

# Israel and the World

## Traveling On The Habonim (South Africa) Summer Camp Train

By DOUGLAS H. FRAZER

Kids get to summer camp in all sorts of different ways. These include car, bus, and plane. But what if you got to travel to camp in a train? A private train. On a trip lasting over 26 hours.

For over 50 years this is exactly how Jewish campers from the South African Zionist Youth Movement Habonim-Dror got to camp.

First, a bit of background. There have been Jews in South Africa from soon after the time that the Dutch first settled Cape Town in 1652. The larger Jewish immigration came in the late 1800's and early 1900's. By the early 1970's, the South African Jewish population approached 120,000.

Habonim-Dror (Habonim means "the builders") was by far the largest Jewish youth movement in South Africa. It was loosely affiliated with the Labor Party in Israel. The summer camp (remember mid-summer in the southern hemisphere is December) for many years was outside of East London on the Indian Ocean. In 1962, Habonim purchased its present summer camp on magnificent ocean property in the southern tip of the country in Onrust, outside of Hermanus, a few hours southeast of Cape Town.

Habonim began using trains as the principal means of transport to the camp beginning with the camp's inception in 1930. In the 1950's, the trains originated in the old Transvaal (Johannesburg) and from Cape Town. Starting with the camp in Onrust, when campers from Cape Town were now close enough to travel by bus, only one train, running south from Johannesburg, was needed.

This was a dedicated train and known affectionately by all as "The Main Train." That is, Habonim would hire out an entire train from South African Railways for the purpose of transporting campers and staff to camp. The train would be as long as 15 carriages made up of sleeper compartments that officially slept 6 campers. Sometimes an "overflow train" was put on for the years when the camp surged to as many as 1200 to 1400 people. The train had no dining car. Campers would have to pack their own food for the journey. Campers brought their own sleeping bags because no linen was provided. The trip included activities and the 6-person compartments could swell to 15 people squashed in singing a mixture of Jewish camping and Pete Seeger and Joan Baez folk songs, playing games, and simply reuniting with friends. Much raiding took place at night.

"We played cards all night," recalled Joel Linton, now of Chicago. "We looked out for buddies from previous camps. Remember, in those days we had no TV [introduced in South Africa only in 1976], or email, or Facebook, so reuniting on the train was particularly exciting. Those were interesting times that occasioned lasting friendships."

The train was assembled in Pretoria.



The campers and staff originating in Pretoria rode the train an hour south to Johannesburg where, in the early evening, the main journey began and most of the campers embarked. Campers from Zimbabwe (Rhodesia) would take an overnight train from Bulawayo and Harare and transfer to The Main Train. In those days, there were also a number of still vibrant smaller towns at which the train would stop and pick kids up. These included Vereeniging, Klerksdorp, Welkom, Bloemfontein and others.

The campers and staff would arrive at

the platform in uniform: khaki shorts, blue shirt and a scarf held in place with a woggle. Later the scarf was replaced with red strings.

The journey would last two nights and a day. Each carriage was organized by *shichva* (age group) – from the *shitilim* (saplings) ages 10-11 to the *shomrim* (guards) ages 16-17. The *madrichim* (counselors) would sleep in three person compartments at the end of each carriage.

"We had something of a tradition," Linton recalls, "of tossing the green leather armrests (loose double football

sized) while crossing the Orange River. Hundreds were lost every year. It was a sight to behold seeing these green objects flying through the air."

About midway through the journey, the train "shunted" in De Aar. The train would terminate in Stellenbosch and sometimes in Worcester. From these points, the campers would board school buses for the two hour ride over Sir Lowery's Pass to Onrust. According to Roland Frankel, now of Chicago, invariably at least one bus would break down crossing the Pass.

"The train was when camp began and as the first 2 day activity the countdown to the train's departure took on a life of its own" says Simmy Ziv-el, now of Milwaukee and a former *Rosh Machaneh* (head of camp).

Summer camp lasted three and a half weeks and into the new year. The journey home began in the morning and would conclude the evening of the next day. The campers and staff would return, exhausted, to their homes and families to prepare for the school term ahead – and, of course, for next year's camp, beginning with the camp train, a mere 48 weeks away.

\* Douglas H. Frazer is a tax attorney in Milwaukee. Special thanks to Errol Anstey of Habonim-Dror South Africa for assistance with this article.

