12th parallel.

On the south by the 12th parallel to Lake Nyasa, thence along the western, southern and eastern shore of Lake Nyasa to the boundary between Portuguese and German East Africa, thence along that boundary to the sea.

The East African Mounted Rifles were six squadrons amalgamated from hastily formed volunteer units centered in the region. The action they saw was in a remote part of World War I, in which the British Army<sup>38</sup> tried, unsuccessfully for all the four years of the War, to defeat a tiny German Army based in the colony of German East Africa, and led by General Emil von Lettow-Vorbeck. "The East African campaign was essentially about a modestly immense Allied army that was engaged by a midget German force led by an obscure Prussian officer who could have conducted post-graduate courses in irregular warfare tactics for Che Guevara, General Giap and other more celebrated but far less skilled guerrilla fighters. Lettow-Vorbeck's exploits in the African bush have come down as the greatest single guerrilla operation in history, and the most successful. Though he ultimately surrendered as ordered, he frequently won against great odds and was the only German commander to invade British territory successfully during World War I."<sup>39</sup>

On Joseph's part, was his decision to join the War patriotism or restlessness? In any event, his earlier years in Rhodesia must have provided him with much needed experience of the terrain, insofar as he survived the war in a region in which 10,000 Commonwealth troops died, mostly of disease.

And now comes the first mystery in the story of Congo Joe: If we consider the short period between his demobilization after the War and his death in 1925, how did he so quickly become the millionaire

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<sup>38</sup> Led , in part, by the South African General Smuts.

<sup>39</sup> Lettow-Vorbeck returned home in early March 1919 to a hero's welcome. On a black charger he led 120 returnees of the Schutztruppe in their tattered tropical uniforms on a victory parade through the Brandenburg Gate which was decorated in their honor. From May 1928 to July 1930 he served as a deputy in the Reichstag. Lettow-Vorbeck "distrusted [Adolf] Hitler and his movement," even though Hitler offered him the ambassadorship to Great Britain in 1935, which he "declined with frigid hauteur." After his blunt refusal, he "was kept under continual surveillance" and his home office was searched. The only rehabilitation, due to his legendary standing among the populace came in 1938, when at age 68, he was named a General for Special Purposes, but was never recalled into active service. By the end of World War II, Lettow-Vorbeck was destitute. His two sons, Rudiger and Arnd had both been killed in action serving the German Army. His house in Bremen had been destroyed by Allied bombs, and he depended for a time on food packages from [Generals] Meinertzhagen and Smuts. With the establishment of the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) and economic recovery, he enjoyed comfortable circumstances again. In 1953 he visited his other home, East Africa, where he was heartily welcomed by surviving Askaris who greeted him with their old marching song Heia Safari! and was received with courtesy and military honours by British colonial officials. From: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul\\_Emil\\_von\\_Lettow-Vorbeck](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Emil_von_Lettow-Vorbeck)



that Eric Rosenthal writes about? That he was active in the Congo is documented. I have several shipping manifests from the 1920's that list him as a merchant, coming or going between the Congo and the Savoy Hotel, London. But was he in some way connected with Lever Brothers, the huge soap-making enterprise? In the divorce proceedings just mentioned Rita, arguing that Joe lived in England, asks that the "Managing Director or other official of Lever Bros. Ltd., of England, in which firm Plaintiff is interested" be summoned to give evidence on this point, so that it might seem that Joe did have some connection with Lever Brothers. But maybe Rita had been given to believe so. (She also asks that an official of Lloyd's Underwriters Association of England "of which the Plaintiff is a member," be likewise interrogated. One had to be very rich to be a member of the Lloyd's Association<sup>40</sup>).

Lever Brothers came to the Belgian Congo in 1911. Through their daughter company 'Huileries du Congo Belge,' Lever Brothers obtained the monopoly to harvest and process all palm fruits in the Congo. The results were spectacular: from 1910 until 1920, palm oil exports increased from 2,160 to 7,624 tons, and palm nuts from 4,224 to 39,457 tons. By the year 1922, more than 50,000 hectares of natural palm plantations were exploited.

Now, this was just the period that Joe was travelling back and forth between the Congo and the Savoy Hotel, spending much of the English summer in Europe. Did he start his collaboration with Lever Brothers, if indeed he had such a connection, almost at the beginning of their time in the Congo?

What is known is that many of his co-religionists in the Rhodesias were at that time beginning to involve themselves in the Congo. To quote from Eric Rosenthal again:

"Deep in Central Africa, in the Belgian Congo, Jewry was also gaining a foothold. ....(By) 1909, two Jewish traders, the brothers Uhlmann reached Katanga (soon to be the copper-mining center of the Congo .. wds) from Rhodesia. In addition, numerous members of the Sephardi Jewish community in Rhodesia<sup>41</sup> had begun living and trading in the Congo. Moussa Benatar and C. Solomon, ... already

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<sup>40</sup> I sent an enquiry to Lloyd's of London asking whether Joseph Rollnick appears on their historical list of "names". I received the following answer: Dear Mr Stein, Sorry it has taken a few weeks to answer your e-mail. I have checked the Roll of Lloyd's: 1771 - 1930 and unfortunately there is no one listed with the surname Rollnick. Best Regards Peter Welch Senior Information Officer Lloyd's Legal and Compliance [www.lloyds.com](http://www.lloyds.com). So Rita must have been misinformed as to Joseph's membership in Lloyd's.

<sup>41</sup> Also from Rosenthal: "(many of them, the so-called Rhodesis, emigrants from the island of Rhodes, off Asia Minor...)"

active in Mashonoland in 1891, went from Salisbury to the Belgian Congo, ... establishing themselves in Elizabethville (today's Lubumbashi... wds) when that town was founded in 1910<sup>42</sup>. Solomon, Benatar & Sons, - and their trade mark "Solbena" - soon became a household word throughout the vast territories to the north of Rhodesia<sup>43,44</sup>." Interestingly, Eric Rosenthal has far less to say about Eli Susman's activities in the Congo. It was largely with his Susman connection that our Joseph, acting as Susman's representative in Elizabethville<sup>45</sup> and engaged in the cattle trade, was to build his fortune.

We will see later that the inscription on Joe's gravestone in Ostend ends with the words, "Elisabethville's Friends" and this strongly suggests that he did not work directly for Lever Brothers. Lever Brothers was centered in Leverville (later Lusanga) and in Leopoldville (later Kinshasa) and not in the Elizabethville of Joe's friends. If Joseph was merely employed by Lever Bros., he could have earned a good salary but not become as rich as he seems to have been<sup>46</sup>.

The next information that we have on Joe is his arrival on the Balmoral Castle at Southampton on 2nd May 1921 from the Belgian

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<sup>42</sup> This C. Solomon is almost certainly the C. Solomon or C. Salomon that Joe Rollnick had been connected with in Northern Rhodesia.

<sup>43</sup> There is an alternative account of the origin of the name Solbena: that it comes from SOLomon BENAtar, Moussa's brother and, in this account, the sole founder of Solbena. In this version, C.Solomon drops out entirely. See Moise Rahmani in "Shalom Bwana" and many places where Rahman's account has been copied verbatim. "Shalom Bwana, la saga des Juifs du Congo" Les Editions Romillat, 17 rue Pascal, F-75005 PARIS (romillat@romillat.fr) publient, dans leur collection Terra Hebraica.

<sup>44</sup> Here is a piece taken from the blog found when Googling Solbena (<http://www.blogg.org/blog-54545-billet-620654.html>), :20-04-2008 16:40 From Sylvia Benatar Subject: thank you, I am the granddaughter of Solomon Benatar, the founder of Solbena, born in Elisabethville, and my heart is listening to this tight chanson.

And another <http://moise.sefarad.org/ouvrages/congo/presse.php/id/39/> quoting Moise Rahmani, the author of Shalom Bwana: "It started with the arrival there of a remarkable man called Solomon Benatar. The Congo was a paradise for us – a new Promised Land. There was no anti-Semitism. And the sense of space was marvellous. We'd drive 400 kilometres to a market just because it had the fruits we liked. Distance meant nothing. The skies were always blue, the air was pure... It was a fantastic life." While not exactly traditional European empire-builders, the Jewish community nonetheless had a significant role in developing the Congo. This included not only big players like Benatar, but the pioneering Jewish traders who opened up the whole Kasai region. "They'd go out with merchandise – they were mainly involved in general trade, textiles and the like – and give credit to small African traders. That hadn't been done before. They trusted them, you see; it was something very important." Amato Freres became a huge palm oil supplier and trading company, centered in Elizabethville, working as contractors for Lever Brothers.

<sup>45</sup> Zion in Africa: The Jews of Zambia, Hugh Macmillan.

<sup>46</sup> Indeed, when I asked Diane Backhouse, the archivist of Unilever, the successor

Congo, one of five First Class passengers, and listing himself as an Exporter, born in Lithuania. His fellow passengers in First Class include a merchant, a commercial traveler and a governess, while amongst the Second Class berths are a valet, the Kjelasi family, the father a Norwegian missionary, and another governess. Joe seemed to be the only person coming from the Congo, even when I looked through many of the Third Class passengers. But he was already rich enough to travel First Class.

Then towards the end of the summer, 19th August 1921, on the Armadale Castle, Joe returns to Africa setting up, as I have mentioned, his pattern of summers in Europe. He listed himself again as an Exporter with his last address being c/o the Standard Bank of South Africa, pretty anonymous.

Another shipping manifest records that his stepson Leslie (last seen as a little boy at school in Maidenhead but now a motor engineer, still living in the family home at 8 Arkwright Mansions) travelled from Southampton to the Congo on 12th April 1922. He stayed, presumably with his step-father, until 11th July, returning before Joe himself, who reached Southampton on the Arundel Castle from the Belgian Congo on the 7th August.

The picture on the next page was attached to Joe's application for a visa to enter Belgium, dated 12 September 1922, and describing him as a dealer in merchandise with Congolese companies (Bunge and

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company to Lever Brothers, what more she could tell me about Joe, she wrote: "From the information provided in your letter it is possible that Joseph Rollnick was in some way associated with the HCB (Huileries de Congo Belge), a company established in 1911 to exploit palm oil plantations in the Belgian Congo, acquired by William Lever (later Lord Leverhulme) in the form of a concession from the Belgian government to provide raw materials for his soap empire. The company was formed under Belgian law, originally called the Huileries de Congo Belge (HCB), subsequently Huilever SA (1931), Plantations Lever au Congo (1960) and finally Plantations Lever au Zaire (1971). It was in effect a subsidiary of Lever Brothers, later Unilever, but under the terms of the original concession half the staff were to be Belgian and half English.

The surviving records of the HCB46 have been catalogued with the archives of the United Africa Company, another subsidiary of Unilever, which are deposited here [ref UAC/2/36]. Unfortunately however they do not include staff records as such, and a search of the minutes and reports of this company for the period c 1920-25 have failed to reveal any reference to Joseph Rollnick [ref UAC/2/36/1/2/2, UAC/2/36/1/3/1]. Another possibility is that he was in some way associated, perhaps as a supplier or customer, with HCB's sister company, SEDEC (Societe de'Entreprises Commerciales du Congo Belge), set up in 1917 as the trading arm of the HCB, which made substantial profits from the purchase and export of palm kernels and the sale in the Congo of general merchandise. The archives of this organisation are as yet uncatalogued, but I have had a look at the accounts of the company for the year 1924, which include a full list of debtors and creditors and I regret that once again no reference was found to Joseph Rollnick. [UAC/2/37/2 temp ref UYA/1/119]."

Banque Congo Belge), resident at the Savoy Hotel London, but domiciled at Elisabethville. A typical passport photograph, he looks into the camera, a little uncertain of himself. "Would the picture come out well?" We really need a full-length photo of this six-and-a-half footer, no longer the scrawny boy of the 1897 extradition order.



On the shipping manifest, Joe had again listed himself as an Exporter, going this time (which was now a habit) to the Savoy Hotel on the Strand in London<sup>47</sup>. Most of his fellow First Class passengers had come from the Belgian Congo, including some Americans, a mining engineer and his family, and a Belgian railway engineer also with his family.

I could find no record of any travelling by Joseph during 1923. It is possible that he took a Belgian ship from Antwerp to the Congo and back.<sup>48</sup>

Remember that it was at this time, however, that Joe began the divorce proceedings against Rita, filing in a South African court. We don't know, of course, why he wanted the divorce. But on 20th December 1922, the proceedings note him as being domiciled in Johannesburg, Transvaal (a fact that Rita disputed, arguing instead that he was living in London where she wanted the divorce proceedings

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<sup>47</sup> I asked Susan Scott, the archivist of the Savoy Hotel, if they had any record of Joseph Rollnick staying at the hotel during 1923 or at other times. Her reply was: "I have now had a chance to make a search for you in the surviving guest cards, and I am really sorry to say that I could not find a record for Joseph Rollnick. There is nothing particularly significant about the absence of a card – the system was very efficient only to the point where a card was no longer required, and I am afraid that removal from the system and subsequent storage were not always as methodical as one might like. This was all done by the reception department of course. The "official" archive was not set up until the 1970s, at which time I suspect that several cupboards were opened, and their contents passed hastily to the archivist (this is pretty much still how material comes in!) So not finding a card really just means that there has been a bit of bad luck in this particular instance.

I am so sorry not to have been able to help you with this enquiry, as who would not be intrigued by anyone nicknamed "Congo Joe"? I really do hope you have better luck with your enquiries elsewhere."

<sup>48</sup> Ships of the Compagnie Belge Maritime du Congo (CBMC) left Antwerp every three weeks and took passengers, but mainly goods, to the Congo ports and as far as East Africa.

to be held). The case was still being heard in May 1923, with the judicial order made for the witnesses to be heard in London. Where was he living in 1923 - Johannesburg, London, or the Congo? It would appear that at least in September of that year he was in London, as this newspaper report<sup>49</sup> shows:

There are three more journeys that have been definitely recorded for Joseph before his sad end. He left on 9th February 1924, a merchant, from the Savoy Hotel to Cape Town, on the Walmer Castle. Among others on board with

him were Mr Herbert Morrison M.P. and Lady Morrison, their daughter, a maid and a valet. On 31st March, 1924, he arrived in England listed as from the Belgian Congo, as always First Class, again on the Walmer Castle, and again to stay at the Savoy Hotel. Listed next to him on the Shipping Manifest were the Rt Hon Lord St Leonards, the Countess of Salford, and the Sidebotham family, exalted company for a Lithuanian boy.

The Walmer Castle would have arrived in Cape Town with Joseph Rollnick on board on about 23rd February and the ship would have reached Beira some ten days later. He would have caught it again in Cape Town, on its return journey to Southampton on the 17th March. That left him just three weeks to travel up to the Congo and back, each way a journey of almost a week, with about one week to complete his business there. He could not have herded many cattle nor harvested palm plantations within that time.

On June 12th 1924, his stepson, Leslie Harris, noted for the Canadian Immigration authorities that his closest relation is his stepfather, J. R. Rollnick at the Savoy Hotel, London.

Joe's final recorded journey was on 15th April 1925 from Liverpool<sup>50</sup>, on the Ocean Steamship Company's Sarpedon to Shanghai, an Exporter, with his intended future place of residence listed as the Congo. So what did he do in Shanghai? Sell them cattle, palm oil? Diamonds, which were being mined in

## MAN WHO WON MILLION.

### CASINO "FORTUNE" WITHOUT KNOWING THE GAME.

Going to Deauville ignorant of the game of baccarat, Mr. Rollnick, a young South African business man staying at the Savoy, went to the Casino and won one million francs.

"I did not have any gambling fever when I went to France," he told an interviewer to-day. "As a matter of fact, I was on pleasure bent, and had no more thought of making money than of attempting to swim the Channel.

"I was so really ignorant of what you call system and about gambling on a large scale in general that repeatedly I had to be told and shown by friends how to hold the cards properly and how to lay my bets. So, if I may say so, my friends helped me more than I did myself.

"Probably because, as I say, I had no real desire to indulge in gambling for the sake of money making. I stopped at a reasonable time, and came away with the million francs I had won.

"I am now in London on business, and I do not think I shall make any other raids on Deauville or any other casino."

<sup>49</sup> Nottingham Evening Post 6 September 1923.

<sup>50</sup> having stayed at the Adelphi Hotel there.

Elizabethville, seems more likely.

The document, depicted above, confirms that before his end, he won a considerable sum in a casino<sup>51</sup>. This was found in the effects of his grandson Robert Rayman (of whom we will learn more, later in this story) marked "Original in Priceless Exhibits" and pitted with holes made by drawing pins.

It's a happy, understated account of our Mr. Rollnick winning a million francs, while on holiday in Deauville, France. A million francs in 1925 is equivalent to £ 20M in today's terms. One could indeed be happy with such a win.

That statement about having to be shown how to hold the cards is a little arch. Macmillan in his "Zion in Africa"<sup>52</sup> describes high stake poker games that Eli Susman's friends (and Rollnick is included in these) played in their Northern Rhodesian days.

Joe had another huge success in 1925. On 25th July 1925, the Belgian Chamber of Deputies approved an application that he had made for the rights to develop an enormous tract of the Belgian Congo in the Province of Katanga for the purpose of developing cattle farming in the region<sup>53</sup>. A colleague of his, Victor Jacobs, had joined him in this venture and was awarded a second tract for the same purpose: The

CHAMBRE des Représentants.	KAMER der Volksvertegenwoordigers.
SEANCE DU 28 JUILLET 1925.	VERGADERING VAN 28 JULI 1925.
CONGO BELGE	BELGISCH CONGO
Projets de décrets approuvant les deux conventions conclues, le 26 septembre 1924, entre le Comité spécial du Katanga et MM. Jacobs et Rollnick (1).	Ontwerpen van decreet tot goedkeuring der twee overeenkomsten gesloten op 26 Semptember 1924 tusschen het Bijzonder Comité van Katanga en de Heeren Jacobs en Rollnick (1).
Bruxelles, le 25 juillet 1925.	Brussel, den 25 Juli 1925.
A Monsieur le Président de la Chambre des Représentants, à Bruxelles.	Aan den heer Voorzitter van de Kamer der Volksvertegenwoordigers, te Brussel.
MONSIEUR LE PRÉSIDENT.	MINNHER DE VOORZITTER.
Conformément aux dispositions de l'article 15 de la loi du 18 octobre 1908 sur le Gouvernement du Congo belge, modifiée par la loi du 5 mars 1912, j'ai l'honneur de vous transmettre, sous ce pli, une copie de deux projets de décrets que je vous prie de bien vouloir déposer, pendant trente jours de session, sur le bureau de la Chambre des Représentants.	Overeenkomstige de schikkingen van artikel 15 uit de wet van 18 October 1908 op het Beboer van Belgisch-Congo, gewijzigd bij de wet van 5 Maart 1912, heb ik de eer U, onder dezen omslag, een afschrift over te maken van twee ontwerpen van decreet welke ik U verzoek gedurende dertig dagen rustig op het bureau van de Kamer der Volksvertegenwoordigers gelieven noer te leggen.
(1) Projets de décrets antérieurs, n° 3, 12, 46 et 116.	(1) Vroegere ontwerpen van decreten, n° 3, 12, 46 et 116.

**CONGO BELGE**  
PROVINCE DU KATANGA  
District de Léopold  
Feuille de l'échelle de 1 à 500,000  
Léopold de la commission de  
délimitation 1924  
F. Rollnick

<sup>51</sup> The original newspaper report can be found at: Wednesday 05 September 1923, Nottingham Evening Post, Nottinghamshire, England.



<sup>52</sup> Zion in Africa: The Jews of Zambia, Hugh Macmillan

<sup>53</sup> Chambre des Représentants. Seance du 28 Juillet 1925 (No. 124) Brussels.

tracts of land together would eventually occupy 40,000 hectares and the plan was to graze on them 10,000 head of cattle to supply meat to “la population noire que pour la population blanche” of the developing region around the Katanga copper mines. The land was to be leased by the Crown to Rollnick and to Jacobs, on a sliding scale rising from two francs per hectare<sup>54</sup>. The minutes of the Chamber of Deputies session record a spirited debate on the plan. Some deputies were concerned about the rights of the native population then living on the land, others about what we would now call the ecological aspects of the deforestation that would be involved. But the plan was finally accepted and the map bears the signature of King Albert himself, together with that of his Minister for the Colonies.

Our Joe was about to embark on a major undertaking, likely to make much use of the considerable managerial experience gained in his business activities with cattle-broker Eli Susman, and to be very rewarding.

But the next records we have for Joe are a telegram (below) sent to Rita Rollnick in Hampstead by a Mr. Peter Lynt in Liverpool informing her of Joseph’s death at the Royal Palace Hotel in Ostend, and a death report in Dutch with a very brief description of the fact of his death on the night of August 31st 1925.

(12506 & 15600) 10/24 Harrow E.278 & 1720			No. of Telegram 61	
B or C.	Charges to pay s. d.		SENT	Office Stamp.
RECEIVED		<small>If the receiver of an Inland Telegram doubts its accuracy he may have it repeated on payment of half the amount originally paid for its transmission, and if it be found that there was any inaccuracy the amount paid for repetition will be refunded. Special conditions are applicable to the repetition of Foreign Telegrams.</small>		
At .....M.		At .....M.		
From .....M.		To .....		
By .....		By .....	THIS FORM MUST ACCOMPANY ANY ENQUIRY RESPECTING THIS TELEGRAM.	
Prefix	Time handed in	Office of Origin and Service Instructions	Words	
	11.13	Liverpool T.	24	
Mrs Rollnick & Family R. L. Deeply regret advise you Mr Rollnick passed away last night at Royal palace Hotel Ostend Peter Lynt Liverpool				

The official report of his death, translated for me by Dr Bertie Lumey reads “On Sept 1, 1925, at 11.30am in Ostende, Ghent,

<sup>54</sup> That would be some \$50 a hectare. So Rollnick and Jacobs would be leasing the tract for some \$2 million a year in today’s currency, quite a substantial outlay.







*Royal Palace Hotel, Ostend,*

previously described.

So we come to the Second Big Question, here really Questions: How did he die? Was it suicide<sup>55</sup>? And had he gambled away the vast sum of money that he had earned in the Congo and increased by a million francs in Deauville?

Was it in Ostend that he gambled away his money? At that time, Ostend, 'La Reine Des Plages'<sup>56</sup>, had recovered from the destruction of the First World War, and had developed into one of the most important beach resorts in Northern Europe. Its sandy beach, pretty parks, squares and avenues, a beautiful promenade (called the Digue) with sumptuous waterfront buildings and luxurious hotels<sup>57</sup>, and numerous entertainments including gambling led to its being greatly favoured by the British. It attracted an international clientele to rival fashionable Deauville and Biarritz.

At the time of his death, Joseph had been staying at the impressive Royal Palace Hotel.

He clearly had funds readily available before registering there, and surely with the prospect before him of developing that huge land grant in Katanga, he could have recovered from a gambling loss. Was he

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<sup>55</sup> Joseph's granddaughter writes "I never heard suicide associated with his name before your email". 24/5/2012, personal communication.

<sup>56</sup> Queen of the beaches.

<sup>57</sup> <http://www.jazzageclub.com/places/ostende-la-reine-des-plages/>

perhaps robbed and then murdered in some dark alley in Ostend?

If it was a suicide, how come he was buried next to a Joseph Wolff and a Mollie Abramowitz, there among his fellow Jews in that cemetery in Ostend<sup>58</sup>? Joseph’s granddaughter writes: “All I know is that he died in Ostend.”

The probate of his will, while it records that Joseph Ralph Rollnick died at the Royal Palace Hotel Ostend, lists his assets at One Hundred Pounds Sterling, not a very impressive sum.

**ROLLNICK** Joseph Ralph of Hotel Russell Russell-square **Middlesex** died 31 August 1925 at the Royal Palace Hotel Ostend Belgium Probate **London** 5 December to Stebbing Russell and Henry Preuss Arnholz solicitors. Effects £100.

Had he indeed lost everything?

Maybe the whole story about breaking the bank at Monte Carlo is purely apocryphal. There was a musical comedy song with that title, still popular at the time my siblings were growing up<sup>59</sup>.

Luckily for his estranged wife, Rita, her own assets had been from the start outside of Joseph’s control. Her canny brothers, Charles and Isidore Stone would have seen to that.

Evidence for this separation of their funds is that in the divorce proceedings she states that she had lent Joe “certain moneys” and that he had “failed and neglected to pay her back”. She would not have had to lend him money had they shared a bank account. Rita’s 1936 will lists her assets at almost



Rita Rollnick in 1932

<sup>58</sup> Traditional Jewish custom required that a suicide be buried outside the communal cemetery, but in our times this restriction has been ameliorated. [http://www.myjewishlearning.com/life/Life\\_Events/Death\\_and\\_Mourning/Contemporary\\_Issues/Suicide.shtml](http://www.myjewishlearning.com/life/Life_Events/Death_and_Mourning/Contemporary_Issues/Suicide.shtml)

<sup>59</sup> *As I walk along the Bois Boolong*      *You can hear them sigh and wish to die,*  
*With an independent air*              *You can see them wink the other eye*  
*You can hear the girls declare*       *At the man who broke the bank at Monte Carlo.*  
*“He must be a Millionaire.”*

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Man\\_Who\\_Broke\\_the\\_Bank\\_at\\_Monte\\_Carlo\\_%28song%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Man_Who_Broke_the_Bank_at_Monte_Carlo_%28song%29)

£750,000 in today's money, further evidence that her accounts and Joe's were separated. She did not remarry although, a rich and handsome woman as her photo shows, she could have found many suitors. Being married to Joe had perhaps made her lose her taste for husbands.

The little family, comprising Rita, her son Leslie and her daughters Natalie and Zelda, was emotionally supported by her brothers, Charles and Isidore Stone. Most weekends, they visited the brothers in their well-appointed apartment in Lowndes Square in a smart part of London. They were dined Sundays at the Ritz. Charles and Isidore, "Stage-door Johnnies" as one of Zelda's children described them, arranged for them to get free tickets to rehearsals of London shows, and summer holidays were spent in Europe. The children went to good schools and Zelda to a finishing school in London. Joe had played no part in the life of the family except that Leslie and he must have bonded. We saw that Leslie went to the Congo overlapping with, and surely meeting, Joe there, and we saw that Leslie had listed Joe as his "nearest relative" on his Canadian Immigration form, although his mother Rita was alive and well. Rita died in 1936, not managing to see her daughter Zelda married in 1938 to Jack Rayman, a fine arts dealer in London, and the son of Robert Rayman, perhaps the most knowledgeable man of fine silverware in London. Jack later took over his father's business. In the 1938 photograph of the wedding, her sister Natalie, married by then to Ernest Berg, is on the far left, the best man, Derick Bond on the right. The parents of both Zelda and Jack were already dead.

I have the shipping manifest of the Raymans' return from their honeymoon in New York. Zelda and Jack had two children,



*The wedding of Zelda Rollnick and Jack Rayman, 1938.*

## Cruiser Dunedin Sunk In Atlantic

### Small Warship Torpedoed —Fate of Crew Unstated

London, Dec. 18—The light cruiser Dunedin has been sunk in the Atlantic, the Admiralty announced.

The 4,850-ton ship, launched in November, 1918, carried a normal complement of 450 men and mounted six six-inch guns.

A German submarine torpedoed the ship in the Atlantic, a communique said. Whether any of the crew was rescued was not announced.



December 18, 1941. The ship had gone down on the 26th November

Zelda Rayman with Rita and Robert circa 1955.

Rita (named after her maternal grandmother) and Robert (named after his paternal grandfather).

Leslie Harris, Joe's stepson, tried to emigrate to Canada where his uncle Samuel Harris was living, but returned and went to South Africa, and from there enlisted in the Royal Navy in World War Two. His ship, the light cruiser H.M.S. Dunedin, successfully searched for U-boats in the Atlantic and sank one from which a famous Enigma message-coding device was retrieved. But eventually a German submarine torpedoed the ship and it went down together with most of its crew, Leslie among them.



Leslie Moss Harris in Navy uniform.



A Christmas card sent in 1941 from HMS Dunedin to Leslie's cousin Thelma Harris, living in Toronto. It was postmarked 21st November, five days before the ship went down.

Rita died in October 1937. Natalie married and was widowed twice, living until 83 years old, being very close to her half-sister Zelda and to Zelda's children, for whom she was a caring aunt.

I am fortunate to have met both Rita (now Adler) and Robert. My meetings with each of them are stories in themselves. Robert I met just by accident when, coming away from a left-wing political demonstration, we shared a taxi ride to Jerusalem and, after two minutes of conversation, realized that we were both Rollnick descendants. Rita I found by diligent search of the web, a phone call, emails and then a designed meeting at my brother's house in the London where she also lives.



*A meeting of Rollnick descendants: Wilfred Stein, Rita Adler and Sylvester Stein in Highbury Hill, London, October 2010*

Both Robert and Rita were able to give me much information about our Congo Joe.

Joe was clearly a great adventurer, energetic, maybe ruthless. In the end, though, we have not been able to solve the two great mysteries, how he got so rich so fast and how he lost it all again. Will the answers be found one day by further diligent searching of the archives?