

# South African Jews enjoy safety, freedom, opportunity in Austin

By **Tonya Cone**

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**M**irroring the increase in Austin's population, the city's Jewish community is enjoying expansion. Likewise, as Austin's technology industry and the University of Texas at Austin attract residents from around the world, many members of the city's Jewish community hail from outside the United States.

Over the next several months, *The Jewish Outlook* will feature a series focusing on those in the city's Jewish community who come from other nations. This month, we feature area residents from South Africa. In February, we'll travel to Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union by way of the memories of several Austinites.

## RON AND BARBARA GOLDKORN



PHOTO BY CHAD HARLAN

**Ron and Barb Goldkorn in their Austin shop, Sew Much More.**

When Ron and Barbara Goldkorn's children were 12 and eight years old, the couple no longer felt their family was safe. Surrounded by crime and racial tension in Johannesburg, South Africa, the family felt they were constantly under a cloud of the threat of violence, so they began looking for a new home.

Ron Goldkorn had a friend in San Antonio and, while visiting that city, had the opportunity to check out Austin. The weather and landscape reminded him of South Africa, he found people here friendly and he thought it would be a great place for his family.

His only hesitation about moving here came from a visit to the Jewish Community Center. While the family was used to being surrounded by Jews and could easily find Jewish food like teiglach, a dessert, and kigel, a sweet cracker served with chopped herring, in South Africa, Goldkorn was told there was no active Jewish community here. The reality of the situation, however, was that the family had to leave Johannesburg, and in 1984 they moved here.

"It was the perfect place to start a new life," he said, noting that many South Africans were surprised to hear that they were moving to Austin. Most had never heard of the city, aside from the 1966 UT Tower shooting, and assumed he meant Houston.

In South Africa, the Goldkorns ran USA Sewing Machines, a store founded by Ron Goldkorn's father. When the family moved to Austin, they started over from scratch and opened Sew Much More. Since then, he said, the store has been rec-

ognized with many industry awards and is known as one of the most successful sewing machine stores in the nation.

While the Goldkorns said it was difficult figuring out how to manage some simple things when they first moved here, the competitive business environment has offered opportunities that would not have been available in South Africa. People are pushed to come up with new, creative ideas in the United States, and the Goldkorns said that for those who are prepared to work here, there are no barriers.

When they arrived in Austin, the family connected with the Jewish community, mostly through their children's activities. Today, however, between spending time with their children and grandchildren, who also live in Austin, and running their business, the Goldkorns said they do not have time for much else. Most of their friends are Jewish and are the same people they met when they first moved here.

"You're lucky to live in Austin," Ron Goldkorn said.

## KIM KAHN

A childhood in Klerkstorp, a town of 100,000 people about two-and-a-half hours from Johannesburg, gave Kim Kahn an opportunity to learn about different religions and cultures. She attended school at a convent, and while Jewish students were taught Bible and Jewish studies by a parent when other students went to church, she once had the opportunity to perform the role of Jesus in a school play.

"My best friend, who was also Jewish, was Mary," Kahn said.

The Jewish community in Klerkstorp was cohesive. An Orthodox and a Reform synagogue were available to those who wished to worship, and Kahn's family belonged to the Orthodox congregation.

"My parents were aware of how assimilated our lives were so they insisted that we attend synagogue at least once a week," Kahn said.

Fridays were an important family night at her synagogue, and Kahn's family always had Shabbat dinner. She was also a member of Habonim, a Zionist youth group.

"I had a strong sense of being Jewish, even though many of my friends weren't Jewish," Kahn said, explaining that her sense of Jewish identity came from her home environment.

When Kahn was 16, her family moved to a very Jewish neighborhood in Johannesburg. She dated Jewish boys and experienced a big difference in her social life in the city. She also began attending a secular private school.

Due to the uncertain future of the nation, Kahn's parents encouraged their children to leave South Africa, and in 1985, at age 21, she moved to London.

"It wasn't deliberate emigration," she said. "It was more an adventure."

At the time, many Jewish South Africans were leaving the country, and most went to the United States, Israel, Canada, Australia and England.

While in London, Kahn reconnected with the man who is now her husband, whom she had also dated in Johannesburg.



**Kim Kahn and her husband, Tony, and their sons, Gabe and Aiden (wearing UT cap and shirt) pose in August during a visit to Cannes, France.**

After four years there, the couple decided to pursue a job opportunity that opened up for her in Chicago.

"We were two wandering Jews," she said.

When the couple first arrived in the United States, Kahn found the amount of choices here, like the cereal aisle at the grocery store, overwhelming. She also noted the choices available to Jews in the United States.

"Here there are so many alternate paths to follow — Chabad, Reconstructionist, Conservative," she said. "It's amazing."

Kahn was pleasantly surprised by the amount of freedom she found available in the United States, especially in media. In South Africa, she was used to seeing words, censored by the government, blotting out of the newspaper.

"I was so amazed by how liberal things were and how many different points of view there were, even comparative advertising," she said. "They were things I had never seen before."

After three years in Chicago, the Kahns moved to Houston and then San Diego so that her husband, a pediatric orthopedist, could complete training necessary to practice medicine in the United States. In 1997, the couple ended up in Austin, where they thought the lifestyle and environment would be in line with the way they wanted to raise their sons, who were three and four years old at the time.

Kahn said she enjoys a sense of safety here that was absent in South Africa.

"My kids can play in our front yard, there is no wall around the garden, we can walk in our neighborhood freely without

concern except that they might get lost. I couldn't go back and live there because I couldn't experience freedom," Kahn said.

Until a year ago, Kahn returned to South Africa twice a year to conduct business, and 18 months ago her husband and sons accompanied her. The family visited Kruger National Park and Cape Town, and the trip was a good opportunity for the boys to see where their parents grew up.

The boys, their mother said, have a sense of pride in their South African roots. While visiting there, the children enjoyed tasting differences in foods, like chocolate, and brought cricket bats and a love for rugby home with them. After her son's bar mitzvah last year, family members and friends watched South Africa win the Rugby World Cup together.

"It was just the most incredible atmosphere," she said.

While Kahn said she misses her roots and is sad that her children seldom get to see their grandparents or cousins, she has no regrets about moving here and has made connections in the local Jewish community. Her children attended the Austin Jewish Academy and her husband was the board president. She has been involved in the school, and the family belongs to Congregation Agudas Achim.

"What's been wonderful about Austin is, we're not the only ones with no family ties here," Kahn said. "We have a relationship with other Jewish families. We're each other's surrogate families. It's a unique community in that way. It makes it easy to integrate and get close."

## LARINE LASDON

Born and raised in Johannesburg, Laraine Lasdon's family members were at the top levels of government and brought a Jewish approach to South African arts, politics, business, medicine and law.

"We were at the top of the heap, being white in the ... (apartheid) days," she said. "Jews took it even further; we excelled."

Jewish life in Lasdon's community revolved around the boys and men. Her brothers attended Hebrew school and became b'nai mitzvah; she did not. Her family observed Shabbat together at home and attended High Holiday services. When about eight years old, Lasdon began school at a convent because private Catholic schools offered the best education.



PHOTOS COURTESY LARINE LASDON

**Laraine Lasdon, in Austin during 1980s (above) and at left (bottom left) with her class at the private Redhill School in Johannesburg.**



Despite what she describes as a largely secular upbringing and having attended non-Jewish schools, Lasdon said being Jewish permeated her being.

"The idea of Jewishness never left you," she said. "You couldn't avoid feeling Jewish in an environment where your family was thoughtful. Being Jewish is in my consciousness even when I'm not doing anything Jewish."

Jews played a leading role in dismantling apartheid in her home country, Lasdon said. Politicians Helen Suzman and Selma Brodie and artist William Kentridge are just a few of the Jews who touched many lives and made a personal impact on Lasdon while fighting apartheid.

All Lasdon's Jewish friends were activists, she said, and as a student activist herself, Lasdon participated in marches, protests, sit-ins and anti-apartheid rallies and worked as a volunteer with children in crèches, or day-care centers. She worked for Suzman, a member of parliament, and Brodie, who was then the mayor.

"How can I stand here as a Jew and let people be segregated, herded, have to show ID or be separated from their families?" she said. "It was reminiscent of how Jews were treated."

When Lasdon married the son of Holocaust survivors, she said, they were unhappy with her political activity. After being liberated from concentration camps, his parents fled first to Australia and then went to South Africa. The family felt they had already been through a lot, Lasdon said, and did not want the attention they felt that her actions drew to their family. But if she did not fight apartheid, Lasdon said, she could not live in South Africa without feeling like she was condoning the system.

"We lived like white South Africans," she said. "We had a house with black guards and servants."

Lasdon and her then-husband moved to London, where she participated in pro-Israel picketing for the Six-Day War in 1967, and came to Austin in 1976. Here, she has been involved in many political activities. She was part of Mothers Inc. in the 1970s and today is active in the Rotary Club of Austin, which has organized a micro-lending project in rural Sudan.

"I am still connected to Africa," she said.

Lasdon said that anti-apartheid efforts kept the Jewish flame burning in her soul. Five years ago, she joined Temple Beth Shalom, where she attends Torah study, is on the caring committee, is helping to plan a gala and has made many Jewish friends.

Noting that her brother is a Lubavitcher in Israel and her sister's family is immersed in Jewish life in London, Lasdon said, "All of a sudden this little Jewish spirit that never dies has blossomed in all the children."

## IVAN SAGER

When Ivan Sager and his wife, Dayle, began thinking about having children, the couple knew they did not want to raise them in Johannesburg, South Africa. His job in the high-tech industry required him to travel often, and he did not feel it was safe to leave his wife and children alone in the city, which is fraught with racial and economic tension.

"It's a different kettle of fish once



PHOTO BY TAMMY MALLEY

Ivan and Dayle Sager, pictured in New York during June 2006 (left photo, and him with sons Jason and Ryan, ready for the snow in New Jersey during October 2006.

you're living in South Africa," he said.

In 1999, the Sagers joined his brother in Cherry Hill, N.J. When the brother moved to California, however, nothing tied the family to the East Coast. Tired of harsh winters, the Sagers found that it made sense to try Austin, with its good weather and strong technology industry, so about four months ago they made the move here.

Having grown up in a strong Orthodox Jewish community, some aspects of Jewish life in the United States, like the lack of separation of men and women in non-Orthodox synagogues, surprised Ivan Sager when he moved here.

"Women (in his South African community) didn't have a big role in the service and didn't wear a kippah," he said. "It was a shock seeing a woman rabbi running the service (in the United States). I had never seen it before. It took me by surprise."

While Ivan Sager's family in South Africa was not overly religious, they lived in an area with many other Ashkenazi Jews where they had the opportunity to gather Fridays and Saturdays for Shabbat.

Along with his wife and four- and five-year-old sons, he tries to continue practicing traditions he grew up with, like breaking the fast after Yom Kippur with ginger beer and milk, although finding ginger beer in Austin can be challenging. The family also attends shul most Friday nights and celebrates holidays by doing things like gathering under a sukkah for Sukkot.

Life in Austin is less stressful than in South Africa, Sager said. He enjoys not panicking every time his children play outside, the lack of a barbed wire and electric fence around his house, and not having to worry about who is in his driveway when he comes home at night. His parents and many friends from university remain in South Africa, however, and Sager said the biggest challenge he and his wife face is not having family here.

"When you're here, you're on your own. There's no fallback plan; our parents can't help out," he said. "It remains a hurdle for us."

In the short time the Sagers have lived in Austin, they have made an effort to connect with the city's Jewish community. They belong to Congregation Agudas Achim, Dayle Sager is an administrative assistant and office manager at the Jewish Community Association of Austin, and Ivan Sager has started connecting with other Jewish professionals in the technology industry through the JCAA's Blue Knot Initiative. By befriending other parents at their children's school and living near the Dell Jewish Community Campus, the family has tried to surround themselves with

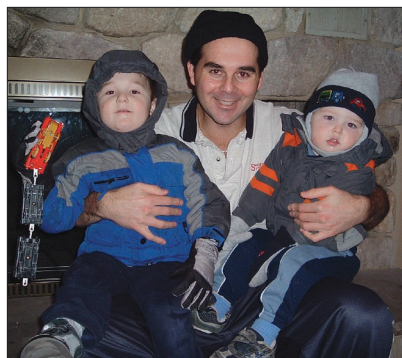


PHOTO BY DAYLE SAGER

Jewish community.

"I'm still feeling my way, trying to understand the community," he said. "It's been kind of fun, actually."

## DENELLE SILVER

Denelle Silver's Jewish community in Johannesburg was observant and Zionist. In the city with the nation's largest Jewish population, Silver said most Jews lived near each other, and neighborhood stores provided anything they might want to buy.

Most of the people in Silver's community observed kashrut, and the Jewish values of family and treating others with justice and kindness were important, especially during the era of apartheid (1948-94). Observing Shabbat was important to her family, who also celebrated holidays together.

When Silver accepted a job at the Austin Jewish Community Day School (now called Austin Jewish Academy) in 2000, she was surprised at the different Jewish denominations in the United States.

"In South Africa, it was just Jewish," she said. "In America, it had to become a label and I hate it. Here it's very distinctive."

Silver learned that her students had heard about Orthodox Jews and had preconceived notions of what she would be like. She received a letter from a seventh-grader saying, "I thought you would be tied by the shackles of Orthodox Judaism, but I realized it wasn't true."

Going from a large Orthodox Jewish community in South Africa to Austin was like going from an oasis into the desert, Silver said.

"There it was just part of life," she said. "Here it's not. You're a minority, a double minority. But it's not something that is difficult because of whom I am. I am Jewish before anything else. My whole life — personally, professionally socially and spiritually — is Jewish."

Silver has adapted to Jewish life here. She lives close to the Dell Jewish Community Campus and attends services at congregations Agudas Achim and Tiferet Israel, so she does not have to drive on Shabbat. She is also a teacher in the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School program, an international Jewish education program presented locally at "The J" by the Jewish Community Association of Austin.

Working as the b'nai mitzvah coordinator and adult and family programming manager and teaching sixth and ninth grades in the religious school at Agudas Achim has also helped Silver to enjoy living in Austin.

"They are so open and welcoming," she said. "They have allowed me to live in the way I want. It's easy in the sense that I believe so strongly in it and work in it. It strengthens it and helps me learn from it all the time. I'm lucky."

Living in the smaller Jewish community in Austin and experiencing people's kindness has been a learning opportunity, Silver said. The people at the H-E-B Kosher Store know the foods she likes and ask her where she has been if she does not go there for a few days. She celebrates holidays and Shabbat in others' homes when she does not host them at her house. When she had major surgery two years ago, she moved into someone else's home so they could take care of her when she could not be alone, and others helped out later by bringing kosher food and taking her to the hospital when she needed a ride.

-Describing Agudas Achim as "an amazing, warm community," she said, "Without Agudas Achim, I wouldn't be where I am today. They truly lived up to the meaning of agudat achim — brotherhood. They live their values. It's nice to see that in action."

Living in Austin has also given Silver the opportunity to experience new approaches to life. She particularly enjoys the freedom of speech here and teaches her students to use their voice. When she encountered legal problems with her visa and someone advised her to talk to her state representative about it, she realized that would not have occurred to her in South Africa.

"Here," she said, "it's a natural course of action to do that."

Silver has also branched out and met other kinds of people in Austin. The first friend she made here is not Jewish, and the two have learned a lot about each other's cultures. Her non-Jewish friend celebrates Jewish holidays with Silver, and Silver took some kosher food to her friend's house so the two could share Christmas.

"It has been fantastic for me and has strengthened my Judaism," she said. "It made me look at what I believe deeper, when looking at it from another perspective. We are different and that's okay. We have lots of similarities as well."

Silver noted that each city she has visited in the United States has its own Jewish culture. In New York City, one can eat every kind of kosher food known to mankind, while California offers organic Jewish food. Even nearby San Antonio, with its older, more established Jewish community is unique, she said. (More than a century ago, San Antonio and Galveston had the largest Jewish communities in Texas.)

"In Texas," she said, "you think about how you can make Texan foods kosher, like enchiladas. There's a Texan twist, which is fun. It's not just American or Jewish culture; it's Texan Jewish American culture. It allows for individuality and connectedness. You can be part of a community and live both. They enhance one another."

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