

Italian Influence in South Africa - part 1

Written by Andre Martinaglia

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"Joao Albasini was born in 1813 aboard a ship in the bay of Oporto, in Portugal, thus automatically becoming a Lusitanian citizen by right of birth, even though his father Antonio Augusto Albasini, a merchant by occupation, and a anti-bonapartist political refugee who fled Italy in the turbulent years of the Napoleonic Wars. His father Antonio was born in South Tyrol in Northern Italy, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Joao Albasini's mother, Maria de Purificacao was Portuguese, reputed to be the most beautiful woman of the Portuguese Court of the time.

As Joao became a young man, he first served with the Lusitanian Navy, and after completing his training, he studied law for a few years. Since there were not many opportunities available at the time to advance his career, he decided to join his father who was trading on the African East Coast. On his father's instructions in 1832 he arrived in Mozambique, setting up in Lourenco Marques (Maputo) a small trading store and bartered with the local African population, and quickly learning the language and various dialects they spoke. This was to become a life of adventure that started a legend of his to be successful in this region.

He once fell prisoner to the Magwembe cannibal tribe of the Shangani nation, but because he understood the language and traditions of the people, he pretended to be mad, and therefore untouchable, while his captured companions perished in the same attack. However befriending a young African warrior during his detention at the Magwembe village, 6 months thereafter he managed to escape, and return to Delagoa Bay, and prepared a while later to enter the deeper interior of that region. His strong physique made him overcome the extreme hardships that were ever challenging in the years that followed, in this wild and untamed part of Southern Africa.

Within 3 years his character and leadership qualities made him a leader among the Africans, while his excellent shooting skills always secured him plenty of fresh meat and ivory. He bartered with the local African population always respecting and paying homage to their various chiefs, even the most fiercest and aggressive tribes chieftans respected him. During the time of famine he was able to hunt wild game for them, and literally supporting them for years to come. He also trained them to hunt elephants, and to treat the skins of wild animals. At times his Safari hunting parties consisted of up to 500 warriors as recorded in 1852.

From then onwards the Shangaan families would follow him, naming him "Jwawa" a corruption of his first name. He became to be known as the news of his accomplishments spread by word of mouth in that area. Soon he was able as a result set up a base and supply store situated at the present day Skukuza, in the Kruger National Park. From here his trained hunters also operated, and his influence spread further afield. One day he came to hear about a Voortrekker Settlement at Ohrigstad in Mpumalanga and decided to travel there and investigate. This was the first time in 7 years he had seen other White people, and was able to meet and speak to them. Despite the disagreement between the two camps of Ohrig and Pretorius the two

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Voortrekker leaders he was able to do business with both. Soon as he was learned with the law skills he had aquired they made Joao their official clerk in all legal and other matters of concern to them. It was here he met Gertina van Rensburg, who he later married. He then moved to the Zoutpans berg Mountains where he set up a second trading post, keeping in touch with Ohrig and Pretorius at the same time. Later because of their continious disputes Joao and Gertina moved to "Pesangskop", together with their Shangaan warriors and built a fort, known as the "Skanz", from where they defended the continued attacks of the Venda against them. He was able to obtain beautiful tropical plants through his continued trading with Lourenco Marques which he planted there. Another extraordinary complex at Pesangskop was called "Goedewensch" built by Albasini.

Here he channelled water from the Sterkstroom River some 10 kilometers away.

Joao's first son Antonio Augusto was born in 1853, the first of two sons, and 6 daughters. With the birth of Antonio, Joao was elected Paramount Chief of the Shangaan Magwambe, and a little later President Paul Kruger appointed him his Vice-Consul with regard to Portugese Affairs, acting as a intermediary between Pretoria and Lourenco Marques. After which he was made Head of Native Affairs for the Limpopo and Mpumalanga regions, which also involved the collection of taxes.

The Venda attacks on the Voortrekkers Ohrig and Schoeman parties continued, with Schoeman deciding it best for everyone to leave for Polokwane and Pretoria where it would be safer. Joao decided that he was standing fast, not preparing to give up for what he had worked for over the many years, taking in 16 oortrekker families who had no wagons to return, helping to mantain his farm and with the Shangaan warriors defended his property against the continious Venda onslaught. Joao had taught his Venda warriors to fight and defend themselves the Roman way, and by so doing eventual victory was obtained, with the enemy being chased past Louis Trichardt to Hanklip, where they were deceisively beaten. As a reward, President Paul Kruger granted the Shangaan the whole area of land on the south bank side of the Levubu River, from Elim near the Mozambique border, which became known as the "Knobnose Location". Joao was also had times requested by the well known "Rain Queen" Modjaji for advice which he willingly shared with her. Modjaji had sucessfully mainted her indepence from both the Boer Republics and English.

Albasini's death in 1888 certainly did not diminish his legendary supernatural strength, as to-day at many a campfire the stories are narrated by the Shangaan tribe, remaining a symbol of nobility, sound justice, and one of superhuman prestige. The "Old Skanz", still to be seen to this day, and regarded as the tribe's most holy of places. His second son Lucas Willem Albasini was also a member of Ricchiardi's "Italian Legion", serving under General Louis Botha during the Anglo-Boer war, later captured in 1902. His daughters married into prominent Afrikaner families like Biccard, Breyer, Pittendrigh, Zeederberg (famous coach lines) and Hazelhurst. The "Albasini Dam" in Limpopo Province is named after Joao Albasini.

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