

Battlefront Namibia

An Autobiography

JOHN YA-OTTO

with
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The Big Family

The bus from Ondangwa, Ovamboland, jerked to a halt in front of the control post. The travellers, covered in red dust and weary from the 150-mile trip south across the arid plains, gathered their bundles and silently climbed down, one by one, to meet the white man's stare. The policeman who stood at the bus door fired questions and poked his cane into each passenger's belongings.

My aunt Anna carefully covered the big basket in her lap, picked up her bag and made her way to the front of the bus, the last to descend. Her head lowered, she put the bag at the policeman's feet.

'Where do you live?' he demanded.

'Keetmanshoop, *baas*.' Her voice was barely audible.

'What have you been doing in the north?'

'Visiting my family, *baas*.' Anna studied the dust, like a servant before her master. To meet the white man's eyes would be asking for trouble.

'What's in the basket?'

Her heart turned over, but she did not let it show. 'Food, *baas*.'

'Go on,' the policeman grunted. Without another word, he turned on his heel and marched back to the shade of his office.

Back on the bus, Anna lifted the cloth from her basket and smiled down at the child, innocently asleep in a nest of blankets. I was six months old and had cleared the first of many hurdles in apartheid Namibia.

As a small boy, I enjoyed Anna telling that story, but I did not understand its significance until years later, when I learned that Ovamboland was a restricted area, an extensive rural ghetto for Ovambos. I would never have accomplished what I did as a

SWAPO leader had the authorities known I was born in Ovamboland. As it was, my territory was the entire country, from Namaland in the south to Ovamboland in the north, and I learned to speak Nama and Herero at the same time that I learned Ovambo. My big family lived scattered all over Namibia and though we were all Ovambos, I have never had the feeling of belonging to one tribe or one place in particular.

Anna and her husband Abraham had left Ovamboland and moved south in the early 1920s before the South Africans had established their control posts. Abraham found a job in the cold, barren mountains near the Orange River, laying track for the South African Railways. He taught himself to read and write, and my clearest memory is of him sitting by the kitchen table, his big calloused hand clutching a pencil as he scrawled one letter after another to our kin in Ondangwa, Tsumeb, Windhoek or Okasise. Every few years he would save up enough vacation to take the family on a trip north. With frequent stops on the way, the journey to Ondangwa, where most of our relatives lived, took as long as three weeks, and poor Abraham never had time to stay long. Anna and her own two small children, Moses and Johanna, would linger through the rainy season to help in the fields and grow strong on the meat and fresh milk, commodities that were difficult to procure in the small southern railway towns. It was during one such visit in 1938 that they decided to adopt me, the newborn third son of Abraham's sister. When the harvest was in and I was weaned, Anna packed me in the basket and set out on the long trip back to Keetmanshoop.

The struggle to raise a family on starvation wages had made Anna as strong and as wise a woman as I have ever known. Her shoulders and arms were broad and muscular like a man's, and when she swung the hoe in our garden patch, the blade completely disappeared in the ground. With a twist of her wrists she would turn over big clods of the crusty soil, while Johanna and I followed with sticks to break up the pieces. She worked row after row, breaking the solid ground, later leading us children in planting, weeding and harvesting. The cabbage and beets from the patch were an important supplement to our year-long diet of mealie meal and bread with the occasional piece of roasted meat. The loads Anna carried were heavier than many men could lift. Squatting, she would place big tubs of wet washing on her head in one heave,

then slowly straighten her knees, while steadying the load with her hands. She made the trip from the water post to the clothesline without resting, letting her legs absorb the movement of her steps while keeping her back erect to balance the weight. When the load was unusually heavy, she broke into a trot, climbing up the embankment to our house and calling as she came in through the gate, 'Johnny, help me set this down. Quick!' The laundry usually belonged to white families across town, and when it was dried and ironed, she folded it neatly and took me along to deliver it. For as long as we lived in the south, Anna worked for white families, either doing their housework or taking in their washing.

At home Anna reigned supreme; Abraham refused to let himself be dragged into arguments with his assertive wife. One frequent source of friction was the *shebeen* that Anna ran in our home—she brewed and sold beer. Most of the money she earned from the whites went on sugar and *erkies* (a kind of bean), which she stirred together in ten-gallon vats and left to ferment. On Saturday nights, when a batch was ready, our house filled with thirsty men who came to rinse a week's worth of coal dust from their throats. At such times, Anna was at her best, her deep voice cutting through the din in Nama, Zulu, Afrikaans, German and even a few words of English. She'd be serving from the vats, passing on the latest local news and keeping an eye out for the police all at once. As *shebeen* queen, she was known to run a tight ship; if anyone became argumentative, she'd place her hands on her broad hips and suggest that the man behave properly if he ever wanted to be served at her place again. Few dared to disregard her.

As Johanna came of age, our *shebeen* became particularly popular with the younger workers and the soldiers who came to guard the railway during World War II. Anna watched her daughter like a hawk, and if Johanna seemed to be spending too much time with any one guest, Anna called her into the kitchen. 'Never, if I can help it, are you going to spend your life in a miserable railway compound,' she told Johanna. Some of the men would give me a *tickie*—a threepenny bit—to help smuggle notes to Johanna, a challenging task that I happily accepted until one day Anna caught me in the act. 'Son,' she said quietly, more pain than anger in her voice, 'we want Johanna to have a happy, secure life. If you love your sister, don't agree to give her any of these notes.' She took my head and I looked into her deep, dark eyes. For the

first time I understood something about Anna's incessant toil: she was wearing herself out so that we children might have something better. 'Don't let all my work be in vain,' her eyes seemed to plead.

By this time we were living in Aus, a tiny railway town on the southern fringe of the Namib Desert. Our home was a converted boxcar, which sat in the gravel just below the track, so close that the spurts of steam from the locomotives hit our back wall with a piping sound as the trains rumbled by with their loads of ore or fishmeal from Luderitz Bay. The railway workers' compound lay scattered below us, a few dozen frame huts of various shapes and sizes stretching towards the railway station. With its four rooms, our 'house' was as good a shelter as we could have hoped for. The wood in the walls was so rotten that I used to pluck out chunks with my fingers, but the odd pieces of plywood or metal siding that Abraham hauled home from the yard kept out the worst gusts of wind. When the draught threatened to blow out the kerosene lamp, we stuffed rags in the cracks around the windows and under the door, and huddled by the small coal-burning stove until it was time for bed.

The winter wind that swept in from the desert chilled Aus. Out of a pale blue sky, it hurtled up the valley, bending every shrub, polishing the rocks of water courses long since dry and raising a perpetual cloud of dust as it reached the compound. Within a week the wilting maize stalks in our garden would turn quite brown. Goats and chickens sought shelter, huddling near the wall, where they seemed to remain immobile for months. The sand found its way into everything. It built up in tiny piles along the cracks in the floor and would crunch under our feet when we got up in the morning. Our drinking water had a perpetual brown film on top of it even if we covered the bucket.

Those of the compound people who had no stove in their huts tried to fight off the chill with firebuckets. With coal from the railway they would build a fire in an old pail, which they took inside once the worst of the smoke had blown off. A good firebucket could burn through the night if you got up and stirred it a few times, but it could also be dangerous. Just a couple of doors down from our house, an old worker celebrated one payday with a few too many beers. As his family had been left behind in Ovamboland, there was nobody to wake him when the bucket

started to smoke. I happened to be passing by when they carried his body, wrapped in a blanket, out of the cold, dark shack.

The winter was worse still for the shepherds who roamed the mountains above Aus. The slopes provided good grazing for the karakul sheep, whose thick, black wool made fortunes for the German and Boer farmers in southern Namibia. The farmers employed only contract labourers, mainly Ovambos, who had to live with the herds all the year round. With very little food and clothing and no shelter other than what they could build for themselves from rocks and dry shrubs, these shepherds were ill-placed to withstand the icy wind. At times a few of them would come down to visit us – the only Ovambo family in Aus – and thaw their frozen limbs. Bearded and emaciated in their rags, they sat around the kitchen table with Abraham. I heard them talk about friends freezing to death and about beatings by the *baas* when sheep were missing. But to me their world was far away and their stories were like tales of strange people on faraway continents.

During those first years in Aus, my own world extended only from the store and the Rhenisch Mission school on one side of the compound to the railway station on the other, where Abraham spent his days shovelling coal into empty fenders. The station was off-limits to us children, but the 'Employees Only' sign just made it more exciting to steal through the gate. From the embankment just above the tracks my friends and I could watch Abraham and his partner, Mr Weiko, work the coal through the fuel bin. This coal was different from the kind we used in our stove; it came in blueish, shiny chunks, which clanged through the chute and into the steel fenders. And it was heavy. Even on the coldest days, Weiko and Abraham would shed their shirts so that you could see the sweat pearls trickling down their chests, making patterns in the fine layer of coal dust that covered everything. Next to the bin stood the water tower, from the top of which we had a view across the compound and the river bed to the white part of town. In the repair shop we watched the welders, behind their frightening masks, bend right down into the rain of blue and yellow sparks. They must belong to a special race of people, I thought, to handle fire like that. At times we would dare each other to go close, skipping and jumping as the sparks fell around our bare feet until one of the workers chased us away. Most thrilling of all were the times when we rode on the engines down to the turntable and back.

I would cling to a handle on the side of the boiler, feeling the throbbing of the rods beneath my feet and watching the white steam shoot by. In my dreams I was the traindriver, taking Anna and Abraham and all the people of the compound to the end of the line in Cape Town.

At the sound of the five o'clock whistle, I was back at the gate to meet Abraham. As soon as I could pick out his tall figure in the line of soot-covered men, I shouted, '*Kuku eya, kuku eya!* Uncle has come.' He would throw me into the air and put me on his shoulders, and together we would set out for home where Anna was waiting with supper.

These were the years when it was difficult to find food. A drought hit the country and the war, too, had something to do with the empty shelves at the store. Every month we got a bag of mealie meal but nothing more. Meat was rare; when sugar ran out, Anna could no longer brew beer, and money became a problem. Still, we did better than many families, and I never remember going without food, as many of my friends did. On the days that Anna worked for the whites, she would return home with bread and leftovers wrapped in a cloth and feed me before the others returned. 'Eat now, and don't say anything,' she would tell me. 'There isn't enough to go around anyway.'

I was Anna's pride and joy, and I lacked nothing. I always had a nice set of clothes for Sunday school, where, as in church, we had to look our best and do our best. When I started school, Anna made Johanna check my homework and if for some reason I didn't do as well, or behave as well, as she thought I should, she would reproach me for representing the family badly. Her punishment was moral rather than physical; the only time she brandished a belt was when I came home from school bloodied and with my shirt torn after a fight with David Rhomann, the bully of our class.

'Shame, look at you. After all I have taught you—'

'But *meme*, he called me "Ovambo",' I protested, letting her know that David had used the word as an insult. 'I bloodied his nose for it, too,' I added.

She let the belt drop. 'He did? That scoundrel!' She looked relieved. 'Well, he got what he deserved then. Tomorrow we'll get you a nice new shirt.'

Abraham, on the other hand, never bought me anything. Not that he was mean; no, my uncle saved every penny he could for

the house that he planned to build in Ovamboland once he retired. Ever since he had started to work for the railways this had been his dream, a dream made somehow more real for me by his drawings and elaborate calculations by the fluttering kerosene light. When Moses finished school and became a railway policeman in Windhoek, a few more shillings found their way into the retirement fund every month. Then, when I was seven, Johanna married a shop clerk in Luderitz; the time had come for Abraham to choose a site for the future *kraal*.

Ovamboland had tall trees, juicy green grass and pools of water, in which I splashed around with my brothers and sisters. Abed was the oldest, then Thomas, followed by me and five younger children. When I arrived, they eyed me for a long time before they approached to feel my shoes and my new khaki clothes. Their own clothes were worn and ill-fitting and their feet were much more calloused than mine. Anna cooked me porridge from mealie meal that we had brought from the south, while they ate their coarse *omahangu* cereal. They were forbidden to touch the biscuits and oranges that Anna had bought me in Ondjondjo. I didn't think this was fair, but Anna gave Abed a good hiding when he tried to steal some of my food. To them I was a sissy, a soft city boy. The first day we went to bring in the cattle they beat me for not knowing how to milk. Instead of teaching me to ride the donkeys, they'd help me get on, then slap the animal's hindquarters so that it leapt in the air like a wild horse and I landed in the mud. This went on for a week or two; I preferred to suffer the humiliation rather than run home and tell on them.

One day when Thomas and I were looking after the cattle, we came across a graveyard with three fresh children's graves.

'I bet you can read, too,' Thomas said, aggressively. 'Tell me their names.' He pointed to the small wooden crosses.

I read out the names, all of boys.

'You're lying!' he shouted. 'Somebody told you their names.'

'But who would have told me?' I protested. 'Who cares?'

Thomas looked sullen. He turned away and I could see he was about to cry. Suddenly I wished I hadn't been so haughty.

After that day I started to pay more attention to how our relatives and their neighbours lived. Most of the men, including my own father, were in the south on contract. The children always had a lot of work to do, much more than I was used to, and that left no

time for school. But even if they had had the time, I doubt that they would have gone. The nearest mission was many miles away, and modern education, like hospitals, cars and trains, was not part of their world.

Instead of taking me back to Aus, Anna and Abraham dropped me off with my childless Uncle Rheinholdt, with whom I was to spend the next year. Rheinholdt's farm, on a railway siding near Okasise, was huge by African standards. He kept a big herd of cattle and countless chickens and goats, which he sold for slaughter to his white farmer neighbours. I helped on the farm only when I felt like it because my uncle had boys from the nearby railway compound working for him. They took the cattle from the *kraal* early in the morning when I was still asleep and brought the buckets of fresh, frothing milk into Aunt Karotua's kitchen at sunset. I spent much of my time near the huts, where I would be at hand in case my uncle had to go to the store. For me the store meant biscuits, sweets and canned meat, and Rheinholdt never said no when I pointed to something. The one time he had gone without me, he felt so remorseful that he gave me five pounds. I held the big note in my hand, unable to think of anything to do with that much money. To be a farmer, I thought, was my kind of life – no work, lots of meat and money to spend as I wished.

On Sundays the railway workers gathered at our farm for a service. Rheinholdt boasted about everything I did, and he made it my task to read aloud from the Bible. I stood reading in Nama while someone translated the words into Herero for the benefit of the workers, who sat in a semi-circle on the ground. After the service, when it was time for beer and fried meat, they'd make me stay to keep them company, which was exceptional in our country, where children are kept apart at social events and at meals in particular. This way I learned Herero in a matter of months, and soon I could read from the Herero Bible. 'Your boy,' the men would tell my uncle, 'he's going to be a big man some day.'

The workers' boss was a huge Boer named Grobelaar. Once when Rheinholdt and I brought him a goat he had bought, he heard us exchange words in Afrikaans. 'Hey, *piccanin*, what was that you just said?' he asked.

I repeated the sentence, worried that I had said something wrong.

But the Boer let out a big laugh. 'This little one, he speaks Afrikaans,' he shouted with delight.

'Oh, yes,' Rheinholdt was quick to confirm, 'he even reads Afrikaans.'

With that old Grobelaar decided that I would become his 'boy'. Whenever the track gang worked near our farm, he had one of the men sweep a place for the two of us under a tree. There he eased his hulk into a folding chair and set me on his knee. While I read from one of his books, he kept an eye on the gang, interrupting my reading now and then to yell and swear at the workers for slackening their pace.

Grobelaar was the first white person I had known. In Aus my contact with whites had been limited to the few occasions on which I had accompanied Anna on her visits to the families she worked for. Inside their elegant houses, full of expensive furniture, I felt as if I were walking on a sheet of glass, and if the lady of the house happened to come into the room that Anna was cleaning, I immediately lowered my eyes in a manner that I copied from Anna. It didn't really matter, for the women ignored my presence anyway. The only times I had touched whites were during our fights with the schoolboys. Along the road between their school and ours was a grove of cherry trees, which in April and May were loaded with fruit. If the white boys were there when Edgar Weiko and I arrived with our friends, we'd pick up rocks to chase them off – and vice versa. There were usually more of us, though, so it wasn't often that the white boys stood their ground. I didn't associate Grobelaar with these people; to me he was a jovial grandpa, whose face lit up in a smile whenever I came over to read his favourite books to him.

The elderly German lady who ran the Okasise store was my grandma – at least for a while. When I became bored around the farm, I took Rheinholdt's bicycle and pedalled the couple of miles down to her shop, where there was always something to do. The old *frau* must have taken a liking to me, for she soon let me help her behind the counter. Like Grobelaar with his Afrikaans, she made a point of speaking to me in German. '*Johannes, kommst du hier, mein Kind. Bitte hilf diesem Herrn,*' she called when a customer came in. And I was only too glad to help, climbing the ladder to fetch things from the top shelves and adding up the prices on small scraps of paper. Neither of her two contract worker 'boys'

was literate, so when supplies arrived from Windhoek, I used to go with them to the station to check the packing slips. In time I became such a familiar sight at the store that people jokingly began to refer to me as 'the assistant'. When the old lady heard that, she laughed and patted my head; I was truly her trusted helper.

At weekends her grandchildren would come up from Windhoek. There were two boys and one girl, the oldest about my age. Naturally, we played together. We toured Okasise on our bikes and I showed them our farm and the railway workers' compound. One day we came back from such an expedition as hungry as hyenas and went into the kitchen to see what we could find. As I was rummaging through the drawers looking for bread, the old lady suddenly stormed into the room. 'Johannes! What are you doing here? Who told you to come into my kitchen?' Before I could say anything, she grabbed me by the arm and pulled me outside. 'Get going now,' she said, and pushed me down the steps.

I was totally confused; wasn't I her friend? I must have done something wrong. . . . I left, but said nothing to Rheinholdt out of fear that he, too, would punish me.

The next week when I went down to the store as usual, the old woman stopped me at the door. 'Don't come here any more,' she snapped. 'I don't need your help.'

So I stayed away. But I continued to play with the German children when they came to visit. We played as children do, competing and quarrelling, and one day, near the store, I got into a fight with the elder boy. We were rolling about in the dust when I felt someone grab me from behind. It was the old woman. With the help of her grandchildren, she dragged me over to a tree and tied me to the trunk with a rope. 'You cheeky little kaffir kid,' she shouted, 'you're going too far.' The children, too, yelled at me and threw sand in my face until their grandma led them back into the house.

Left alone, tied to the tree trunk, my astonishment turned to confusion and tears. I could have beaten that boy if I had wanted to, but it wasn't a serious fight. People I had thought were my friends now called me the worst kind of names. When the woman finally returned and untied me, I grabbed my bike without looking at her and pedalled away as fast as I could. For the rest of my stay at Okasise I never went to the store again, and neither did I tell anyone what had happened.

For the most part, however, my stay at the farm was carefree, and I would have liked to stay with Rheinholdt and Karotua forever. But Anna would not budge: one year was enough. I never returned to the farm. A few years after my stay, the government passed a law that took away most of Rheinholdt's pasture – the Boer farmers needed more space – and forced him to slaughter his cattle. Rheinholdt clung to the little he had left, but with poverty came demoralization and, after a while, Karotua left him. The last I heard, he had become an alcoholic – a poor, drunken African.

When Abraham and Anna retired to Ovamboland in 1950, I was sent to Tsumeb to live with my Uncle Isak Shitilifa. Tsumeb was a big, bustling town. Life centred upon the mine, a huge complex of buildings and monstrous machines where work never stopped. At night, the fluorescent lights made a bright, mile-high arc in the sky, dimming the otherwise brilliant stars that hang above the desert. The loud, grinding noise from the mill, heard over the chorus of diesel engines that ran the pumps, fans and elevators, churned inside my head. The worst thing about the mine, though, was the stench. Long after I had got used to the noise, I'd wake up in the morning nauseous from the sour fumes emanating from the oxidizing plant. It was worst during the wet season, when the rain seemed saturated with the stuff and even the water in the stream that ran through town was poisoned. My cousin Neru warned me against drinking from that stream.

The mine had attracted people from all over the country. In the Ohoromende location where we lived Hereros, Namas, Damaras and Ovambos all lived side by side. Nearly all the men worked for the American Tsumeb Corporation as clerks, drivers, machine operators or staff in the company's hotels and white workers' bunkhouses. Most of the actual miners were contract workers who were confined to the compound (known as Okatjari), a cluster of big cement dormitories surrounded by a tall cement wall with only one gate in it. The men went straight from the compound to work and returned the same way. The police were always ready to pick up anyone who strayed into town.

Only on Sundays were the workers free to leave the compound, and the open space by the gate would teem with people buying and selling soap, cigarettes, candles, food and clothing, playing *owela* in the sand or just chatting in groups. Here news from all over the

country was passed on, and stories about the past were told and retold, each time with a new twist to suit the teller's taste.

The contract workers came from Ovamboland, where they had been recruited by the South-West African Native Labour Association, SWANLA. They arrived in Tsumeb by truck, each with a cardboard sign around his neck to indicate his destination. Often when I passed the mine office, I saw the line of new workers, disoriented after days in the waiting camps. At times they would have to wait the whole day in the baking sun before the company clerks found time to process them.

Many of my relatives came down from the north like this, and as I entered my teens, I became a frequent sight in the compound. Submerging myself in the flow of men returning from the mine, I could sneak through the gate to visit cousins and uncles. Their rooms were even more crowded than at home; eight, twelve or sixteen men slept in concrete bunks stacked four deep along the walls. Their washing hung from string tied to the top bunks, so that you had to duck and plough your way to the door. The single light bulb was always burning to keep the occupants from tripping over each other's clothing and utensils. Men came and went at all hours; those who worked the early morning shift rarely saw those who worked in the afternoon or at night. The cement table in the middle was used for reading, mending clothes and eating. The food for all four thousand workers – porridge and tiny cubes of meat – was prepared and dished out on to tin plates by shovel in the cookhouse. Some of the men saved part of each day's porridge for Sundays when, hiding in the bush behind the compound, they used it to brew a sweet drink called *maheu* – this despite strict government prohibitions and frequent police raids to enforce them.

In the summer of 1953–4 the police raids became more frequent with the arrival in town of a new Native Commissioner. I was playing soccer with a group of friends one Sunday afternoon when a convoy of police jeeps and trucks roared by in the direction of the compound. The white policemen were armed with rifles, the blacks with truncheons. We dropped the ball and gave chase, taking a short cut over a ridge behind the mine offices.

A picture of confusion and terror met us when we reached the crest. The square by the compound gate was a chaos of police chasing, clubbing and kicking people. Merchandise that had been

stacked neatly on colourful blankets spread on the ground was now strewn all over the place. Women were clutching children and screaming, trying to get away. From the bush behind the compound men came running, followed by constables with dogs. Shouting and cursing, the line of police pressed the terror-stricken mass of people against the wall.

As if in a trance, we watched the raid from the slope, unaware that other spectators had joined us. I wanted to move a bit further up the hill where it was safer, and when I turned I collided with a man standing right behind me. My heart jumped: it was Leo Mate, one of the African officers, but dressed in a torn coat and old khaki trousers. So an informer had set up the raid!

Just then the throng broke through the police lines. A wave of figures came running, stumbling, falling over each other, heading up the slope to where I was standing. Above the din, shots rang out – one, two, then rapid firing. A man ten feet in front of me fell to the ground. His body contracted once, then he lay still. I stared, dumbfounded, waiting for him to get up, but he didn't move. For what seemed a long time, I watched the blood trickle from his nose and mouth.

Another volley brought me out of my daze. Leo Mate wheeled around, wincing with pain. Blood streamed from his right hand. Slipping in the loose gravel, I ran up the hillcrest without seeing where I was going until I found a path that took me around the edge of town and down into our location from the opposite direction. I did not want Isak to know where I had been.

Isak was one of the few men in Ohoromende who did not work for the mine; after a couple of contracts in his youth, he had become so deeply involved with the Rhenisch Mission that he now earned his living as an evangelist, spreading the word of God to Africans in and around Tsumeb. He lived what he preached: hard work, frugality and complete obedience to the Lord. Between four in the morning when he brought in the daily wheelbarrow-load of firewood from the bush and bedtime he hardly sat down. He expected the same hard work from his family. 'Why are you sitting there idle?' he would ask. 'Only those who work deserve to eat.' Not that any of us were trying to shirk; with Isak's miserable salary, we all had to do our best to make ends meet. I would get up at five to chop the wood that Isak had brought in, then go over

to the *kraal*, which we shared with three other families, to milk the cows and let them out. Neru, who was my age, helped my aunt in the kitchen and kept our house and yard swept clean. The younger children, Afeu and Ericson, fed the chickens and carried in wood. Our house was spartan. Only the adults sat on chairs and the only decorations on the walls were a few framed quotes from the Bible. 'Children, I'm a simple person,' Isak would tell us, pulling at his sleeveless undershirt. 'Don't give me my tea in one of these modern mugs; give it to me in a can.' And he held up the old jam can with the metal handle which he had made himself. 'You may use a cup, Johnny, but me, I like it simple.' With that, he would puff at his old pipe - his only luxury - with satisfaction.

Isak was highly respected in Tsumeb. His Sunday services filled the local church, and when he held catechism sessions in the compound yard, scores of workers gathered to hear him speak. With his deep, resonant voice and his white hair, Isak was a figure of authority to young and old alike. It seemed natural to me that people should look up to their church leaders. For as long as I could remember, the Rhenisch Mission preachers had been the ultimate authority to our family. Next to the family and the tribe, the church commanded our loyalty almost beyond question, and no one could gain recognition in the community without being a proven member of the faithful.

During my school holidays I often accompanied Isak on his trips to visit farm workers. Our donkey cart was loaded with Bibles and prayer books, which we sold to those of the workers who had money. My job was to give change, write down the names of those whom Isak had baptized and read the verses Isak chose for each sermon. On some farms the men had not seen any African children since they had started their contract - they could never leave the farm - and my presence sparked memories of home and their own families. As I read from the Bible, their eyes would be fixed on me as if I were their own son, mastering the magic of something they never knew. After the service they praised Isak for raising me in this way and brought us the best food they could find. Our visit was like a break in the clouds; they would plead with us to stay longer and to return as soon as we could.

Of course, we had to get the farmer's permission before we could speak to his workers. Some were glad to let a preacher see their

men; some did not care one way or the other; others were virulently antagonistic. I remember one trip in 1954, a year in which the newspapers were filled with gruesome stories about the Mau Mau revolt in Kenya. Isak and I had travelled the whole day to reach a big farm near Otavi. Our water had run out hours before; my throat was dry and coarse with dust when we finally reached the gate. A trough of clear water sparkled in the late afternoon sun. I jumped off the cart and started to lead the donkey towards the water. 'Wait!' Isak said. 'First we'll get permission.'

When we pulled up in front of the farmhouse, the owner came out on to the porch. He held a shotgun in his hands. 'What do you want, kaffirs?' he yelled. 'Who said you could come here?'

Isak said nothing. For a long time we sat silently on the cart while the Boer glared at us.

The farmer spoke again. 'I don't want any strange kaffirs on my property. Get going!' He gestured with his gun towards the gate.

When he was sure the man had finished, Isak finally spoke. 'I have come to preach the word of God. I am an evangelist of the Rhenisch Mission.' He held out his letter of credentials. 'If you are a Christian yourself, you will allow the word of God to be spread among your workers.'

'*Bliksems donner*, you black bastard, you think I'm as black as you?' the Boer spluttered. 'Man, I'm not black at all.'

'I know that,' Isak said quietly, 'but God's love does not differentiate. Sir, I only want to talk to your workers; the men are hungry for God's word and it is my duty to give them His blessings.'

The farmer pointed the gun straight at my uncle. 'Get out!'

Isak took the reins out of my hands and turned the donkey around. 'Can we please have some water from your trough?' he asked, in the same quiet voice. 'My boy is thirsty.'

'Look, you, I don't talk to kaffirs that long. Just get out that gate - now!' The farmer was coming down the steps. Walking behind us down the driveway, he kept the gun pointed at us until we reached a turn in the main road and were out of sight.

We rattled on in silence, the donkey pulling listlessly. I was waiting for Isak to say something, but the old man just sat as he always did, chewing on the stem of his pipe with slow, thoughtful motions of his jaw. The urge to break the silence finally became too strong for me. 'Was that man a Christian?' I asked.

The response was some time in coming. Isak seemed to be contemplating the setting sun, his eyes nearly closed under the bushy brows. 'When a white man points his gun at you like that,' he said finally, without looking my way, 'you can be sure he's a Christian.' Only when I was older did I understand what my uncle had meant.

Lessons in Black and White

I was always hungry. My breakfast of porridge and milk wore off fast, and if I brought food to school, I would finish it by mid-morning, between the sessions of physical exercise and school construction that the Rhenisch Mission leaders made part of our curriculum. From then on it was a battle between time and my rumbling belly. The lack of food made me so drowsy that I would get up and stand by the wall to keep from nodding off. Later would come the hunger pangs, usually brought on by the sight of some student eating. Once they had started, they became impossible to ignore; no biblical wonder, no verbs or multiplication tables could erase the image of meat and white bread that seized my brain. The prickling contractions in my solar plexus spread down to my legs. In the breaks I would fill myself with water, but that helped only until the constant trips to the outhouse made me feel even more wobbly. Nothing but food can chase away hunger when you're an adolescent and stretching like a mealie stalk.

Supper was not until seven or eight o'clock, so after school I joined my friends to raid vegetable gardens in the white townships. The green peas and tomatoes might be delicious, but there was never enough to fill me up. A better place to go was the white bachelors' bunkhouses, where we could find potatoes and whole sandwiches in the rubbish bins. In Aus, too, I used to search through the rubbish for food, scraping the mould off the bread and fruit and gulping the edible parts down then and there so that Anna wouldn't find out. But here in Tsumeb the older boys laid claim to the bunkhouse location; they respected each other's spots and ganged up on any outsider who moved in on their grounds. Only the crumbs were left for us younger ones, though I was luckier than most when Danny Mutilifa, who 'owned' one of the more bountiful

bins, recruited me to watch his spot until the senior classes were let out. Before I left school he would collar me: 'Make sure I find you at my bin, Johnny; let nobody else near it!' Only after Danny had sorted through the day's haul would I get my cut.

Another way to get food was to work for a white family. The year I turned fourteen I was hired by a Dutch couple in Kleintsumeb, the district where the engineers and managers lived. When I arrived after school, I went straight to the back steps where the cook, an old Herero woman, gave me a big piece of bread and coffee with plenty of milk in a can. Then I washed dishes, weeded the garden, and bicycled into town for groceries.

It would often be evening before my chores in the Dutch people's house were done. It was no good for a black boy to be caught in Kleintsumeb after dark, and I used to run along the back roads to the Ohoromende location. One night I ran right into a group of white boys playing with a dog. I turned down an alley, but was too slow. 'Slave! Kaffir boy!' the boys yelled. 'Get him, get him!' They set the dog on me. I couldn't possibly outrun the big beast, so I picked up a big rock and turned to face him. His ears lay flat along his head and his teeth were bared. As he was about to leap, I let out a howl and threw the stone, my eyes closed with fright. I must have hit him because when I looked again the dog was limping back towards the boys, whimpering. I seized the moment and ducked down the alley, crossed the next street and was gone.

I was almost home when a policeman on a bicycle pulled up beside me. Without a word, he grabbed my arm and handcuffed me to his bike, then set out for town so fast that I had to run to keep from being dragged to the ground. I was completely out of breath when we reached the group of boys. 'Ja, that's him,' they shouted. 'He threw rocks at our dog.'

'I'll take care of him,' the policeman said. 'C'mon, blackie, let's go.' And off we went at the same lung-puncturing pace. By the time we reached the police station, the policeman was only a blurred figure riding in front of me.

What were they going to do to me? Ever since I had been a little boy in Aus I had learned to fear the constables. They raided Anna's *shebeen* and arrested our neighbours for being without passes. From the adults I heard how they beat up contract workers who ran away from their bosses. In Aus, however, these things had been

the worry of the grown-ups; I could play and fight as I pleased. Now, as my captor led me into the charge office, the worst fears went spinning through my head.

And sitting behind the counter was none other than Sergeant Rautenbach. Of all Boer policemen, Rautenbach was the one who inspired the most fear in Ohoromende. He could track down anyone, and once he had his man, he was said to be ruthless. When he led the pass and beer raids, he would walk along the lines of arrested men and women before they were taken away, staring each one in the face, inscribing them in his mind, all the time swinging his key chain on his finger. When he swung his keys like that, everyone shuddered.

I began to weep before the feared Boer had a chance to open his mouth. 'Now, what's this one done?' he finally asked, without taking his expressionless eyes off me.

'No, no, *baas*,' I protested. 'These boys sent their dog after me and I defended myself and that's all that happened, honestly.'

Rautenbach's keys swung from his finger. His eyes bored right through me. 'Did you say "boys"? Don't you know that you're a kaffir?'

'But, *baas*, they were young, younger than me, *baas*.' I tried to defend myself.

From under the counter Rautenbach drew a *rottang*, a thick piece of reed treated with salt water. Without looking at me, he tried it on the counter. Whoop, whoop! The length of reed smacked down. Suddenly the officer who had brought me in grabbed me from behind and held me in an armlock. Bending me forward, he pulled my shirt up over my head.

The *rottang* stung my back. 'The way you talk to me is the way you talk to any white,' Rautenbach said. Again the *rottang* and I screamed. 'If it's a boy, call him *kleinbaas*; if it's a little girl, call her *kleinmeisie*.' His voice was calm, like that of a patient teacher. Each sentence was punctuated by a rap of the *rottang*.

When they were done, Rautenbach sent an African constable to get Isak. I was still sobbing when he arrived. 'Uncle, they beat me, they beat me.' I ran over to him and lifted my shirt to show him the welts across my back.

'This isn't a damn dressing room,' one of the whites said. 'Get your kid out of here, Isak; he's just upset.'

On our way home I told Isak what had happened. The old man

said nothing; he just gnashed his pipe between his teeth and stared down at his feet as we shuffled through the location. I couldn't understand it. Isak did not seem to react at all. 'But isn't there something we can *do*?' I finally cried.

Isak stopped and turned to me. 'No! There's nothing we can do.' He tried a faint, comforting smile, but his voice betrayed his bitterness. 'You must understand, Johnny, there's nothing we can do about these Boers. Just learn to stay out of trouble, that's all.'

Stay out of trouble! It seemed we couldn't leave our house without being in danger! What had we done to be treated this way? And Isak, who preached honesty and equality before God, how could he let it pass? The more I thought about this, the more questions I found. The whites had bigger houses, better food, more money than us – why did they also have to treat us worse than dogs? Were they afraid of us? Take the farmer who had waved his gun at Isak and me: uncle had even said the man was a Christian. But the other white Christians that I knew seemed to be different – or were they? There was Pastor Rechtmeyer, Isak's superior in the church: I had always thought of him as a kind man who gave us sweets whenever we ran an errand for him. But, there were other things about him that made me wonder what kind of a person he really was. When Isak returned, exhausted, from his long trips, he immediately had to walk the two miles to the pastor's house with the money he had collected, even though it would have taken the pastor no more than five minutes to drive over to the location. The few times he did come, Rechtmeyer never entered our house; he stayed in his car and had one of us children run to fetch Isak. In that way they talked – the missionary behind the wheel, with the window rolled down, Isak standing in the street, bending down to hear what his boss told him.

There were other things too. The missionaries got eight or ten times Isak's salary, yet they never went out on the dusty back roads to confront hostile farmers. They didn't even attend Isak's services in the crowded, steaming-hot location church. Once at the supper table, after a particularly frustrating day, I could see that Isak was fed up. 'These whites are all the same. Some will call you "brother, brother" and shake your hand, but after you've left, they'll wash their hands, just like the rest of them.' He was talking as if to himself, staring into his plate. 'All they care about is the money I collect for them,' he mumbled. Still, he remained faithful to the

Church. God, he repeatedly told me, was not responsible for mankind's follies. And with the secular world looking bleak for our people, religion was Isak's only source of hope. Once he had mounted the pulpit, he forgot about racism and hypocrisy; for a short while no earthly evil could block out the blessing that came from being with the Lord.

Was it the case, then, that I could not trust any whites? After being whipped by Rautenbach, I became suspicious towards all Europeans, including the missionaries whose paternalism and jaundiced view of equality now seemed all too clear. Nevertheless, some of them displayed a sincerity and a genuine commitment that kept me from becoming antagonistic towards the Church. One such person was Emma Köller, my teacher during my last two years at the Rhenisch Mission school. While other teachers rapped our knuckles bloody for being unruly, the most *Schwester* Emma could bring herself to do was to pick up the ruler and plead, 'It would hurt if I used this. Child, it would make Jesus very unhappy.' Her unbounded love was exploited by young boys such as Ben Amathila and me, her top students. When I had not prepared for a class, I would lie back on the bench and moan until Emma noticed. 'Johannes, are you sick?' She would come over and put her hand on my forehead. 'Maybe you are hungry. Have you eaten today?' Her kitchen was always well-stocked with bread and jam and meat. I would spend the rest of the afternoon at her house behind the school, eating, picking fruit in the garden and cleaning up so that the place looked nice when *Schwester* returned at the end of the day.

I kept in contact with Emma for years after I left Tsumeb. She used to tell me that I had the material in me to become a bishop and was sad that I had become involved in politics. Some of her letters were opened by the Special Branch police; if they were wondering why so many SWAPO activists were former students of Emma's, they must have felt cheated when they read her words: 'My child, I know you feel strongly about your politics, but you should also keep up with your Saviour Jesus. It is He who will free us and His ways are not violent.'

The difference between Emma and our other teachers was that she encouraged us to study, to learn. During the final year in the mission school, I began to think seriously about my future. I had become a leader of our mission's Christian Youth Association by

virtue of being an exemplary student. What I wanted to do with my education was not yet important: I only knew that I did not want to spend my life shovelling coal or living in some contract workers' compound. Had it not been for the political upheaval, which offered a new, secular alternative, I might well have stayed on to become a member of the congregation council, choir leader and socially active in the community – but lacking the inner fire of conviction that made Isak such a forceful person.

Halfway through that year, I decided that my only hope lay in Augustineum College at Okahandja, the only high school for Africans in Namibia. There, I thought, I would find an oasis of reason, a haven where no racial barriers were erected. Armed with a diploma from such an institution, I would be judged by my ability, not by the colour of my skin. But the competition for admission was stiff. I approached my studies with undivided zeal and scored high in the exams. Ben Amathila and Bernard Shanyengange, the only two among my friends with the same ambition, had left school shortly before exam time, Shanyengange after a fight with a teacher, Amathila because his parents could not afford to keep him in Tsumeb any longer and called him back to his native Walvis Bay to work in the canneries. Thus I was the only one left in our class to go straight to high school.

When I stepped off the train at Okahandja in January 1955, clutching my cardboard suitcase and a bucket of dried meat, I might as well have had 'new student' written across my chest. My uniform was spotless: white shirt, blue blazer, grey khaki shorts, black knee socks, and shiny black shoes. The blazer badge was in Latin and translated: 'From hard work is victory'. But I felt like a man. My graduation from the mission school had coincided with my confirmation, a boy's formal step into adulthood. The ceremony called for elaborate preparation in catechism class, though my mind had been ninety per cent on the new clothes that were required – adult clothes. Isak could not afford anything special, so I wrote to my uncle Petrus Haufiku in Tsobis who responded with a mail-order catalogue from Edwards & Co. in Cape Town. I sent away for a full dark brown suit with double-breasted jacket and trousers with creases sharper than knives. The gem was the beautiful Battersby hat, which had become the envy of every youth in Ohoromende. With this

important ritual now behind me, I felt in every way ready to take my place at Augustineum, our country's ultimate seat of wisdom.

'From hard work is victory' – if I had thought that Augustineum would be different from mission school, I should have thought twice when I read the school motto. The college buildings were old and badly in need of renovation. Consequently, the year I arrived, bricklaying was made part of the curriculum, taught by a semi-literate old Boer who with few words and vague gestures supervised the construction of a new dining hall. In the mornings he was gruff in the manner of the road-gang boss he had been before coming to Augustineum. He never really showed us the work but would curse us if the mortar was not mixed correctly and the walls turned out crooked. We spent nearly as much time taking down bad work and scraping the used bricks clean of dried mortar as we did actually building. Towards midday, when the old man had had his early shot of gin, the pace would slacken until gradually he drifted off into his own world altogether and we students sought the shade of the jacarandas while the remaining mortar crusted and finally turned to rock in the mixing troughs. It took us the whole year to finish that dining hall, and it still looked as if one big gust of wind would be enough to obliterate this testimony to our new skills.

That first year I spent half of my days on construction. The rest of the time was spent in the classroom under Mr Osborne, our science teacher, and Mrs Smith who taught history and Afrikaans. Osborne knew his subjects and when he stuck to teaching, the class was quiet and attentive. But all too often he would forget about science and launch into the strangest monologues about his physical strength. He was young and well built and when he brought his fist down, the heavy wooden desk shook. 'I can beat any of you,' he would say with a grin. 'With this fist I'll turn you into mincemeat. One smack in the mouth and you'll swallow your teeth like stempmealies.' He danced like a boxer, swinging wildly into the air, laughing at his own jokes until the class, too, laughed. I couldn't understand why a competent teacher would spend time on this kind of foolishness. But then much of Afrikaner behaviour was beyond me and Osborne's was not the most troublesome.

Mrs Smith was a different case. I don't know why she was teaching because she didn't believe that Africans could or should

be educated. Worse, she had nothing to teach us; all she ever did was to make us read from the text and listen to her racist tirades. 'You have come here only to fill your stomachs and sleep on a bed,' she would tell us. Then she would ramble on about how we Africans were completely dependent on the whites. 'How many blacks have guns?' she would ask with a laugh. 'If we wanted to, we could wipe you out in a minute.' Unlike Osborne, Mrs Smith had no respect from our class. To show her what we thought of her insults, we would bang our books on the desk tops and shout to each other across the classroom.

One day when the principal, Mr Steenkamp, came by on inspection, Ishmael Tjombe found the courage to raise his hand. 'Sir, we would like to bring your attention to something,' he said very politely. 'Sir, we have come here to get an education, but Mrs Smith seems more preoccupied with insulting us than with teaching.'

There was a long pause as Mrs Smith's face turned successive shades of red. Steenkamp's eyes scanned the rows of expectant faces; Ishmael obviously had the class behind him. 'My concern is that you learn as much as possible,' Steenkamp finally said. 'Mrs Smith and I will have a talk about this.'

A few weeks later, however, Mrs Smith resumed talking rubbish. But now our fear had been broken; we were not going to take this. 'Mrs Smith,' one of my classmates interrupted her, 'why don't you just give us the reading assignment and let us study in peace.'

Mrs Smith exploded in fury. To be told what to do 'by a black boy like you' was the worst insult she had ever received. She told us to shut up or leave. But it was Mrs Smith who left eventually, forced by a stream of complaints to depart the year before I graduated. We were awakening to the power of our numbers.

It was a great sacrifice for my family to send me to Augustineum. Isak, of course, had no money for fees. Abraham, Rheinholdt, and some of my other uncles helped, but their contributions barely covered the minimum costs. The first school year I had no pocket money and when my friends went down to Okahandja town on Saturdays, I would pretend to be too busy with my studies to go along. I found it more difficult to hide my shame when they returned with bags of bread, canned meat and sweets, which they

piled up on their shelves. The Windhoek boys in particular seemed to spend freely, and though they shared generously I could rarely bring myself to accept. There was nothing I could give them in return. 'No thanks, I don't like to eat much,' I would scoff while struggling to take my eyes off their smoked sausage. I had to find a way to make money. When Joe Ithana offered to take me along to Windhoek for the summer break, I jumped at the idea.

Joe had a job pumping petrol in a downtown service station. The day after we arrived, he took me to see the boss. 'There's nothing to the job, man,' he told me. 'It's all a question of attitude.'

With that important piece of advice I went to the cramped smoke-filled office where Mr Grobenau sat behind his desk, feet propped up. I stood in the doorway, waiting for the man to notice me.

'Ah, what's this?' Grobenau finally looked up from the paper he was reading. 'How are you, boy?' There was no trace of greeting in his voice.

But I was ready. 'Very good, *baas*. And how is the *baas*?'

Grobenau put down his paper. 'Suppose I'm a customer who has just paid - what do you say?'

'Thank you, my *grootbaas*.' I turned on a broad smile and held out my hand. 'Here is your change, my big *baas*.'

I was hired. Grobenau gave me overalls, a cap, and a rag for cleaning windshields. He told Joe to show me what to do - sweeping floors, washing cars and mending flat tyres. After a week I was ready to serve customers. 'Now watch me,' said Joe, and he sprinted out to greet a shiny station wagon that had just pulled up. He bowed low on one knee as he took the order and danced around the car as he cleaned every window and checked the tyre pressure. He cleaned the headlights with his rag and showed the driver the dipstick as he checked the oil. When it was all over and the station wagon was back on the street, Joe showed me the twenty-pence tip in his palm. 'That's what you have to do,' he shrugged. 'Better get used to it.'

Before long I had worked out a quite convincing routine. When a customer pulled up to the pumps, I ran out as though I had been waiting for him the whole day. I cleaned the windows and checked the oil and water before I gave him a chance to order.

'Fill it up, boy.'

'Ah, my *grootbaas*, I will serve you,' I cried.

While the tank filled, I walked around the car, polishing the chrome until it shone. I watched the driver all the time, doing my best to keep his attention. If he looked pleased, I even cleaned the headlights and number plates before accepting his money. The more attentive the customer, the greater the fuss I made of him – and it usually paid off. When a man was with his wife or girlfriend, I would make a special effort, going down on my knees and throwing my cap into the air. ‘Oh, my *baas*; this must be my *missies*. How she is beautiful!’ I pretended to faint at the size of his tip. I had never met such a generous *baas*.

As I became skilled around the pumps, another dimension of the job came to the fore: it was a challenge to manipulate the customers. At first I had been genuinely nervous about making a slip with them; now my bowing and scraping were calculated manoeuvres. As I approached each car, I’d size up the driver for what he might be worth and treat him accordingly. The dour types, farmers in town and government officials got only the minimum treatment. Younger businessmen and workers, Germans and especially Americans and Canadians, could be good for a fifty-pence tip if everything went well, so for them I performed my best. By the end of the summer, the trepidation I used to feel when faced with whites back in Tsumeb had given way to the what-can-I-get-out-of-this-one attitude that I had so admired in the Windhoek boys.

I made more money during my first two weeks at Grobenau’s than I would have made working the whole summer as a houseboy in Tsumeb. Even when I put aside half of my earnings for school, I had enough left over to buy myself a pair of stylish tweed trousers and a crew-neck sweater of the kind city boys wore. In this outfit I no longer felt shy to go to the cinema with Joe and his friends. After seeing a film starring Louis Armstrong – the great Satchmo – I took a week’s worth of tips and bought a second-hand recordplayer and some old records with the ‘His Master’s Voice’ label. How the music stirred me! In the beginning I knew only African singers such as Dorothy Masuka and Miriam Makeba but later, when I was back in Augustineum, American pop music invaded Namibia. The Mills Brothers, the Everly Brothers, Pat Boone and Elvis; we played their records over and over again until we knew the words of every song, if not their meanings. My favourites were Elvis’s ‘Jailhouse Rock’ and ‘Shiboom, Shiboom’,

which I practised until I could copy Elvis gurgling deep down in my throat better than anybody else in the school. The wall behind my bunk was covered with magazine pictures of Elvis, Harry Belafonte, Natalie Wood and Tony Curtis.

I knew how to handle myself in the world. No Mrs Smith could ever make me lower my eyes from now on. Back at Augustineum, I left the blazer and the black knee socks at the bottom of my suitcase never to touch them all year. My new friends were Moses Garoeb, Onesmus Akwenye, Tommy Akwenye and the other city boys. They were sophisticated fellows. Among other things, they read newspapers – something I had never done. In 1956 and 1957 the papers were full of articles about the Bus Boycott and other protests against the government in South Africa. In 1957 Ghana became independent under Kwame Nkrumah, an educated and articulate man who was respected by many Europeans but whom our teachers considered as just another kaffir who would ruin everything the British had done to build up his country. On Sundays, my group of friends and I would sit in the shade of the big poplars near the dormitory and talk about the things we had read, such as the Suez crisis. We knew that the Egyptians had kicked out the English, who then went to war, but we didn't quite know what to make of this conflict, until one day Osborne happened to bring it up during his regular boasting binge, blasting the 'cheeky' Egyptians.

'But isn't it their canal?' somebody dared ask him.

'Whaaat, the Egyptians' canal???' Osborne repeated, incredulous. South Africa would never stand for anything like that, he ranted; South Africa knew when to put its foot down. During his half-hour tirade he did not explain anything, but only a fool would have dared to ask him again. The answer would have to come from elsewhere – and in time it did.

In our group, I was satisfied to listen while the other boys discussed the complex events. But when someone lent me a tattered copy of the *Cape Times* or the *Windhoek Advertiser*, I searched the pages for headlines about the United Nations, Suez, Ghana, Hungary – anything that had come up in our conversations. I hid the papers in my bedding to make sure that nobody but my friends knew what I was reading. One day shortly after the 1957 winter break, Efraim Mize showed me a leaflet he had brought back from South Africa. It was a single sheet of paper,

printed on both sides and folded in half to make four pages. It described how the whites of South Africa's ruling Nationalist Party saw themselves as the *herrenvolk*, the master race, how they exploited black people, how their police beat and harassed us. Efraim told me that he had been given the leaflet by a member of the African National Congress, an organization that I had read about in the papers.

The crumpled sheet felt like fire in my hands; we'd be in trouble if someone caught us with this. Yet my eyes wouldn't leave the page – what it said was true! Master race, that was it! My hands quivered as I read; my heart pounded as if I'd had a sudden attack of fever. It was true – but it was dangerous. I almost wished that Efraim hadn't shown me the leaflet. I had come to Augustineum to get an education, not to get involved in anything subversive and end up getting expelled. Trying my best to seem indifferent, I handed the leaflet back and, without a word, brushed past Efraim to join the stream of students going to the dining hall.

Though I did my best, I could not block out of my mind what I had read in the leaflet. Everywhere I turned, troublesome questions cropped up. My favourite subject in school was history, but our textbook contradicted the stories every Namibian child is told by the elders. The Germans had never been 'invited by warring tribes' to bring peace to our country, neither had South Africa brought us prosperity. True, we had fought among ourselves, and the Germans had taken advantage of this to conquer us all. The text, however, said nothing about our grandparents' resistance and about the terrible slaughter of the Hereros and Namas that followed the conquest. Even as late as the 1930s, air force planes had bombed Chief Ipumbu's village at Ukwambi, not far from my birthplace. Only in the last fifteen years – since I had been born – had there been no open resistance against Boer rule. But it no longer surprised me that our schoolbooks were lying; the whites simply wanted us to think that they were more intelligent than we, that they were a superior race and that, consequently, they were entitled to rule. But what fool would believe that there was something superior about our old, drink-sodden bricklaying 'instructor'? And he was not the only stupid Boer I had met.

When I returned to the garage the following summer, I needed nobody to show me how to get the big tips. I was making more money than any of the other pump boys. As a reward, Grobenau

put me on the night shift as well. I worked alone and after the evening traffic had died down, I would make myself a bed across the office chairs and go to sleep.

One night I was woken up by the frantic honking of a car pulling in. Fumbling with the pump keys, I ran outside. 'Yes, baas?'

'Fill it up,' said the Boer at the wheel.

When I had finished, he started the car. 'Back to bed, kaffir,' he shouted through the window. 'Thanks for the petrol and go to hell.' And he sped out of the station before I could say anything. The money would be taken out of my wages.

Twice I was beaten up by a gang of drunken whites who had nothing better to do than to pester Africans. They pushed me around and kicked me, rolled me in puddles of grease and turned the water hose on me. I was too terrified to try to defend myself. When they came the third time, I knew enough to keep the door locked. Rigid with fear, I watched them as they tried to kick in the door and pressed their boozed-up faces against the glass. 'Open the door, you black bastard, or we'll kill you!'

These types, drunk now, were the sort I crawled for in the daytime. 'I treat them like gods and what do I get?' I thought. The servile grin on my face became increasingly forced as a new, gnawing resentment welled up in me every time I went to attend to a car. If being a fool was the only way an African could make some money in this system, what was I trying to do with my schooling? When I thought about Augustineum, it was our discussions that came to my mind. One day, I felt, the dam that held back my feelings would burst. But before I reached that point, the summer break ended and I returned to Augustineum for my final year.

The petrol station job made me realize that I could never work directly under whites. That was one, but only one, reason for my decision to become a teacher. Our country needed African teachers. All around, children were flocking to the schools that existed; in some places they walked for an hour or more and crowded into classrooms so packed that they had to sit on the floor with nothing but a slate and a piece of chalk. But to learn what? Bricklaying? Mrs Smith's racist nonsense? The years at Augustineum had taught me this: if we Africans wanted to learn, we would have to rely on ourselves.

Many of my classmates chose the same course, and the more we

discussed our plans, the more wrongs we found in our situation at the college. Even if most of us worked hard at our studies that year – the final exams could make or break our futures – an atmosphere of suspicion seeped into our relations with the teachers. They became jittery and seemed to read the worst intention into the simplest question. Their reactions alienated us even more, and as the year ground on, our lessons became a war of nerves. It was not until the graduation ceremony, however, that the tension broke into the open.

The dining hall had been cleared of tables and we were seated in rows, dressed in our Sunday best, hushed and solemn at the weight of what lay ahead. I was selected to be valedictorian for our class. For weeks I had pondered what to say; I could not make up my mind whether to be pleasant or serious, whether to talk about the good times past or the challenge of the future. In the end time had run out and I wound up with just a few notes that didn't say much of anything. The teachers were seated on stage, facing us for the last time. My education was officially over; I no longer depended upon their approval, yet the burden of their judgement hung over me as I clasped the notes in my sweaty palms. Since I didn't have the courage to speak my mind, I should have asked to be replaced as valedictorian. But it was too late now.

Mr Steenkamp, the principal, shook me out of my quandary. I knew him as a soft-spoken, almost meek person, so it surprised me when, instead of offering wise words of encouragement, he cut his farewell speech down to a point-blank warning: 'Whatever your career, don't get mixed up in politics!' Teachers in particular had an obligation to the government, he said; anyone who used their classroom as a political platform was a sinner.

This talk about obligation to the government angered me. My obligation lay with my people, with those who were going to be my students. Heart pounding, I mounted the podium and began speaking without even thinking of my notes. I spoke of the importance of education for a people like ours, of how young teachers should help to shape the future of our country. The sentences came rapidly, carried by their own logic to the conclusion: 'It is only when our people have education that we will have independence.'

With the tension in the hall now thick as fog, the ceremony was brought to an awkward close.

In the following year, the tension at Augustineum turned into open conflict. Halfway through the final term, the government closed down the senior class and sent the students home. By then I was teaching in Windhoek and had discovered that the polarization at Augustineum was only part of a confrontation building up throughout the country. The events to unfold in Windhoek would be on a different scale, the consequences much more severe.

The Windhoek Massacre

The muddy square bore the painful testimony of the previous night's devastation. Pieces of clothing lay scattered about, torn and trampled into the dirt. All the windows and doors of the municipal offices that fronted on to the square were shattered. Piles of broken glass along the walls glistened in the early December sunshine. A jumbled heap of blackened sheets of corrugated iron was all that remained of the Old Location beer hall. The fire had cracked open the huge vats of beer and the brown liquid was still oozing into the ashes, emitting a foul steam that settled over the square in the windless morning.

Two municipal workers in overalls were struggling to lift the body of a young woman out of the puddle where it had lain all night. A striped scarf was still wrapped around her head; the upper part of her blue cotton dress was saturated with blood. The water in the puddle was a dark, dirty red.

Four other corpses were already stacked on the truck. As the two workers straightened up with their load, the body of the young woman slipped from their hands and fell rigidly to the ground. The white foreman swore at them from the cab of the truck, but when his eyes met mine he immediately looked away, uncertain, almost fearful.

The older of the two workers looked at me and said without force: 'Bastards.'

I wanted to say something, if only to agree, but no words would come.

I felt the younger worker's gaze upon me. 'Say, aren't you one of the boycott leaders?'

Yes, I was, for a while, I thought. But now? The boycott had only brought trouble. If the whites could kill to move us Africans

out of Windhoek, what was the use of resisting? In a way, I felt personally responsible for the bodies on the truck and in the street. Since coming to Windhoek a year ago I had made too many grave errors of judgement. There was one thing I was sure of now: the people of the Old Location were dead set against the forced move to Katutura. Dead set. That much I had learned painfully early on, as the lines of conflict were drawn and I found myself on the wrong side.

It was easy to be mistaken about the Old Location. Vast, crowded, the shanty town wrapped itself around the scrubby hills of Windhoek's northern fringe, on the opposite side of the city from the white suburbs. The wiry shrubs gave way to houses made of cardboard, cloth, scraps of plywood, flattened oil drums and other makeshift building materials, thrown together in no apparent order. Only when you got near could you distinguish the shacks, set so close together that some families could easily touch their neighbours' walls from their own windows. Family quarrels behind the thin, gaping walls soon became neighbourhood gossip. Everyone knew one another and strangers did not remain so for long. You knew the streets, unmarked and unnamed, only after you had lived in the Old Location for a long time. Around the irregular rows of shacks, streets snaked and jogged, narrow and dusty. When the rains came, the streets became roaring rivers that washed away shanties and left deep gullies. Neighbours took in the homeless until materials could be salvaged and a new place propped up. Since it was impossible for a stranger to locate anyone without asking, Africans with passbook problems also found refuge from the police there. It was as if the very hardship of life in the Old Location created a great family in which each member looked out for every other.

In spite of the hardship, there was a strange contentment with Old Location life; in the midst of so much noise, a serenity. In the mornings women sang as they did the laundry by the water post and children played in the puddles left after the night's rain. Towards midday the sweltering heat drove people inside and the afternoon hours were quiet – even the chickens and goats sought refuge under the eaves. When the shadows again reached into the streets, women emerged to take down the washing from the lines strung zig-zag from house to house, and the children set out for the hills to bring back the daily load of firewood. Smoke from a

thousand cooking fires collected in a blue-grey haze in the hour before sunset. Soon a clanging of pots and pans echoed from street to street. The first stars would be shining when the workers began to arrive home from town. They came in twos and threes from the city, slowly climbing the last hill before home, their shoes still caked with dried mud from the morning's walk to town. 'They're here!' The word travelled several streets ahead of the men, followed by shrill children's voices and rapid little footsteps down the streets, then deep, muffled voices and laughter. Later came the noises of clattering plates and cutlery and of conversation as shadows moved back and forth behind the kerosene lamp in each doorway. Then, as the mist crept along the hillsides, the shadows became fewer; the lamps were brought inside, and quiet settled over the maze of dark shanties. This was the Old Location, as I came to know it.

But I understood little of this community when I moved in with my uncle, Ananias Kasheshe, in April 1959, fresh from Augustineum. I was to start teaching at the Herero school the very next day. I had not seen the school, nor did I know how to get there, but my uncle came to the rescue by giving me the name of a teacher who lived near us. That was how I first met Aron Hipondoka. He was to take me along and introduce me to the principal.

That first morning I set out at six, a full two hours before classes started. Aron was not yet up, so his wife sat me in a corner while she went about her tasks of making the fire for her husband's bathwater, feeding the children and cleaning up. I would have liked to arrive early but, well, Aron had been teaching for fifteen years so he should know At seven the children had finished their breakfast and were packing their school bags. Outside, people were hurrying off to work. I was sitting on the edge of the chair, glancing at my watch every few minutes. Mrs Hipondoka laughed at my impatience. 'The old man will come when he's ready. He's lazy, that's all.'

At ten to eight Aron finally emerged from the bedroom, slowly, groggily, his pyjamas dragging on the floor. I jumped to my feet. 'Good morning, sir.' My loud, formal greeting sounded very out of place.

Aron rubbed his eyes. 'Who the . . . ? Ah, the new Ovambo teacher.' Aron, too, was Ovambo. He looked at me, a curious smile

flickering at the corners of his mouth. 'Let me get dressed and we'll go.'

It was now after eight. Aron sat by the table, fumbling with his clothes, thoughtfully pulling on each article, pausing often to yawn. His shirt was stained and his shoes unpolished. Seeing me standing with my hand on the doorknob apparently irritated him. 'Sit down and relax,' he grunted. 'You schoolboys, you think new brooms sweep clean. Well, you'll soon get old in this job.'

The students were lined up in the yard when Aron and I finally arrived. They were of all grades, from seven-year-olds to boys who looked both older and bigger than I. All faces looked our way as we came through the gate, but nobody spoke. Without even looking at anyone, Aron shuffled straight to his row of pupils. I was left standing alone.

A few minutes passed and still nobody moved. We seemed to be waiting for someone – suddenly I realized who. Heart pounding, I walked up to the grey-haired, imposing man I took to be Mr Katjimune, the principal. 'Excuse me, sir, I'm John Ya-Otto.'

Katjimune barely noticed me. 'Okay, son, just step over there. As soon as that new teacher shows up, I'll get you registered.'

'Sir,' I took a deep breath, 'I am the new teacher.'

His eyes opened wide, then he burst into hearty laughter. I could feel the four hundred students staring at my back; I wished I could vanish into the ground. But Katjimune's humour was good-natured. 'Attention, everyone! Our new teacher is already here,' he roared. He pumped my hand and, turning to the rows of students and teachers, made a short welcoming speech, arm draped over my shoulder. 'Don't judge a man by his size,' he concluded. 'The young have new ideas to pass on. So I'm happy to introduce ... er ...'

'John Ya-Otto,' I whispered.

'... John Ya-Otto.' Katjimune beamed and the students broke into laughter and loud applause. I had begun my teaching career.

Aron seemed happy to have me as a colleague. We often walked home from school together, and I discovered that in spite of his laziness, he knew a lot about his profession and was always willing to offer advice. 'We Ovambos have to stick together,' he said. But for some reason Aron wanted nothing to do with the principal or

the other teachers. In the breaks he sat brooding by himself while I mingled with the others. When classes had resumed, however, he would often send one of his pupils with a note asking me to his classroom. The first time, I thought it was urgent and rushed over only to find Aron sitting on his desk, totally indifferent to the pandemonium of students shouting and playing tag across their benches. Aron complained to me about Katjimune, the principal, relating incidents over which the two of them had almost come to blows. He named teachers who, in his opinion, were unfit to teach and were only looking to gain influence in the community. Oblivious to my embarrassment, he talked on and on, in front of his sixty students. But I found it difficult to concentrate: what if my students were running wild outside? What if the principal came by? Still, Aron was my mentor and many years my elder – according to our customs, I could not possibly walk out on him. So, in anguish, I listened.

Aron's hostility towards our colleagues was hard to understand; he seemed too intelligent to be concerned with such petty squabbles. It took me a month to discover his reasons.

The government had prepared an excursion for all of Windhoek's African schools: we were to visit Katutura, the new township under construction outside Windhoek. We set out on the long bus ride over sandy ridges and across the flat, wind-swept plain to the west of the city. Suddenly, from the wasteland, rows and rows of unfinished houses appeared, lining the hastily cleared roads that trailed off in different directions, ending, as they began, among the scrub. An Afrikaner official took us on the tour. There was not much to see. Each little house looked exactly like the others: square, cement-block structures with tin roofs, two windows and an outhouse by the back door. A worker was passing from house to house, painting numbers on the front doors: H3-17, H3-18, H3-19 This, the official told us, was the Herero section, third street, nineteenth house. Ovambos would be settled over there, Namas over here – with a sweep of his arms he indicated subdivisions that did not yet exist – each tribe in its own separate section.

We wandered about in groups, bending against the wind and dust blown up from the construction roads. Aron was by my side. For once he looked content. 'I say, Johnny, they're really pushing

ahead here. Each family will have a nice house. And better schools, too. Listen, there's something I want to talk to you about.'

For years Aron had wanted to establish a separate Ovambo school in Windhoek. 'We have to look out for our own people, you know. Why should we just be thrown in with the Hereros? And you know how crowded that school is.' He was right on that point. I had over ninety ten-year-olds in my class, and no matter how hard I tried, none of them could get the personal attention that is so crucial to a good education. But why not simply divide the pupils into two groups, irrespective of tribe?

Aron checked to make sure nobody else was within earshot. 'Let's be realistic, Johnny. Schools cost money. I've already discussed the question with the Native Commissioner and he's willing to help with a small school, for the Ovambo children only. Just two teachers - you and me. But first we must convince him that there really are enough Ovambos to fill two classes.'

A separate Ovambo school would be a step backwards from the spontaneous integration of the Old Location, where tribal differences were no longer as significant as in the past. But the quality of education was important, too. 'If you really want to help your people and not just dream about it, here's your chance,' Aron said, as we boarded the bus for the ride back to the crowded, ramshackle old Herero school.

That evening and the next, Aron and I visited all the Ovambo families in the Old Location, Aron asking the questions while I recorded the information on official forms: size of family, number of children, source of income. Then Aron gathered the completed forms and led me to one of the government barracks near the location entrance. The light was still on in one office. Telling me to wait, Aron entered through a door that bore the sign 'Office of the Native Commissioner'. Ten minutes later he re-emerged with a satisfied smile. 'Well done, Johnny. Now, let's wait and see.'

We only had to wait a week. When we heard, however, it was not from the Native Commissioner but from the Herero Advisory Board. People were infuriated that their children had been taken to Katutura without parental consent. In an emergency staff meeting at the school, Katjimune showed us the angry letter from the Board demanding that all teachers attend a community meeting to explain our actions.

The Advisory Boards - there was one for each tribal group - had

been set up by the South Africans many years before for the purpose of handing down government policy to the people. Nobody had paid much attention to the government-selected go-betweens who served as Board members, but in recent months, when the members had refused to take people's grievances to the Boers, the Old Location people had forced them out of office in favour of more radical leaders.

Komando Hall, the meeting place of Windhoek's Herero community, was packed when we arrived, led by Katjimune. The tumult of a hundred excited conversations overwhelmed us at the door. We had pushed halfway up the crowded aisle before people noticed us. 'They're here! Make way for the teachers!' I looked up at the walls of the converted church. No religious symbols were apparent; the weak light bulbs hanging from the ceiling barely illuminated the stained-glass windows. It was as if God had left this building, to be replaced by the judgement of the people. And the people were angry. 'Let them up front. Make way!' At the head of the hall, where once the pulpit had been, the sombre Advisory Board members were seated behind a long table.

The chairman pounded his cane on the floor, demanding silence. 'Our teachers have some explaining to do,' he began. 'They should know by now that we will not move to Katutura.'

The crowd responded with cheers. I had not realized that they were so strongly opposed to the new township. Without knowing exactly what was at stake, I began to feel that I had made a serious error. The Board members glared at us as the clamour finally subsided. 'Who will speak first?' the chairman asked.

A young teacher from the Catholic school leapt up. 'Sir, we're teachers, not politicians. This Katutura business is not our concern.' There were angry shouts from the back of the room, but the chairman restored order and the young teacher blithely continued. 'We are civil servants. We have to answer to the government. Who has given you people the right to put us on trial?'

This time the chairman could not have quashed the reaction even if he had tried. Shouts of 'Kill him!' rose above the general uproar. People were standing up, shaking their fists at us. A threatening group of thugs in the back brandished their knobkerries.

Katjimune seized the moment. He produced his own knobkerrie

from beneath his coat and advanced on the chairman's table. When he rapped the table and shouted for order, the mob reluctantly settled down. 'This man,' Katjimune pointed to the young teacher, 'speaks only for himself. We in the Herero school work for the community, not the government.'

'Then why did you take my child to Katutura?' someone jeered. 'Yeah, what about that? Explain yourself,' resounded throughout the hall.

Katjimune was struggling to remain calm. 'It was my mistake and I accept full responsibility. I really didn't know—'

'*You didn't know?*' This time the interruption came from one of the Board members. 'It's such an obvious ploy to promote Katutura among the children. Mister Principal, please—'

Katjimune swallowed. 'We understand now; it won't happen again. If the people are really opposed to moving, then we teachers are opposed to it too.'

The applause that followed this diplomatic feat came as a tremendous relief. Karita, a fellow teacher standing next to me, exhaled from the very bottom of his lungs. 'That was close, man, too close.'

But Karita had spoken too soon. 'Wait a minute,' a deep voice called, as the chairman was about to signal the end of the meeting. All eyes turned to a man who rose from his chair behind the table.

Sam Nujoma was already becoming a legend in the Old Location. Once a labourer for the railways, he had been fired for trying to form a union. Now he was blacklisted by the employers and, unable to work, he devoted his time to the Advisory Boards and to community issues. He had startled everyone by engineering the ousting of his own conservative uncle from the chairmanship of the Ovambo Advisory Board. Though Sam himself was not officially on any of the boards, people all over the location recognized him as one of their real leaders.

'There is something else to explain, Mr Katjimune,' he proceeded. 'You say your staff really works for the people. Yet two of your teachers have taken a census of all Ovambo families for the Native Commissioner.'

I was seized by the anxiety one feels in an early morning pass raid, when a flashlight is suddenly turned on you — you have done

something wrong even if you are not sure just what. My stomach tightened with tension.

Katjimune looked uncomfortable. 'What are you talking about, Sam? What's this?'

Sam, still standing, now turned to the audience. 'I've heard a rumour, and tonight we are going to find out if it's true.' He spoke slowly and clearly, presenting Aron's plan for the Ovambo school as well as Aron himself could have done. He let it hang in the air for a moment, then suddenly pounded the table so hard I almost leapt out of my chair. 'The trouble is,' he shouted, 'the trouble is that there is only one place the government will build this school: Katutura! Aron Hipondoka, do you have anything to say for yourself?'

An angry whisper rippled through the hall as people tried to identify the sell-out. Next to me, Aron jumped to his feet, his eyes wide with fright.

'Kill the traitor!' someone shouted before Aron could open his mouth. Some of the stick-brandishers at the back of the hall began to make their way towards us.

Aron bolted for the door. In a few giant steps he was down the aisle and gone before anybody could stop him.

I instinctively wanted to follow, but I hesitated. Surely Sam knew about my participation? Katjimune, too, must have figured it out, and perhaps the other teachers, because of all the time I had spent with Aron. But if I ran now, I would have to keep on running – from my job, from Windhoek, from my friends – or I would have to live as an outcast, a traitor to the community. So I sweated and appraised an escape path to the door through which Aron had just disappeared.

'Who is the other one?' the crowd demanded. People were still looking around, fists clenched. I stared straight ahead, afraid to meet any eyes. The aisle was clear enough. I could still get away.

Sam cleared his throat and fixed his stern gaze on me. My heart almost stopped. 'I had it wrong. I think Hipondoka acted alone.'

The meeting was over. Avoiding the few people I knew, I slid into the night and made my way home along the back roads.

I did not yet fully understand the passion surrounding the issue of Katutura. All I knew was that by assisting Aron I had nearly thrown away any chance of earning respect in the community. So I fell back on what I was sure about: doing my job as a teacher.

Exams were only a few months away, and my students were not nearly ready. The old teacher I had replaced had taught them nothing. I dedicated myself to my work, preparing special assignments to help the students catch up with the previous year's curriculum and staying late with those pupils who were lagging furthest behind. I asked advice from Karita and the other teachers. They knew the Old Location and its problems well; there was only so much we could do within the school when hunger, sickness and pass troubles threatened life outside the classroom. Still, as summer approached, we were making progress. My students became inquisitive and enthusiastic about learning.

I spent many evenings going through the location, visiting my students' homes, and was surprised by the adulation with which I was received. *Mitiri*, the families called me, a word for teacher that carried the respect normally bestowed upon someone twice my age. The entire family would gather, the father surrendering the best chair, the children on the packed-dirt floor with their knees drawn up to their chins, studying me in silence, and sometimes the oldest daughter standing, waiting until the mother rushed her away to make me tea. I was given every available comfort where there was little to go around.

It did not take me long to discover that those families who were most concerned about their children's schooling were also interested in other issues. In one of the very first households I visited, as I drained my cup and stood up to leave, the mother took my arm and fixed me with a serious look. '*Mitiri*, you should be a leader of this community. What have you done about Katutura?'

With a start I looked from her to her husband, still impassive, to the expectant children on the floor. No, they didn't know of my association with Aron; the question was not meant as a trap. 'Well, I'm just a teacher,' I said stiffly. 'I don't know about—' I broke off as I realized that my words were those of the young teacher at the meeting in Komando Hall and not very different from the admonitions of the white principal at Augustineum who had warned us to steer clear of politics. I began again, stuttering. 'Please, I'm still new here. I don't understand this - why don't we just move to Katutura?'

'It would be easier that way, yes. But we cannot let the whites push us around like that.'

'But I've seen Katutura,' I continued. 'The houses are new. There's lots of space.'

'The houses in Katutura may be newer and nicer than this,' the husband interrupted, looking around the tiny shanty, 'but how much rent will we have to pay the Boers? And the bus fare to work will be too expensive. If we can't pay, we'll be kicked out and deported to some reserve.'

When I left the family, the man walked me into the street. 'You're a good teacher, Ya-Otto, and your intentions are good too. But soon you'll have to take a stand on this question of the move.'

These were arguments I came to hear again and again as I visited my students' homes. The most precious aspect of Old Location life was the lack of government presence. Here the people found a reprieve from the Boers' efforts to implement their apartheid state. But in Katutura every man, woman and child would be registered with the Native Commissioner, who, for the smallest problem, could revoke a person's residence permit. No permit meant no job; and deportation to the distant native reserves would be the next step. There would be nowhere to hide in the new township. The state would also run – and profit from – the bus service, the water supply, and electric power for those who could afford it. The only road out of Katutura could be sealed off in a minute by the police. In short, we would become as dependent as kittens, and every aspect of our lives would be open to government scrutiny. People were infuriated by the Boers' plans and looked to the teachers, among others, for leadership. These visits to families in the location satisfied me that my brief collusion with Aron was still a secret, but I also realized that I could not remain on the political sidelines for much longer.

As the biting winter wind gradually loosened its grip on the location and made street life more tolerable, the move to Katutura became everywhere the foremost topic of conversation. They talked about it, in the pass queues, in the tax queues, by the water post, even in the public bathhouse.

In the summer heat I usually went straight from school to the bathhouse for a shower. The road took me by the house of Sam Nujoma. Sam was often on his porch, reading from a stack of papers beside him. I would try to slink by, avoiding his gaze. He knew what I had done with Aron; I knew what he stood for. Yet

he would invariably look up and boom, 'Good afternoon, *mitiri*,' with a warm smile. His friendliness surprised me. It was an invitation to talk, an invitation I did not have the courage to accept until one day he was more direct: '*Mitiri*, please sit down.' He motioned to the steps where he was sitting. Nervously on guard, I took a seat on the bottom step.

'I hear good things about the new teacher,' he began. 'I've been wanting to talk to you but you always seem so busy when you pass by here.'

I could only think of the Komando Hall meeting. 'Look, sir, about what I did with Aron, I—'

'Don't worry about it,' Sam interrupted. 'You're new in Windhoek, new to the issues here. An honest mistake.'

Behind his smile Sam was watching me carefully. He handed me one of the documents from his stack. 'Read,' he said. The paper bore the stamp of the United Nations but was signed by something called the Ovamboland People's Organization – OPO. The letter was a petition for Namibia's independence. Startled, I looked up at Sam. Then I noticed he had a whole stack of these papers right there on his porch, as if they were newspapers. What if the police came? I suddenly became very nervous.

'Well, *mitiri*, what do you think?' he asked, serious now.

'Uh, interesting, very interesting.' Inside I felt that same jittery sensation I had felt when reading the ANC leaflets at Augustineum. We were in plain view of everyone walking by. Quickly I handed the paper back. 'I'm afraid I must be off. I have a lot of homework this evening.'

Sam, however, was not quite done with me. 'This Saturday I'm going to Rehoboth to meet the Coloured leaders. But my Afrikaans is poor; I need an interpreter. I hear your Afrikaans is very good. Could you help me?'

'Well, perhaps—' A request from Sam was not one I could turn down lightly.

'If you can come, be here at eight in the morning. We can talk more on the way. Think about it. We need people like you, people with education and the respect of the community.'

I had heard of some meetings in the location; they must be the work of Sam and his OPO. So, people were talking about independence. I, too, believed that one day we would have our own government, that Namibia's Nkrumah would emerge to give us

leadership. Yet, when we had discussed these questions at Augustineum, the time seemed far off. Our debates had been the ramblings of students engrossed in books and newspapers. Our messiah was to be a well-educated person in some important position, and he would somehow make the Boers go away. I never would have thought that these same ideas of freedom could be nourished in the tough, day-to-day struggle for survival in the Old Location. I liked Sam; he was a man worthy of the respect one shows one's elders. But I had been tricked by my respect for Aron. However, a little translating could do no harm; I decided to accept Sam's offer.

Sam did most of the talking on our way to Rehoboth. 'You know, Aron's not a bad person. He was used by the Native Commissioner.'

'But it was his plan.' I now felt personally betrayed by Aron and welcomed any opportunity to dissociate myself from him.

'Well, we have to keep in mind our real enemy: the Boers and their government. No African is my enemy – though sometimes I have to remind myself,' he added with a grim smile.

We passed out of Windhoek and were driving at good speed on the lonely, open road. The bare, brown mountains rose sharply to our left and stretched as far as the horizon. Sam's mind was on the meeting ahead with the Coloured leaders. 'We have to get everybody together on this,' he said. 'Hell, if we can't unite against Katutura, how will we ever run the Boers out?'

I remained silent while Sam let his thoughts flow. 'We need a national organization, representing all the tribes. That's where young people like you come in – educated, in positions of respect. We need your kind to build such an organization.'

He went on to talk about Katutura: how we would have to pay rent and all kinds of new taxes, the new Bantu stores run by the government, the high bus fares. The Boers would make a lot of money when they finally had us where they wanted us. Of course, they already made money from the Old Location services, especially the beer hall. But OPO had a plan that would change that: a boycott of all municipal services, such as buses and the cinema, as well as the beer hall, until the government gave up Katutura.

I knew most people in the location would probably support such a boycott but I wondered how the government would respond. The

Boers had experience of this kind of action from many of South Africa's cities where the Congress Movement had boycotted buses and beer halls for years. But I said nothing until we were seated around the table in the house of Diegaart, the Coloured leader, and it was my job to translate. Diegaart was openly sceptical of the idea of a boycott. 'The Boers won't give in, I tell you; they never have. People will get hurt, then who'll be responsible? We will.'

It was not empty talk. The Coloured community at Rehoboth had revolted thirty years before. They had been slaughtered by the South African Army because they had no weapons but sticks and a few old muzzle-loading guns. Now the Coloureds were suffering under the apartheid laws and they were being kicked around by the white *baases*. But on the Boers' race scale, they were one notch above us blacks, enjoying slightly better jobs, schools and housing. They would be risking more by confronting the government with a boycott.

Olivier, another Coloured leader, slid a brown hand through his wavy hair. 'Why are you so interested in this Katutura? Let the Hereros handle it, Windhoek is their territory.'

As I translated Olivier's remarks, Sam got up and paced the room. 'Look,' he jabbed a finger at the two men, 'if the government can move the Hereros in the summer, they'll move the Ovambos in the autumn. Soon there'll be a Katutura for the Coloureds too, just wait.'

We returned to Windhoek without any promise from the Coloureds to help with the boycott. Sam wasn't discouraged though, and within days the OPO pickets closed down all government services in the Old Location. Talk had become action. I was impressed by Sam's ability to win people to his cause. Once the boycott was successfully under way we even won the support of the Coloured community in Windhoek. I was still wary about being pulled into the OPO but this did not prevent me from becoming a good friend of Sam's, and an experienced interpreter as well.

The boycott was so effective that the Boers were soon forced to respond. The public meeting that they scheduled for 2 December was an unprecedented event: for the first time ever, Boer officials were going to speak directly to the people of the Old Location. They had to – the tribal Advisory Boards could no longer be trusted to pass on government directives. The meeting was an admission

by the Boers that our resistance to Katutura was a force to be reckoned with.

As I stood on the edge of the huge crowd, waiting for Sam and the other OPO leaders, I listened to the arguments that crackled in the midday heat. Some people were sure the whites were only coming to give us a final eviction notice; others argued adamantly that the government had given up on the move. Men threw down bets on what would happen. Women shifted the babies on their backs and cursed the whites who made them wait here in the baking sun. In anticipation of a showdown, thousands of Old Location residents flooded over the bare earth of the soccer field.

When Sam and his friends arrived where I stood, a crush of people separated us from the wooden stage where a crew of municipal workers was setting up the public address system and chairs for the speakers. He shook my hand and smiled. 'Today, *mitiri*, your voice will be heard far and wide.' Leading our group, he began to nudge his way through the mass.

'Excuse us, please.'

'It's Sam Nujoma. Hey, make room.' People pushed back to clear a path for us, cheering us as we passed through. I felt as if I were on parade.

On the platform we were joined by Chief Kutako and other members of the Herero Chief's Council. I tried to spot familiar faces in the throng. Everybody was here, it seemed: workers in dirty overalls and khakis, clerks in white shirts and loosened ties, women with bright scarves that dotted the crowd with colour, and children running about in front of the stage. They were all restless. 'Let's begin, Sam,' someone shouted. 'No, we must wait for our friends,' someone else responded and we all laughed.

Before long, a cloud of dust signalled the approach of the mayor's black Mercedes. The police chief's jeep followed close behind. The cars pulled up to the edge of the crowd and out climbed the four officials who were to address the meeting. The mayor, the Native Commissioner and the location superintendent all looked more appropriately dressed for their air-conditioned offices than for the hot, dusty soccer field. They straightened their dark suits and squinted into the crowd awkwardly. Only Police Chief Lombard had had the sense to dress for the situation. He wore shorts, open-neck shirt and dark glasses. One hand casually

placed on his gun holster, he led the ruddy-faced group through the quietly hostile crowd. They were already sweating profusely when they reached the stage and slumped into the front row of chairs.

Luckily for me, the Boers had brought their own interpreter, a thin Coloured man whom I came to pity more and more as the Native Commissioner, Bruwer Blignaut, began the speeches. Blignaut was trying to be friendly, saying that although it might be difficult for us to comprehend, resettlement in Katutura was really in our interest. He was so out of touch with the crowd before him that they just ignored him, waiting quietly for the next speaker, Superintendent Pieter Andries de Wet, who stepped confidently to the microphone. 'We chose the name "Katutura" because it means "we want to go and stay there",' de Wet began.

When the thin man translated this opening remark, the crowd suddenly burst into life. 'Liar! Liar! You don't even know our language.' The people of the Old Location, not the government, had dubbed the new township 'Katutura', meaning 'we are always being moved'. People yelled and shook their fists at the bewildered de Wet. A woman leapt on to the edge of the platform. 'We'll never move. You'll have to haul our dead bodies to your damned Katutura!' she screamed into the Boer's face. De Wet, who did not understand her words but could not mistake her sentiment, jumped back. Sweat poured off his balding forehead; he was almost swimming in his black suit.

If the officials had more to say, they preferred to wait. After a confused pause, Sam took the microphone. 'Is this the best our friends can do?' he began and I translated into Afrikaans. He went on to attack the Boers' reasons for the move to Katutura. Soon the crowd took up the chant, 'We won't move! We won't move!' Sam turned to the whites as he waited for the clamour to subside. 'Why don't you move,' he said when his voice could be heard. 'You have shown that you cannot rule us. Go back to South Africa and let us rule ourselves.'

I was only halfway through the translation when Jaap Snyman, mayor and one of the richest men in Windhoek, leapt from his chair and pushed me away from the microphone. 'Don't listen to this communist agitator,' he screamed hysterically, 'he's leading you astray. We know what's best for you.'

A loud, humiliating guffaw rolled through the crowd. Thousands of black people were laughing openly at the mayor to his face. Some began to chant in Afrikaans, 'Boers, go to Kakamas! Boers, go to Kakamas!' (Kakamas was a remote outpost in a desolate area of South Africa's Cape Province, and this slogan was soon to become our trademark.) No longer able to make himself heard, Snyman stepped back, his face distorted in frustration, whispered something to his colleagues and, in close formation, the four of them trooped off the stage with the unfortunate interpreter making up the rear. The jeering crowd parted to let them pass. 'We'll see who moves,' people yelled after them as the Boers' entourage roared off towards Windhoek in a cloud of dust.

Sam was still standing next to me, looking in the direction of the disappearing cars. 'Well, we showed them, eh?' I sniggered.

But Sam was not smiling. He watched the crowd break up and slowly drift back into the location. 'You can't make fools of the Boers,' he said pensively. 'Sooner or later they are going to make us pay for this.'

The boycott was now in full swing; the excitement of the public meeting sparked many new volunteers to join the pickets at the bus stops and the beer hall. In turn, the whites stepped up their harassment. Municipal policemen patrolled the area, always in pairs. Police Landrovers cruised back and forth between the Old Location and the city, driving on the very edge of the road to force people into the ditch. The triumph of the mass meeting turned into uncertainty; the next move was up to the Boers and no one could guess what they might do. It was not until 10 December, though, when the mayor summoned all the Advisory Boards to a special meeting, that I began to worry.

The meeting had already started when I slipped into the downtown cinema. One of the Nama Advisory Board members was speaking from the front row. 'But can't you see that people don't want to move? If everyone opposed to Katutura came to testify, we would be here for six months.' He shrugged and sat down.

For a while nobody spoke. The city officials sat up at the front behind a long table, pitchers of ice water before them. I spotted the four who had been at the soccer field, plus a dozen of their underlings. They were leaning back in their chairs, smoking,

looking pleasantly bored in the air-conditioned coolness of the cinema.

Lombard rose to his feet. The police chief was a stocky man with a sunburnt face and closely cropped blond hair. He wore his uniform this time, resting one hand on his gun as his eyes scanned the Africans below him.

'Bantus, let me tell you a story.'

Bantus – in one word Lombard restored to the whites the authority they had lost on the soccer field. This was a different kind of meeting. The Boers had probably already decided what they were going to do.

Lombard's story was about five Africans who came upon a set of lion tracks in the veld. Four of them were cocky fellows and went ahead even though they were unarmed. Of course, they were eaten by the lion. Only the one who turned back survived.

The police chief looked straight down at the Advisory Board members and adjusted his gun belt. 'We have talked long enough,' he said. 'Are you moving to Katutura – or are you going to meet the lion?'

Nobody responded. The faint humming of the air conditioner was the only sound in the cinema. I saw Sam and the other Advisory Board leaders exchange worried looks. After a minute, the whites gathered their briefcases and sauntered out, chatting among themselves. There would be no more meetings.

That evening, eager to escape the growing tension I felt, I dropped in for a chat with friends at the far end of the location. I had forgotten about the day's meeting when, at around nine o'clock, one of the neighbours burst into the room.

'There's trouble by the beer hall. Someone attacked the pickets and now the police are everywhere, beating people with clubs. There's a huge crowd down there.' The man spoke breathlessly, having run all the way up the hill from the square. Then he noticed me in the corner. 'Ya-Otto, man, I saw some of your OPO friends there too.'

'I must go.' I was out of the door and halfway down the street before he caught up with me. 'Let me go with you. It might be dangerous down there.'

We soon heard the commotion. As we got nearer, there was a sound of breaking glass and someone shouting through a bullhorn. We ran towards the noise.

The square by the municipal buildings was ringed with police cars. Hundreds of angry women and men were out in the open space, yelling and waving their fists. A double line of police was trying to push them back towards the beer hall. Police clubs slashed the air, pounding bodies to the ground amid screams of pain and rage. But the mass of people forced the police back step by step, drowning the bullhorn voice.

My companion and I were separated from the mob by the police lines. We took shelter by a squad car. Rocks sailed over our heads, hitting the cars behind us with sharp clatters. I wanted to get out of this spot, but there was nowhere to go. I hunched down in hiding while my friend peered over the car.

'They're breaking through,' he said suddenly. I sat up to look. Policemen came scrambling to safety behind the wall of cars. Officers were unloading rifles from a van, barking their commands. '*Gaan hier die kant, en jy gaan daar!* Get over here, quick!' Within seconds, a dozen men were leaning over the vehicles, aiming straight into the throng.

I could hardly believe what I was seeing. The crowd was still a hundred feet away, slowing down before the line of cars. The bullhorn was silent. The last few constables dashed to safety. The commanding officer raised his stick. '*Gereed en . . . skiet!* Fire!'

Three volleys erupted in rapid succession. Black figures dropped to the ground. The crowd recoiled; people were trying to get away, stumbling over each other, pulling each other down, screaming.

The police kept firing into the chaos. Yellow flashes split the dark. More bodies fell, shot from behind. Spent cartridges popped against the car that sheltered us.

A shattering noise nearly burst my eardrums and flames shot up from the car next to us. I rolled away, into the open space in front of the gunners. A dark shadow darted past the blazing vehicle; in panic I followed.

I did not hear the shot. In front of me my companion was lifted into the air before dropping, convulsing, to the ground. I saw it in a flash, then I hurdled him and kept running. I could feel the rifle aimed at my back, the bullet on its way. Now I could hear nothing, see nothing; escape was my only thought.

Safety lay behind the first row of shanties. I dived around the corner and collapsed in the dust. People were streaming past me,

crying, screaming – but the sounds were distant, unreal. I staggered back to my feet and kept running until I reached home.

The next few hours I remember only vaguely. I found Onesimus Akwenye, Jason Mutumbulwa and some of my other friends, and we stayed together for the rest of the night. A Volkswagen with two white men inside passed us on the street and we pelted the car with rocks, breaking all the windows before they could get away. Then we climbed the hill behind the houses and watched as a police armoured car roared by. From its turret a powerful floodlight lit up every inch of the block; there was no sign of life anywhere.

We stayed on the hill until dawn. I left the others and walked back down to the scene of the massacre. The square was quiet and almost empty. The ambulance sirens were no longer wailing and the police had disappeared. The shots and screams echoed distantly in my head, and images of the rioting crowd faded before a desolate picture of gutted buildings, scattered rocks and debris, a few bodies lying crumpled in the street, and two workers lifting them on to a truck, while a white man watched them from the cab. Glass crunched under my shoes as I approached the two workers who were struggling with the body of what, before last night, had been a young living woman. I stood by them for a while, unnoticed, lost in thought.

‘Eh, aren’t you one of the boycott leaders?’ Dumbly I looked at the young worker. His expression was simply curious, not at all accusing. The boycott may have provided an excuse for the massacre, but I knew who had done the shooting, who had ordered it. The recollection of the police chief’s arrogant threat pierced the numbness I had felt during the night. ‘Bantus, let me tell you a story.’ I could see Lombard adjusting his belt again, and this time I wanted to stand up, shout him down, shut him up, for good. They were bastards, these Boers: inhuman, ugly things. Cruel, unfeeling, they could shoot us down without flinching.

But if they could shoot us down like this, they were also powerful; in the end my anger and hatred was misspent, useless. Bastards, sure, but strong bastards, against whom our boycott was as a broken spear against a mighty lion. Lombard was right, in a sense; they had the guns and we didn’t. All our grand ideas about freedom and independence seemed insignificant, even silly, before this simple fact. I had been so naive at Augustineum, and after a

year in Windhoek, among the older leaders and the people who called me 'Mitiri', I still felt like a boy among men, dangerous men.

Me, one of the boycott leaders? Hardly, I thought. And anyway, there no longer seemed to be any point in resisting. Surely the real boycott leaders would see that. The location movement was good while it lasted: it brought everybody together for a time and finally put tribal separations in the past; it made people conscious of what they had that was precious, in spite of the whites; it showed them how callous the whites could be in taking that away. But that resistance was broken; now, I was sure, the boycott was over.

I turned again to the young worker to reply, but the two men were already alongside the next body, which I recognized as that of my companion of the night before. The men turned him over so that his open eyes stared blankly at me. 'Let me go with you,' he had said, 'it might be dangerous down there.'

The workers must have noticed how shaken I was, because one put a hand on my shoulder. 'You knew him?'

'Sort of,' I mumbled, looking away. Across the street sat the burnt-out shell of the police car that had momentarily sheltered us both. There was a heavy feeling in the pit of my stomach. He was a family man - I could almost hear his wife and children crying far off in the Old Location - and I was just a confused, young rebel, but a boycott leader as well. Why wasn't it I who had been killed? Why this man? What had he done? There was no sense to it. A black man's life was worth exactly nothing to the Boers. It didn't matter whether you were against them or not. I realized then, at a time when I should have been thanking God that I was still alive, that my own life was out of my hands. And if I could die at any time, I might as well die fighting.

'Bastards!' I said loud enough for the white foreman to hear. 'They think this is the end. We'll see, this is only the beginning!'

The two workers said nothing. I left them, crossed the street and headed back into the Old Location.

The Lines are Drawn

'Which one of you is Ya-Otto?' A tall, muscular African approached us without goodwill. It was an overcast Saturday morning and I was helping the driver load the delivery van at the back of Karl Richter's bottlestore where I had a part-time job.

Without setting down the cases of beer, I replied, 'What do you want?' I was in no mood to talk to anyone, as Richter had just denied my request for a rise. Relations between the storekeeper and his workers had been tense since the massacre that December night, four months earlier.

'Let's go. My boss wants to see you,' the African commanded. When I ignored him and reached over for another stack of boxes, he grabbed my shirt. 'I'm from the Special Branch, understand?'

Annoyed, I followed him around to the front of the store where a heavy-set Boer was waiting in a grey, unmarked police car. 'Hello, *houtkop*,' he grinned. 'Get in, blockhead.'

I stood still, feeling the blood rise to my head. I was not going to tolerate this, not even from a Special Branch agent. The Boers had not changed a bit since the massacre. Only a few weeks before, in South Africa, they had shot down seventy blacks at Sharpeville without so much as a word of regret. Of course, they had blamed the Africans for what had happened. The Old Location was still under curfew and the police conducted frequent raids on the homes of the community leaders; the few friendly whites had grown cautiously aloof, like the old butcher who no longer sang and joked with the long line of Africans in his shop. I had grown increasingly bitter. I could certainly not bring myself to play the fool as I had done when I worked at the petrol station while a

student at Augustineum. The Boers would get nothing more from me.

'Well?' the Boer asked, 'are you Johnny Otto or not?'

'And what is it to you?' I replied. 'I don't talk to Boers.'

The officer was not angered. 'Ja, ja, this is our man, all right,' he chuckled softly. 'Another big-mouth *grootmeneer*.'

'If you're through with your insults, I have work to do—'

A big hand grabbed my neck from behind and held me in a vice-like grip. 'Baas, we do too much talking here,' the big African complained. 'Let me take him in for a few tricks.'

The Boer laughed and shook his head. 'No, let go of him. He'll talk, if we're nice.'

With the brute behind me, I got into the back seat and spent the next half-hour answering questions about my family, schooling, friends – nothing that seemed important – while the officer took meticulous notes. Finally he closed his little book with a sigh and squinted at me with pale blue eyes. 'Just out of school and now you want to destroy the government that gave you an education. You think you'll be a big man here in this shit-arse country. Just watch it, *houtkop*, or we'll get you like we got the others.'

The 'others' were the OPO leaders who had been deported to Ovamboland soon after the massacre, leaving the Old Location community without its most dynamic leaders. But why the police were worried about me, Sam's interpreter and a first-year teacher, was beyond me. 'You can't deport me,' I told the officer. 'I was born in the south.'

The big African stirred next to me. 'Please, *baas*, let me teach this cheeky—'

The Boer ignored him. 'So was Sam Nujoma,' he smiled.

They could not deport Sam, so they had arrested him on ridiculous charges and then rearrested him as soon as he got bail. This had gone on for weeks and all of OPO's money and energy went on keeping Sam out of jail. Finally he fled the country. The loss of Sam's leadership had been the single most debilitating blow to the Old Location movement. I knew this Special Branch agent could easily get me fired from the school and blacklisted. My frown gave away my anxiety.

'I think our friend understands now.' The Boer motioned to his assistant who opened the car door and let me out. 'We'll be seeing

you,' the chief grinned as the car sped off, leaving me in the dust.

I never met those two again, but I ran into many Special Branch agents over the next few years. They watched me and the young leaders of the South-West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) with interest. SWAPO, which replaced OPO in early 1960, brought together Namibians of all ethnic groups. Its formation was Sam's last act before he slipped out of the country. To me, this step was only natural after the boycott in which the Hereros, Namas, Damaras and Coloured had been as active as the Ovambos. If some people wanted to maintain their traditional tribal organizations, such as the Herero Council, that was fine, but we needed something stronger to oppose the Boers' schemes for our country. Even though the massacre had left me pessimistic about our chances to put pressure on the government effectively, I had joined SWAPO. And little by little, as its early leaders were deported and harassed into silence by the police, I found myself drawn – reluctantly, at times – into the core of the most active members. From that vantage point, as my bitterness and hatred for the South African regime pushed me into the work of organizing a national liberation movement, I came to understand something of the Boer mind.

In our confrontations with the whites I tended to be more diplomatic than most of my SWAPO colleagues. Still, I never took the kind of insults I had put up with when I worked at the petrol station. It was not so much a question of conscious attitude as of a spontaneous bitterness that I couldn't control. The time I beat up a white security guard in a supermarket is an example. The cashier was too busy to look up as she checked out my groceries and because of my polished Afrikaans, she must have assumed that I was white. 'Thank you, *meneer*. Have a good day,' she said as she handed me my change. But in that very instant she looked up and, to her horror, realized her mistake. 'You, kaffir, who do you think you are,' she yelled.

I tried to ignore her even as she continued to scream at me. But as I reached for my bag of goods, the guard arrived. He was a slight fellow, but probably felt he could do anything to me just because of his skin colour. Without asking any questions he twisted my arm and led me towards the back of the store. My temper flared. I dug my heel into his shin and with my free hand grabbed his hair until

he let go. I could have left it there, but by now I was too angry. I went at him with a barrage of blows that bloodied his face. This one zealous white was suddenly paying for all the offences that had been committed against me by his race. I didn't care who he was or that it was really the cashier who was to blame; something in the pit of my stomach kept my fists pounding away at the guard's face until the store manager arrived and pulled me off.

Most whites in Namibia attach great importance to the way Africans address them and vice versa. Every 'baas' and 'meneer' assures the white man that he is really the boss – and that we know it. The less successful in life, the more he will insist, for he feels threatened by any sign of intelligence in Africans, particularly the 'cheeky' and educated ones such as myself. A German storekeeper in Windhoek once blew up at me and my friend, Andrew Cloete, because he didn't understand Andrew's English. Andrew had recently returned from Cape Town where he had been the chairman of the SWAPO branch, and where English had been his working language.

'Du, Johannes Ya-Otto, you think that by speaking English you are as good as a white man,' the storekeeper shouted. 'But listen to me. God put the whites here to take care of this country. The day you rule, you won't find me here.'

'That's all right,' I replied in Afrikaans, wanting to calm the storekeeper and get Andrew served without a fight. 'But you're here now and my friend wants to buy a few things.' The surprised Andrew switched to Afrikaans and a minute later were were back on the street, shaking our heads, but with the goods we wanted.

Some whites were patronizing rather than overtly hostile. I met a few who liked to show me off to their friends because I was a SWAPO leader and a teacher – an intelligent African – just as when I was a boy, Grobelaar, the railway foreman, had bounced me on his knee and marvelled at my ability to read Afrikaans. I knew white workers in Windhoek who would greet their favourite Africans with a roar of laughter and jocular punches to the stomach or about the ears in a strange show of affection. We would be expected to dodge the jabs and giggle 'basie, basie' as they showed their mates that these Africans were their pals. I couldn't tolerate such people for even a second. Instead of confronting them, however, the diplomat in me made me take flight every time I saw one of them approaching.

Yet it was not the educated, 'intelligent' blacks who bore the brunt of racist abuse. If most Boers looked upon us as inferior, they hardly considered the contract workers as human beings. A few years after I joined SWAPO, a series of murders exposed conditions worse than slavery on many of the settler farms. It began when a SWAPO member in the Otjiwarongo area, the heartland of Boer farming, found out that a farmer had shot and killed two of his contract labourers just before their eighteen-month contracts were up and their pay due. Threatening to kill the other workers as well, the farmer made them cut up the dead bodies and dump them into the cauldron for cooking pig food. We had to hire a lawyer to force the police to investigate. When the officers arrived at the farm, the bodies had boiled down to the bones.

Such a murder did not seem all that improbable. The farmers acquired their contract workers by paying a small fee to SWANLA – the South-West African Native Labour Association – supplied them with mealie meal and paid them their few shillings of accrued wages at the end of the long contract. To the farmer, a calf or a day's tomato harvest was worth more than an Ovambo labourer.

As it turned out, the publicity from this first case led to other reports from other farm labourers. One farmer, who was never brought to trial, had strung a wire across his road at the right height to decapitate the worker standing on the back of his truck. Another case disclosed a murder for entertainment: three drunk Boers had tied a worker to their car and dragged him along at high speed. The man was still alive when they stopped, so they killed him with a set of jump cables connected to the car battery. Two of these farmers avoided charges by giving evidence against the third who was sent to jail for three years. The state would not have brought them to court at all had it not been for SWAPO's press statements and public demonstrations.

But a few whites tried to distance themselves from the conduct of their brethren. Once, when I was hitching a lift to Windhoek from Otjiwarongo, where I had been publicizing one of these atrocity cases, an Afrikaner family in a station wagon picked me up. I was quiet, as behoves a black stranger, and lost in thought about the murder case, when the man began to talk to me. 'Meneer,' he said without a trace of sarcasm in his voice, 'I know

your people will rule this country one day. Today I'm doing you a small favour but tomorrow you may cut my throat.'

I was caught by surprise. Did he know I was a SWAPO leader? 'No, no,' I averred, 'I will never kill anybody.'

'Please don't misunderstand me,' he pressed on. 'When the time comes, my family and I will have to pay for what our race has done, even if we don't feel like most of them.' He paused and looked at me in the rearview mirror. 'We have created such hatred that people can only see the colour of their skins, not what's in their hearts. I don't blame you; I only know it's true.'

This conversation was not the only one of its kind that I had. Despite the increasing violence and polarization tearing at the seams of Namibian society, a minority of whites did try to prevent the total estrangement of the races. Some even asked to join SWAPO – during 1965 alone I counted more than two hundred such requests. Their initiative caused much discussion in our ranks. It was obvious that not all whites supported apartheid and that there were some who genuinely wanted to work for a democratic, multiracial society. Some were guided by humanitarian views about improving the conditions of our people; others by the simple understanding that the government's present course would lead to bloodshed and destruction. A few of these anti-racist whites we in SWAPO knew well; they assisted us with money, transport, skills and communication with the outside world. Could we exclude people like this from our movement and still claim to be fighting for a multiracial society? Many black Namibians considered every white an enemy but this point of view did not have much support within our organization. Hatred for the whites was an understandable reaction to our life experiences, but it was not an outlook that would promote our struggle. It was becoming clear that just as there were whites who supported SWAPO, so were there blacks – tribal chiefs for instance – who opposed us and would do anything to crush us.

We debated for months, within the leadership and at our membership meetings, before we finally decided that for the time being it would be a mistake to admit white members into SWAPO. There were reasons of security: apart from the handful of well-known friends, how could we know which whites to trust? Most of all, however, we weighed the great gulf between the two Namibias: the one in which the many live fenced in, herded about

by oppressive laws, exploited to near starvation, and the other in which the few lived in comfortable security, where the conscience sometimes grumbled but never the stomach, and from where it was impossible really to comprehend the things that were driving the many to revolt.

SWAPO's task, and my obsession, was to win over *black* Namibians to the cause of independence and majority rule. The whites who concerned us most were the ones who fought this effort: the government, the police, especially the Special Branch. And to deal with these adversaries, we had some remarkable characters in the leadership of SWAPO.

Very few people knew that our school principal, Katjimune, was in SWAPO; I myself didn't know until several months after I joined, even though he and I had become close colleagues after Aron was exposed at the Komando Hall meeting. Katjimune's discretion enabled him to stand up for his young teachers - Karita, Jason and me - when the School Board tried to fire us for subverting our students with SWAPO propaganda. The Board always balked at Katjimune's threatened resignation, for that would have meant certain closure of the best African school in Windhoek. His stature also enabled him to deal with the Special Branch in ways that would have sent the younger SWAPO leaders straight to jail. One time, however, when the Special Branch raided a SWAPO fund-raising party, I was sure he had gone too far.

It was a cold Saturday night in the Old Location, but over a hundred people warmed the big house with talk and laughter. They crowded around the tables heaped with delicacies: meat, bread, eggs, fruit and, of course, liquor, which was illegal for Africans. As master of ceremonies, I auctioned off the food and drink while Karita, our SWAPO treasurer, collected the money. The guests spent generously. 'Friends, Mr Shivute has offered one rand for this delicious goat's head. Are you going to let him get away with that?' I called out. I would drive the bidding as far as the mood allowed. As the hours went by and the liquor went down, the bidding became wilder. 'Attention! We have a bid of fifty cents for Miss Ngutua to sing us a song. Miss Ngutua?' The embarrassed woman's friends would raise a counterbid to get her out of the obligation, and back and forth it would go with much laughter and cheering until we had raised ten rand or more. Parties like this were an effective and enjoyable way to raise money for SWAPO's bail

fund – except when the police caught us and confiscated all our liquor. On this night our supply was at Katjimune's house, and every hour or so he would disappear for a few minutes to return with his overcoat bulging.

By midnight the party was already a great success. The lookouts had been called in to join the others who were dancing to Miriam Makeba records. I was standing in front of a table sipping a beer when the front door crashed open.

'All right, nobody move!' In the doorway stood Maritz, a police captain with a tough reputation. His rifle pointed into the crowded room.

The dancing, the drinking, the talking stopped. Only the music broke the shocked silence. All eyes were on the gun. Maritz moved slowly into the room, leaving his squad of African policemen outside.

Only one person kept a clear head. I heard the slight rustling of an overcoat behind me. The bottle on the table next to me disappeared noiselessly. A familiar deep voice whispered, 'Move!'

I got out of the way. Maritz, five feet in front of me with his back turned, did not. He was knocked to the floor and his gun went off into the ceiling as a grey, bulging figure barged through the doorway, past the impassive black policemen with their truncheons, and into the night.

Maritz was hysterical. 'Get him, get him,' he yelled at his unwilling underlings. He picked up his rifle and waved it wildly towards the rest of us.

But the spell had been broken. By the time Maritz was back on his feet, there was not a single bottle in sight. An angry, inebriated murmur replaced the stunned silence.

But a fight would get us into far worse trouble than the bottles; it was time to do some talking. I stepped forward and tried to pacify Maritz. But the Boer had been cheated before a large audience; he held his gun tight and shouted curses at the grumbling party guests.

Just as I was expecting a scuffle to start, there was a stir at the door. 'What's going on here?' Katjimune, without his overcoat, strode into the room. 'What happened to the birthday party?'

'He's the one, baas,' said one of the black policemen. 'He's the one who ran off.'

Katjimune didn't even look at the man. He went straight over to Maritz. 'What are you doing here? I see enough of your people during the day. Can't you see that you are spoiling the party?'

I could see the conflict in the captain's face. The Boer in him must have been screaming for revenge. But he hadn't seen who had knocked him over and Katjimune was the last man he wanted to arrest mistakenly. 'Mr Katjimune, we are not here to create trouble—'

'No?' Katjimune growled. A lot of brandy had damaged his sense of diplomacy.

'We were told there was a SWAPO meeting here,' Maritz retorted, glancing at Karita and me, 'and by the looks of it—'

'Nonsense. I was invited to a birthday party. These people have nothing to do with SWAPO.'

Maritz finished scanning the crowd. He fixed our principal with a sceptical squint. 'Look, Mr Katjimune—' he began.

'You call me a liar?' Katjimune stepped forward.

That does it, I thought, as everybody in the room tensed for a fight. But Maritz seemed reluctant to start it. He turned to his men, then hesitated. Finally: 'All right, boys, let's go,' he barked. As the policemen filed out, Maritz shot a last glare at us. 'You watch your step, kaffirs.' Katjimune slammed the door shut, waited five seconds and then let out a deep laugh. The party was alive again.

Katjimune's school must have given the School Board constant headaches, because they frequently sent us inspectors who would appear in the classroom without any warning. The inspectors were looking for us teachers to slip up, for some pretext to fire us. To them, our school was a SWAPO nest, a hotbed of subversive ideas. They were right, of course, but I was always careful that my students were ahead in all their subjects before I talked about politics. Year after year we turned out the top students and had the lowest failure rate of all the schools in the city.

To the School Board it must have seemed a frustrating irony that the best teachers were also SWAPO leaders. To us it made perfect sense. Karita, Jason, Levi Nganjone, myself: all of us had become teachers because we wanted something better for our people. At Augustineum, teaching seemed to us the best, perhaps the only, means to help improve things in Namibia. The Old Location movement provided another means, and we took that up as well

by joining SWAPO. It was often difficult to separate our dual roles. Our country's history is one of oppression, and no person of conscience could teach that history as the South African texts presented it. Nor could we ignore our students' questions about independence in other African countries and how we could win ours.

But to teach was not enough. My pupils dozed in class from lack of food, the school ran out of chalk and paper and could not afford to buy more, children dropped out because of tragedies at home – these were problems that required a resolution outside the school. We teachers were among the fortunate few who, because of more money, opportunities or simple luck, had managed to surmount these obstacles. But, surrounded by misery, we could not use our profession selfishly.

As teachers with travel privileges, Brian Bassigworth, Jason, Karita and I constituted SWAPO's regular team for weekend trips to other towns. At least once a month we piled into SWAPO's car, a beat-up Ford dubbed 'Bluebird', and drove the hundreds of miles of highway to Walvis Bay, Luderitz, Tsumeb, Okahandja and a dozen other places large enough to turn out a crowd for a public meeting. Along the way we were often arrested, detained, or simply harassed by officials who tried to make their job of keeping tabs on us at least entertaining. Brian and Jason, in particular, kept them entertained.

Brian was incorrigible. At roadside checkpoints officious inspectors, supposedly fighting foot and mouth disease, would spend hours going through our few bags when we were in a hurry to get to a rally somewhere. Brian would make things worse by refusing to get out of the car. Arms folded tightly around his thin frame, he refused to be searched. 'I'm no animal, I'm clean,' he would say to us. 'If you fellows like being searched by Boers, go ahead.' When we had finally coaxed him out of the car, he would taunt the inspectors: 'Here, *basie*, my dried meat's in this bag and I've hidden my bottles of fat in that one. Us just little kids, *basie*, us don't understand, see.'

Jason Mutumbulwa, for his part, was one of the most intelligent people I have ever met. He would have been a top lawyer or doctor in any country offering him the slightest opportunity. In Namibia some of his talent was put to use in leading SWAPO, but much of it was also wasted on the games we played with the Boers.

Whenever we visited our lawyer, Bryan O'Linn, in Windhoek, Jason would pore over legal texts, and the next time we were stopped by some dim-witted Boer official, Jason would cite, in English, the exact paragraphs of this or that law. Jason's Afrikaans was so good that he was even able to obtain a liquor permit – available only to Coloureds – which we used to buy drinks for our fund-raising parties.

While I did not usually join Jason and Brian in their antics, there were occasions when I could not resist the temptation. One time the three of us were buying liquor on Jason's permit at Pupkewitz's bottlestore. As we paid, the clerk warned us: 'Be careful, Jan Leff is watching the store.'

Jan Leff was the heavy hand of the Windhoek police liquor division. He had come from South Africa the previous year, a poor farmer's son from the Orange Free State where he had received less than the usual schooling for a white boy. But what he lacked in wits he made up in other qualities. He weighed at least two hundred pounds and was the city's best heavyweight boxer. As an athlete he had determination; plodding around the ring, hardly affected by the blows he took, he would wear down his opponent until the poor man came within reach of the slugging steamroller that he was, and the battle would be over. He pursued thirsty Africans in the same way; you might dodge him for a while but sooner or later he would crush you.

'Jan Leff, eh?' said Jason. The three of us looked at each other. Brian went out and brought Bluebird right up to the door. Jason went out, then I, bottles clumsily concealed under my shirt. I glanced furtively in every direction, except at Jan Leff who was sitting in his Volkswagen across the street.

Brian jockeyed the Bluebird through the streets like a big-city cabdriver, darting from one lane to another and shooting through yellow lights. Jan Leff could barely keep up. On the road towards the Old Location he finally overtook us and made us pull over.

He stuck his red-blotched, battered face into our car. Two front teeth were missing. 'Give me the bottles.' We had our supplies on the rear seat.

'Beg your pardon, sir?' Jason said in English.

'Who owns that liquor?' Jan Leff's broad Free State dialect rang in our ears.

'We don't take orders from any old farmer,' I chimed in. 'Will you please—'

'I'm a policeman and you're all under arrest!' A huge, hairy hand reached past Brian for the ignition key.

'Wait a minute!' Jason shoved his permit into Jan Leff's face.

He read it slowly, then scrutinized Jason. 'You, a Coloured?' He looked ready to tear both the paper and Jason to pieces.

'You don't look all that white, yourself,' Jason said. But before the words had left his tongue, I knew he had gone too far.

In a flash, Jan Leff pulled out his black revolver and brandished it, quivering, for all of us to see. A crimson flush spread from his splotches to the rest of his face. For a few long seconds I was sure he was going to shoot. Slowly he regained some of his composure and lowered his gun. He was breathing heavily. 'You pull this joke one more time and you'll be dead, you black bastards.' I had no reason to doubt his frankness, and from that day I left the sport of humiliating Boers to the experts.

The man who knew how to humiliate them the best did not consider it sport at all. I first got an idea of Maxuilili's toughness one foggy Sunday afternoon in Walvis Bay where he was SWAPO acting president. It was in late 1960; Jason and I had gone down to the coast to speak at a rally. The speaker's platform was a flatbed truck and the meeting place a sandy stretch behind the location. Several thousand people had gathered when four police jeeps suddenly appeared from out of the fog. Wheels spinning in the sand, the jeeps roared straight through the crowd to our truck and unloaded about twenty policemen armed with automatic rifles. They formed a line and moved slowly towards the crowd.

The people at the front backed away and some of those on the fringes were already retreating into the fog, towards the African location. At best it seemed Jason and I had made a long, tiresome drive for nothing; at worst, the police might arrest us as soon as the crowd had dispersed.

But Maxuilili had other ideas. He grabbed the megaphone. 'Everybody stay where you are!' he commanded. 'There is no need to leave. This is a SWAPO meeting; we did not invite the police. They are the ones who will have to leave.' Maxuilili aimed his megaphone down at the uniformed whites. 'And I mean now!'

Everyone, myself included, froze. Was Maxuilili going to get us all killed? The Windhoek massacre was still fresh in my memory.

The policemen looked at each other, dumbfounded, but kept their rifles still.

With an eye on the policemen, Jason edged over and whispered something to Maxuilili. 'Never mind,' the other replied aloud, 'just give me your watch.' He spoke into the megaphone, 'Policemen, this is a SWAPO meeting. Move your jeeps out of the way. If you want to listen to our speeches, stand back.' He checked Jason's watch. 'We give you three minutes.'

Three minutes and then what? The plainclothes officer in charge of the troop looked blankly up at Maxuilili, who gave the Boer a burning evil stare in reply. Unlike Katjimune, Maxuilili was not intimidating in appearance; he was of average height and with a thin frame. His fiery eyes suggested sincerity and commitment, but little of the rage that lay beneath. He was a lay preacher and looked every bit the religious man – though I was beginning to understand why he had not been officially ordained. Years before he had been a policeman for the South African railways. Maybe he knew the police mind well enough to play this dangerous game, but I felt weak in my knees as I glanced at my own watch: one minute had passed, and no one had moved.

Most of the crowd had stayed on, and now they cautiously began returning for a better view of the showdown, forming a tight throng around the twenty policemen. The officer called his sergeants over for a whispered consultation. They looked out over the silent crowd, shook their heads, glanced over their shoulders at Maxuilili who glowered back at them. 'Maxuilili' is actually an African word describing the feeling of sudden fear, and he had earned it by his brutal frankness. Anyone who lived in Walvis Bay and who was a stranger to Maxuilili would be confronted sooner or later. 'Who are you?' he would boom at a passer-by in the location. 'Why haven't I seen you at SWAPO meetings? Are you a black Boer?' Now, as he glared at the huddled policemen, I knew they were feeling at least a touch of 'Maxuilili'. Two minutes.

As the discussion among the officers continued, a rumble of voices rose in the crowd of people around them. Walvis Bay had been an OPO stronghold from the beginning and the cannery workers had staged several strikes, the latest in 1959 when all the canneries had been forced to close. To the people in this crowd, confrontation with the police was nothing new.

'You have thirty seconds,' Maxuilili's stern voice came through the megaphone. The crowd grew louder.

The police sergeants dispersed quickly, waving their men back into their vehicles. In silent disbelief, the crowd parted to let them through. A few moments later, the last jeep had disappeared over the dunes.

'Africa!' Maxuilili shouted.

'Africa!' the people roared.

'Where are *they* going?' he asked, pointing into the fog that had swallowed up the policemen.

'Kakamas!' the crowd screamed.

'And what will we have?'

'Independence!'

'Those who want to be ruled by the Boers, raise your hand.'

Thunderous laughter. Our meeting had started.

Through hundreds of public meetings like this one, SWAPO was able to win over the majority of Namibians to the cause of independence. The desire for self-rule was already there, in their gut feelings about daily life under the whites. We only articulated the discontent, generalized it, told people in Walvis Bay and Windhoek what people in the countryside were thinking and vice versa; we added the perspective of our history, of Africa's history, and the new era of independence that was dawning – all in simply worded speeches in between the prayers, the chanted slogans and the freedom songs. Most of all we provided the discontented with a national organization. At each meeting, after the speeches and singing and shouting were over, people flocked to the platform to join SWAPO.

Of course, we didn't win everyone's support. Some people were loyal only to their own tribe, while others – particularly the older people – were sceptical of any change. The tribalists were not a problem so long as they belonged to the radical Herero Council or to other groups that shared SWAPO's goals. But later, as SWAPO outgrew the narrow tribal organizations and even drew away their members, competition became ugly, and some leaders, such as Herero leader Clemens Kapuuo, were used by the government against SWAPO. The old sceptics, too, may have mistrusted SWAPO for reasons of jealousy. We were young upstarts who had bypassed the old institutions to create our own. To people who had lived sixty or seventy years and had seen no improvement in the

Africans' lot, the boys who talked of big changes were just wild-eyed idealists too young to know better. But SWAPO's own elders – Maxuilili, Akwenye, David Meroro – spoke in our favour and our respectability as teachers helped a lot.

Our purpose in these early years was not to foment a violent revolt that would force the whites to surrender power. My faith, at least, lay with the United Nations, the legal guardian of our country after South Africa had so clearly violated its League of Nations mandate to govern Namibia 'in the best interest' of its people. But in the fifteen years that had passed since the UN first appealed to the South Africans to put Namibia on the road to independence, no progress had been made. Some of my countrymen had sent petitions to the UN headquarters in New York. Hermann Ja-Toivo, for example, in 1958 mailed a taped plea hidden inside a hollowed copy of *Treasure Island*. After his petition was read to the UN General Assembly, Hermann was arrested and deported to Ovamboland where he was detained for several years. Sam Nujoma, since leaving Namibia, had spent months at the UN and was trying to maintain a constant pressure from the SWAPO office he had established in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. But despite the lack of concrete results so far, I was sure that the UN had only to see how SWAPO had united and prepared our people for independence in order for the world body to act decisively. So when South Africa finally admitted a UN fact-finding mission to tour our country in 1962, I thought our freedom was near.

We young leaders in Windhoek prepared accordingly. I helped Levi Nganjone prepare a special issue of our tabloid, *Unity Wings*, with articles about the UN, the imminent visit, and the need for all Namibians to demonstrate to the delegation their desire for independence. Night after night in my tiny room we sweated over our old typewriter and the duplicating machine. I could hardly sleep for the ink fumes and the mountains of paper that spilled on to my bed as we cranked our elbows sore. The SWAPO teachers piled into Bluebird every Friday afternoon with stacks of *Unity Wings* and headed for one of the stops on the UN delegation's announced itinerary. By this time we had established SWAPO branches in Walvis Bay, Tsumeb, Luderitz, Oranjemund, Gobabis, Otjiwarongo, Ovamboland and of course Windhoek, and we had members in practically every village and railway

siding from the Orange River in the south to the Kunene in the north. Wherever the South Africans escorted the UN delegation in the hopes of showing them a prospering, contented people, SWAPO was there, too, with a different story to tell. After two weeks of SWAPO banners and placards calling for independence and reminding the UN of its obligation, the delegation leader, Mr Carpio, insisted that the South Africans let SWAPO meet him. I was certain this was to be a momentous meeting.

The Grand Hotel was known to be the most luxurious hotel in Namibia, ranking with South Africa's finest, some people said. The air in the lobby was cool and sweet-smelling; the thick, smoked glass doors kept out the din of downtown traffic. A blood-red carpet softened our step with a strange, spongy sensation. Huge, twinkling chandeliers hung from the high ceiling as in pictures of European palaces. The wall panels were of dark, polished wood, half-hidden behind potted ferns that suggested a bush garden. For a moment I forgot why I was there; in amazement I stroked the smooth blue velvet of the easy chairs.

Carpio and his delegation were waiting for us in a richly appointed conference room. As we filed through the doorway, the South African security men on either side glared at us with disgust; they seemed extremely uncomfortable with us for the restraint imposed by the UN presence. Inside, the delegation members were seated around a long table, with Carpio at the head.

His appearance took me by surprise. I had been conditioned by so many years of seeing whites in charge that I was unprepared for this brown-skinned, stubby little man – a Filipino – with black, unruly hair like a Coloured's. Throughout our speeches he nodded and smiled as though in complete agreement with us from the start. His Indian deputy next to him looked every bit like the people the Boers were now evicting from the newly declared 'whites only' parts of Durban and Cape Town. Our speeches seemed hardly necessary; surely these people understood our plight.

'For a long time Prime Minister Verwoerd said that the United Nations would never set foot in Namibia,' Carpio said after hearing us out. 'But today we are here. And this is only the beginning.' The South African escort looked pained; I was impressed by Carpio's boldness. 'In the Philippines we had to fight knee deep in our own blood. Today we are a free country. Here in Namibia, too, you will

find the same thing. The harder the struggle and the redder the blood that flows, the sweeter your freedom will be. I think—'

'That sounds very fine, brother,' a voice cut in from the back of the room, 'but we're beginning to wonder whether your United Nations isn't just a toothless dog.' All eyes turned to Maxuilili. 'This is the first time that any of us has been in such a hotel,' Maxuilili continued aggressively, 'and as soon as you leave, the whites will go back to treating us like animals. We shall be punished for what we have told you here.' He paused and pointed a finger at the UN diplomat. 'For your part, I hope you will do more than just add this to all the other petitions we have sent you.'

I was shocked by Maxuilili's angry outburst. But Carpio, in his rambling reply, did not make any specific promises. Rather, his visit ended in total confusion. First, a joint communiqué from Prime Minister Verwoerd and the UN delegate commended South Africa for its benevolent administration of our country. But then Carpio issued his own statement, charging that he had been poisoned and hospitalized, and had never signed any communiqué with Verwoerd. After that, the South African newspapers printed stories about Carpio being drunk throughout the visit. Whatever the truth, another UN resolution condemning South Africa's rule was all that came of Carpio's visit. Maxuilili was right after all.

The disillusionment I felt with the UN weighed heavily on me. Perhaps nobody in the whole world cared whether we got our freedom or not. But Maxuilili had another way of looking at it. 'It was worth a try,' he said. 'Just don't expect the UN or anyone else to hand us our freedom. We'll win it only when we fight for it.'

But how? No one in our organization seemed to have thought a strategy through. Sam and the other exiled leaders in Dar es Salaam would soon begin training SWAPO guerrilla fighters for the years of armed struggle to come. Inside the country we still enjoyed the peaceful means left open to us by the confident South African government. But by 1965 SWAPO was strong enough to be considered a threat, and so the crackdown began.

Confrontation

When will the *real* confrontation come? How will it happen? These questions, only half-formulated, drifted about in the outer reaches of my mind as I raced about Windhoek and the country, teaching and organizing, doing the day-to-day work that led more and more Namibians into the ranks of SWAPO. The Carpio visit was only one of many skirmishes during those years of the early 1960s. As we in the movement traded inconclusive punches with Special Branch and other organs of the government, our conflict seemed to move, slowly and inexorably, into the shadow of a looming cataclysm. I can see this clearly today, but it was only a vague feeling then, a sense of gradually being pulled into a current stronger and wider than either we or the South Africans could fathom.

Beyond Namibia the African continent was rapidly changing. By the end of 1964 most countries had become independent. Where the whites refused to hand over power, war seemed inevitable. Telling tales of violence and looting, displaced European settlers from Katanga and Angola arrived in Windhoek, as well as Salisbury and Johannesburg. The attitudes of the local whites stiffened. The Rhodesian settlers decided they could not afford majority rule and elected Ian Smith to lead their fight. In South Africa, the Boers used the events in other countries to fuel the terror sown by the Sharpeville Massacre and to crush all real opposition. By 1965, the leaders of the African National Congress and the Pan-Africanist Congress were either in jail or in exile, leaving their organizations temporarily paralysed. For the present, white power reigned supreme.

In Namibia the surface was deceptively calm. The newspapers were virulent in their attacks on African nationalism, and more

whites took to displaying their guns, but there were no big police swoops and political trials. Perhaps we should have seen the signs earlier; in any case, it was only with the 1964 publication of the Odendaal Report, named after the judge who compiled it, that we began to understand the government's intentions. At the time, however, we were so worried about the sudden danger to one of our leaders that we did not foresee the larger menace to us all.

Simon Kaukungua had long been one of the most outspoken SWAPO members in Ovamboland. Deported from his contract job in the south, he had kept up his political activities despite many threats from the tribal chiefs and the Native Commissioner. Now they had finally decided to get rid of him after he had stood up and denounced them at a mass meeting called by the commissioner to introduce the new Odendaal Plan. The note delivered at my house early one morning said that the chiefs' men, armed with rifles, were combing the villages all over the north, vowing to shoot Simon on sight, and that I must intervene with government officials in Windhoek.

Jason and David Merero accompanied me to the offices of the Bantu Affairs Department. Between us we had considerable experience in cutting our way through apartheid bureaucracy. Merero's businessman's prestige, Jason's eloquence and my honest passion would get us as far as any Africans could hope to get. This morning, however, we got nowhere. Implacable *verligte* officials listened to us from behind their desks, disappeared into back offices and returned to plead ignorance of the whole affair. Whatever our concern was, they said, Ovamboland was under separate administration – we might try to file a special complaint that would be forwarded to the appropriate office.

We summoned Maxuilili from Walvis Bay; only he could break down the barriers that kept us from protecting Simon. The next morning, with our president leading the way, we walked straight into the offices of the top official. The startled African clerk did not even have time to object as we strode through the front room. 'Just stand back, brother, this is a matter of life or death,' Maxuilili advised him.

If Mr Gouws was surprised by our ostentatious entrance, he recovered rapidly. He already had a guest in his office, a man whose back was towards us, but who yet seemed strangely familiar. Gouws stood up behind his huge, polished desk and smiled politely

at us. No introduction was necessary. 'Gentlemen, please have a seat.'

But Maxuilili walked right up to the desk. 'Mr Gouws, we want you to stop the murder of Simon Kaukungua. We want you to call off the chiefs.' His voice was restrained as he stared at the short, round-bellied Boer across the shining oak surface.

Gouws sat down and reached to the ashtray for his pipe. In his grey, outmoded suit and with his bald head he looked more like an elderly teacher than a Bantu Affairs boss. The smile slowly spread across his whole mouth as he leaned back and proceeded to load his pipe. 'Please, Mr Maxuilili, let's take this from the beginning.'

I recognized the accommodation in Gouws's response and stole a wink at Jason. Maxuilili, too, must have sensed that the Boer was on the defensive. He slammed his fist on the desk. 'While we're talking, a man is being hunted like an animal. We want you to—'

'We will do nothing at all, Mr Maxuilili. You and your friends should know that times are changing in this country.' The acid voice of Gouws's guest cut Maxuilili short. That voice, that tall, lanky figure, where had I met him before? He turned in his chair and I nearly jumped: It was de Wet Nel, the Native Commissioner, the very person responsible for the hunt for Simon! 'The north is now becoming the territory of your traditional rulers. If they want to punish Kaukungua for his insults, they have every right to do so,' he said.

'We know who makes the decisions,' Jason said indignantly. 'Your Odendaal Plan is nothing but a cover.'

Jason was right, of course. The plan envisaged turning all of Namibia's tribal reserves into so-called independent homelands under the rule of local chiefs. The chiefs would get more power — more guns, tribal armies, more money from the government — but the Boers would remain to make the real decisions. And de Wet Nel did not try to pretend otherwise. He leaned back in his chair and dug one hand a little deeper into his pocket. 'Let's not waste time on academic points. The plan will soon become law, agreed to and signed by your chiefs. You can go and complain to them.' His long, gaunt face remained expressionless as he spoke.

The man's undisguised cynicism made my blood boil, yet I couldn't find words that would not seem silly to this monster. It

was Maxuilili who reacted first. 'You bastards,' he exploded, 'you think you can make Africans fight Africans. But we know who our enemies are. You'll see!'

With that he wheeled around, and we marched out of Gouws's office as abruptly as we had entered.

We were seething, enraged by de Wet Nel, humiliated by our obvious powerlessness. Oh yes, I thought, we could continue to talk at meetings; it would be easy to expose the Odendaal Plan for what it was. But that would not worry the South Africans so long as we did not have the means to really fight it. And where could we find that power?

Simon eventually managed to flee the country, joining a growing trek of SWAPO members who were swelling the ranks of our external wing in Tanzania and Zambia. Another to leave was my old friend from the years in Tsumeb, Ben Amathila. Ben had been active in the Walvis Bay branch since its formation and had become branch chairman. Together with Maxuilili, he had done a very good job - so good, in fact, that the police soon singled him out and had him fired from his regular work. Later I had wanted him to come and live in Windhoek to work as part of the SWAPO executive, but each time he came for a visit the police made sure that he stayed for only a short time. On occasion, however, he was able to cut free for a few days to serve as our courier between Windhoek and Ovamboland in connection with some particularly sensitive matters. I accompanied him to the Botswana border one rainy Saturday. We were both subdued as we stopped at the path in the sparse forest where I had to turn back.

'Come with me, John,' Ben whispered. 'You know there's a lot to be done out there, too.'

We had already argued this out many times. Ben was sure that the South Africans would soon arrest us all and put us away for life. What good would we do rotting behind bars, Ben asked.

'You go, they need you. Don't worry about me.' The conversation was awkward despite our close friendship. I realized that I might never see Ben again and I had to stop speaking for fear I would start crying. I pushed him on and stood immobile, watching him disappear among the trees into the bitter-sweet safety of exile. That I did not follow would prove to be a costlier decision than I thought at the time.

Others were less lucky than Ben and Simon as they fell victims

to the chiefs' campaign to scare people away from the movement. Leo Shopala was shot dead by the headman of his village and many others were badly beaten. Every SWAPO activist deported from the south was detained at the kraal of his chief and warned to stay out of politics. More and more of my time went on attending court hearings and raising defence funds to keep our most needed members out of jail. I was not very concerned about my own safety; officially, I had been born within the Police Zone and could not be deported to a reserve. Thus I had become complacent and was slow to recognize when I was in danger.

It was mid-1965; I had been called away suddenly to Grootfontein where my brother Abed was hospitalized after being beaten up by his *baas*. After visiting Abed, I went to stay overnight with a friend who shared a house with his policeman brother, a rowdy giant who boasted of his strength and authority as we sat around the table after supper. My friend had wisely introduced me under a false name, but still as a teacher from Windhoek.

The policeman brought out a bottle of gin which he passed around. I was still nursing my first glass when the conversation took an unexpected turn.

'Ach, teacher, there seem to be a lot of bandits in your profession,' the giant proffered as he poured himself another glassful.

'Bandits?'

'Ja, these SWAPO types, Ya-Otto and Mutumbulwa and the rest. Getting paid by the government but working against the government, what else are they but crooks?' He looked angrily around for agreement. His brother and I nodded thoughtfully.

'Why is it so?' he asked me with a curious smile that made the question linger in the air. 'You probably know them all.'

Did he, after all, know who I was? For a moment I wanted to be frank with him and tell him why he, too, should be a SWAPO member. Then I thought better of it. 'Well, it's difficult to say. Some people are just never satisfied,' I answered evasively.

'That's true,' he nodded. He paused for a moment, then leaned over the table. 'They better not set their foot here in Grootfontein. We have just received orders that if one of them appears, we are to make sure he never sees Windhoek again.' The giant ground his thumb on the table top as though obliterating a bug.

'You mean you will arrest them?' I asked politely.

'Arrest them? Yeah, you might say so, man; we'll start with that.' He laughed raucously and drained his glass. I excused myself soon after and went to bed. The policeman was still sleeping when I left town at daybreak.

I was supposed to stop for a few days in Otjiwarongo to attend one of the farm-worker murder trials.

My mind, however, was more on the policeman's revelation; I was anxious to get back to Windhoek to discuss it with my comrades. Lukas Shaduka, my host and chairman of SWAPO's Otjiwarongo branch, found me a lift for the next morning.

A nervous, frail-looking youth picked me up at dawn. He was going to Windhoek on business and had contacted Shaduka to offer me the lift. The first orange flush of the new day outlined the hills to the east as our pick-up truck left the bumpy location road and turned south on to the main highway. Everything was still on the large, well-kept farms where the first rains would soon soak the waiting fields, turning the hard earth black and soft. Not so long ago, Hereros and Damaras kept their large herds grazing on these fertile hillsides. Now the few African farmers left had gone the way of my uncle Petrus; their shacks and small sandy plots were in the other valleys, far away from the river and the main road. There was no other traffic on the highway this early and we soon put the farms behind us. With some luck we would be in Windhoek by noon.

My companion seemed ill at ease. At first I thought he was simply a novice driver: he stared intently at the straight, flat road and though the morning was cool, his hands were wet with perspiration. Every time he wiped them off on his jeans, the vehicle veered towards the ditch. I tried to get a conversation started but whatever his troubles, he evidently wanted to keep them to himself. He only mumbled a few inaudible words without ever taking his eyes off the road.

I had all but resigned myself to a quiet trip when – bang! – a front tyre blew out and sent us skidding on to the gravel shoulder. It would only take a few minutes to change a flat; I was used to far worse from our trips in the old Bluebird. But the poor youth seemed on the verge of collapse. He sat hunched over the steering wheel, sobbing.

Eager to get back on the road, I got out to change the wheel myself. I had just begun to unbolt the spare wheel, however, when he was at my side, wrestling the wrench out of my hands. 'No, no,

let's not . . . My God, my God,' he kept mumbling. 'If we can only get you another lift in time.'

By now I was finding my driver's behaviour a little too odd for my liking. He paced up and down, wringing his hands and praying. A few times he cocked his head and stared down the road as if he was expecting someone.

The morning was still young and there was no sign of life in either direction. I suddenly felt very vulnerable. Nobody in Windhoek expected me home yet. If something happened to me here, it would take days before my friends would know.

It seemed like hours before other cars began to pass in our direction. The youth flagged them desperately. Finally, an Afrikaner family in a station wagon pulled over. 'Can the *baas* please give my friend here a lift to Windhoek?' the youth asked before the car had stopped properly.

'But what about you?' I asked him.

'Don't worry, *mitiri*, please get into the car now.' He grabbed my bag from the truck and stuffed it into the wagon. 'May the good Lord bless you and guard over you. May you arrive safely in Windhoek. The Lord knows I've done what I could . . .' He was still stuttering as the wagon pulled back on to the asphalt and I continued my journey.

Five minutes later I saw what I had begun to fear. In a dip where the road crossed a creek, visible only from close range, were parked a police van and two Special Branch cars. A group of officers was standing at the roadside, gazing towards us. I sank back in my seat, trying to make myself as small as the children next to me, as the wagon slowed down. But the constable waved us by; they were obviously looking for a green pick-up truck to bring them their catch.

The frightened youth was spotted by Shaduka as soon as he returned to Otjiwarongo. Cornered, he confessed that he had been recruited by the Special Branch to deliver me into their hands, after which he himself was to disappear for a while. But his fright had been my salvation. I swore to myself that I would be more careful from now on.

On 26 August 1966 a South African Army unit attacked a SWAPO guerrilla base near Omgulumbashe in the remote north-western part of Ovamboland. A few days later our militants counter-

attacked and destroyed two police posts. By the end of the week, the entire north was flooded with South African troops in helicopters and armoured cars, combing the bush for guerrillas, terrorizing and arresting hundreds of villagers. The region was completely sealed off from the rest of the world and we in Windhoek lost all contact with our Ovamboland comrades.

The beginning of armed struggle did not come as a total surprise. I had known for several years that many of the young people I had helped to flee abroad were getting military instruction. But in 1965, when I received a note from Hermann Ja-Toivo in Ondangwa saying that six guerrillas had slipped into the country, the sudden realization of what we were getting into caused me a great deal of anguish. Within SWAPO we had discussed the question of violent struggle as early as 1963 - inconclusively. Faced with the note from Hermann asking for advice, I called together Maxuilili, Jason, Karita, Ben Amathila and a few others for an urgent meeting. In the end we sent Ben up with the message that the six must disappear, that we must wait until we could take on the Boers in a big way. We knew nothing of guerrilla strategy, and what we had in mind when talking about war could not be done by six armed men.

For a long time, I had felt torn about the prospect of our using violence. Five years of peaceful organizing work had built up a solid mass movement and put a lot of pressure on the Boers. It had won us the recognition of the UN and other international bodies. The Boers, of course, displayed no scruples about their own brutal methods, but we in SWAPO had to show that we were better than they, that we could challenge them without sinking to their level. This is not to say that my passion always agreed with this reasoning. What black Namibian, even the most devout Christian and humanitarian, could honestly deny an inner hatred of the people who made our lives so difficult? I certainly spent many hours fantasizing about how one day I would give them some of their own medicine. Yes, I would enjoy seeing the Rautenbachs and Blignauts and de Wet Nels suffering at my feet. Deep down, every Namibian must have had such dreams; yet, when we discussed our objectives in meetings, it was in more reasoned and detached terms. Only recently had I begun seriously to doubt our strategy of turning the other cheek.

My compatriots abroad could look at the question from another

angle. They were not so caught up in the organizing and legal defence as we were. Thus they didn't feel as protective of our gains. On the contrary, they could see more clearly the limitations of our peaceful approach. While we inside Namibia were practically sealed off from the new currents of national liberation washing through Africa and the rest of the Third World, Sam and the others abroad were deeply inspired by their contact with radical governments and liberation movements, some of which ultimately became strong supporters of our own struggle. Many of our members in Ovamboland – the people who bore the brunt of the Boers' and chiefs' intimidation – also longed to strike back at the enemy. Two years before the war began, I had received a visit from Kahumba Kandola, one of our oldest and most respected activists in the north. My hedging and hesitancy during our all-night discussions did not sway him, and when he left I knew he was ready to look for weapons. Thus he was better prepared than I for what was about to happen.

Such were my thoughts as I stood alone among the white sand dunes north of Walvis Bay where Maxuilili was waiting for my arrival. It was early September in 1966, a few days after Prime Minister Verwoerd had been stabbed to death by a white man in Cape Town. The killing, coming less than two weeks after the Ovamboland battles, had brought the Boers in Namibia so close to hysteria that a group of our Windhoek leaders had set out for Walvis Bay for a special meeting with the president. The dense evening fog coated my skin with tiny, cool pearls of moisture, soothing after the drive through the hot, dry desert. The Bluebird, its engine overheated, was sitting helplessly by the roadside behind me.

The Atlantic surf crashed on to the beach with thundering regularity as it had done for thousands of years. This harsh coastline, named the Skeleton Coast by European seafarers, and the burning Namib Desert behind it, had delayed the white invasion for many years. But then the discovery of diamonds in the desert and the rich fishing grounds off the coast had added to the attractions for the colonizers. Why should we not fight back before they bled our land of all its natural wealth? How long before I would be called upon to handle a gun? The fog had swallowed the road and the Bluebird where my colleagues were sleeping while we waited for the engine to cool. The dunes around me were floating

grey shapes in the dense wrap of wet air. The rolling thunder of the surf and the sucking hissing of the foam receding through the sand after each wave were the only sounds in the fairyland atmosphere of the night.

I was so engrossed in my thoughts that I did not hear the steps behind me until one of the men coughed. My heart missed a beat. I wheeled around.

'Easy, Johnny, easy. We didn't mean to scare you,' smiled the one nearest to me. His colleague kept his hand in the coat pocket where his gun was. I didn't recognize either of them, yet I knew without asking that they were Special Branch.

'You should be careful walking about like this,' said the one in front. 'You could get lost in the fog, you know. Disappear without a trace.'

'Yes, quite without a trace,' his unsmiling partner repeated. His eyes were fixed on me; his right hand remained in his pocket.

The Bluebird was buried in the fog. My voice would hardly carry a hundred feet against the sound of the surf. I stood rigidly, waiting for the Boers to make the next move. I said nothing for fear of betraying my real fright. Perhaps I could have attempted to dash into the fog but my legs felt sapped of all strength.

The leader took out a packet of cigarettes and offered me one before withdrawing it quickly. 'Oh, I forgot, you don't smoke, do you? We know quite a lot about you, you know. And now you're going down to celebrate Verwoerd's death with Maxuilili, I suppose.'

My heart had finally slowed down enough for me to speak with a normal voice. 'So what, wouldn't you?'

I must have sounded cockier than I felt. There was a new jarring tone in the leader's voice when he spoke again. 'Listen, you fool, it's time you stopped playing games. We're not fucking around here in the fog for the fun of it. There are enough of my men who would have taken this opportunity to feed you to the fishes.' He took a last drag from his cigarette and flipped the butt into the wet sand. 'Things are about to change. Get out, get out while you still can.'

He nodded to his partner and the two of them walked off into the fog as suddenly as they had appeared. A minute later I heard their car start and move off in the direction of Walvis Bay.

I swore quietly; I was as vulnerable as a sitting duck, yet I was

damned if I was going to leave Namibia. I was a family man now, married to Ali Akwenye. I had known Ali for years as Old Akwenye's daughter, my friend Onesimus's little sister. Then one day she was suddenly a grown-up woman and a SWAPO activist in her own right. She helped organize meetings, she participated in study groups, and it was in this way that we really got to know each other and fell in love. Our son Kenneth – we named him after Kenneth Kaunda, Zambia's president – was born in April 1966. I was not going to leave my family yet.

As the weeks passed and nothing dramatic happened, I pushed the encounter in the fog to the back of my mind and concentrated fully on my teaching and organizing work. I began to plan improvements to my little shack so that Ali, Kenny and I could move out of the Akwenyes' place where we had stayed so far. But I never got very far with my plans.

Early in the morning of 1 December, three squad cars pulled into the schoolyard. It was the first day of exams and I was handing out the question sheets when the cars stopped in front of the open classroom door. A load of Special Branch agents disembarked and spread out in front of the building. Two of them came to the doorway.

'John Otto, come here.'

I did not even look up. 'Can't you see I'm busy?' I said and continued to distribute the questions. 'If you want to talk, come back in the afternoon.'

They did not move. 'We have a warrant for your arrest. Bring your coat and come with us.' The man who spoke was Dippenaar, an oldtimer with the Branch.

I stepped outside. 'Arrested for what?' I felt more annoyed than worried.

'Under the Suppression of Communism Act.' I sensed a tone of accomplishment in his voice. It was the first time they had invoked this act against us.

Dippenaar led me to his car. 'Now, empty your pockets,' he ordered.

My heart sank. Among the rand notes, receipts, keys and coins I had carelessly kept an old note from Hermann Ja-Toivo in Ovamboland about guerrillas and guns. Heart pounding, I tried to separate the crumpled paper from the other things that I pulled out, one by one, and placed on the hood of the car.

Fortunately, Dippenaar did not search me. After looking through the items spread out on the hood, he returned the money. 'The people in the charge office will handle this. Now, take us to your house.'

The team took four hours to rummage through my tiny shack. Over the years the place had filled up with party files: correspondence from the UN, Dar es Salaam, London and Lusaka; letters and reports from every corner of Namibia – they were all there. So were old, dusty copies of *Unity Wings*, our typewriter and the duplicator. I also had my personal letters and books, now spilling out on to the floor so that it was difficult to walk across the room. As the Branch men were rummaging, I saw papers that I had given up for lost years earlier. There was nothing dangerous here, however; I kept all the confidential papers among my clothes at the Akwenyes'. Except the note in my pocket.

The search drew attention. From the water tap across the street word had spread that something was afoot. Women who came for water stayed to see what the police were doing; others arrived just to watch. After an hour there must have been a hundred people crowding the street in front of my house. Eva Ngutua, who had been wounded in the 1959 massacre, shouted at Dippenaar, 'Why are you here? What has he done?'

The Branch men worked as fast as they could. They took everything, including photos of my earlier girlfriends. First they filled my three suitcases, then stuffed the rest in cardboard boxes, which they stacked by the door. Dippenaar was constantly at the door, peering out at the jeering women. An incident now could cost him both his prisoner and the evidence that his men were loading into the cars, pushing their way through the throng. As more and more location people arrived, the mass closed in on the house so that only a small space by the door could be kept clear. People called my name and through the window gave me the thumb-up freedom salute. A rock sailed through the air and hit the tin roof with a clang.

Dippenaar asked me to go outside and calm the people. 'Tell them that we're just taking you down to the station,' he said. 'You'll be back soon.'

This was my chance to get rid of the note. With the Boers looking from the doorway, I stepped over to *meme* Eva, hands in

my pockets. I curled the paper inside my rand notes and shoved them into her palm. 'Quick, take the note,' I said in Herero.

'Hey there, no contact with the prisoner!' Dippenaar shouted from the door. 'John, get that money back!'

'But I need some food,' I protested. 'It's long past lunchtime.'

My objections gave Eva enough time. When she handed me back the money, the only evidence linking me directly to the guerrillas had vanished.

At the police station Dippenaar marched me into a room where his men proceeded to sort through my papers once more. Everything written in English and Afrikaans they read; what they could not understand they put aside. My old love letters they suspected to be SWAPO messages in code. 'Who is this girl? Where is she now?' They joked about what they found the whole time, and when it was something of particular interest, they passed it around with gloating excitement. 'Look, we've got him now. He'll sure hang for this.' And they roared with laughter. Dippenaar addressed me with mock reverence. 'Meneer, Mr Secretary General, it seems you are the one who'll be going to Kakamas and we whites will stay here in South-West forever.' He pointed to the picture of Verwoerd above his desk. 'See this man? A great man Dr Verwoerd was; better than a hundred John Ottos, Nkrumahs and Nyereres put together.'

The sorting took twelve hours. The agents had their dinner breaks one at a time, but I had to remain in the office, standing up with nothing to eat. My only break was a trip back to the school where to his delight Dippenaar found a book by Marx and Engels in my desk. From the moment we left the station his men kept me at gunpoint. But the thought of escape did not enter my mind. My comrades, I was sure, would engage a lawyer and in a few days I would be out on bail.

It was well after midnight when the last papers were sorted. Tired and hungry, I was pushed into an office where another Special Branch officer, Major Kotze, sat waiting, his bulky body squeezed into a swivel chair. A revolver lay on the desk, next to his right hand. Under a blond crewcut the furrows sat deep in his forehead as he tried to look severe. 'Johnny,' he said, 'you are such an intelligent young man. It's too bad you've fallen prey to the communists.'

I was too tired to listen to the old man's lecturing, too tired even

to want to argue. I simply stood on the floor, wondering when I would be able to get a rest.

Kotze talked on and on, trying to read my reactions as he tried different approaches. First he wanted to scare me: 'Do you know death, Johnny? Have you seen people die? Well, take my advice and prepare; you may hang before this is over.' Then he held up hope. 'As a Christian, John, open your heart; tell the judge the truth and maybe he'll forgive you. Be honest with the Lord, John; remember that only truth pays in the end.'

I had been through all this before – the wise old Boer telling the little black boy what is best for him. The only useful information he gave me was that Jason and Maxuilili had also been arrested and that the three of us would be flown to Pretoria the following morning. When Kotze had finally talked himself out, I was locked up to await the plane the next morning.

The old Dakota aircraft arrived from Ovamboland with another group of prisoners on their way to the South African capital. I had never flown before and was actually looking forward to the experience. Jason and Maxuilili were standing next to me. They did not take our arrest too seriously either; we thought the South Africans were merely using their detention powers to keep us out of the way while they re-established their control. Dippenaar and Kotze had spoken in general terms about 'communism' and 'agitation', but these were crimes we had been accused of for years. Being held in Pretoria for a few months, I thought, could not be so bad and SWAPO would surely go on without the three of us. Having to leave Ali and Kenny, who was now six months old, hurt more. I had spent too much time away since he had been born; he might not even recognize me by the time I returned.

The Dakota taxied past the low terminal building and came to a rattling stop twenty yards from where the three of us stood under guard. The door was jerked open and police with stenguns jumped out without waiting for the ramp.

Jason, Maxuilili and I were ordered to load our confiscated possessions on to the plane. Jason and I continued chatting as we took the duplicator between us to heave it in through the narrow opening in the fuselage. A vicious kick from the dark interior caught my jaw. I reeled backwards down the ladder and landed flat on the hard runway. From the top of the steps a man in green khaki

and soldiers' boots fixed me with a cold stare. 'You shut up, kaffir!'

His eyes alone were enough to frighten anyone; they were red and watering from drink or too much sunlight and were set close together in a lined unshaven face. His wide-brimmed bush hat was pulled down low on his forehead and a bulge under his shirt betrayed the gun. This was Lieutenant Ferreira, the man in charge of Special Branch operations in Ovamboland. He could be no more than thirty, and he had that contemptuous hardness about him that I had previously seen with policemen who were used to hunting down Africans. Ferreira was the kind of policeman who probably thought of Kotze and his Windhoek colleagues as dough-faced liberals, if not outright kaffir-lovers. It slowly dawned on me that this time I might be in real trouble.

As I continued loading boxes on to the plane, Ferreira kept after me as if he wanted me to fight back. 'Three months in the goddam bush just because of you bastards. You'll pay for this, you monkey!' I bent down to pick up a typewriter and he kicked me in the buttocks so that both the machine and I went crashing to the ground.

Inside the dark plane about twenty other prisoners were chained together on a bench along the cabin wall. The three of us from Windhoek were chained down with them. During the flight, Ferreira walked the length of the cabin, slapping, kicking and showering obscenities on his victims. Some of the other men were already bruised and battered, their clothing torn and dirty as if they had been the quarry in a long and terrifying hunt. They sat impassively, staring into space. The plane droned southward, putting five hundred miles of the burning Kalahari Desert between us and our homeland.

Torture in Pretoria

The steel door slammed shut behind me, the key turned with a grinding noise and a bolt slid into place. I was in cell number 14, on the third floor of Pretoria Local Prison. Only a dim ray of daylight filtered in through a tiny opening close to the ceiling, twelve feet up. Several minutes passed before I could see. The cell was only a body's length and so narrow that when I leaned against one wall, I could still touch the opposite side. The floor was of black polished concrete. By the wall with the paneless window were two buckets and a stack of three small, threadbare, lousy blankets.

For a long time I remained standing, completely at a loss about what to do with myself. How long were they going to keep me in this hole? I remembered hearing about people disappearing in jails like this. Only the faint echoes of voices in the corridor reached into my darkness.

I was helpless, like a child on the first day of school. When my bowels started to rumble, I banged on the door. I shouted. A few minutes passed before the peephole cover in the door went up.

'What do you want?' a thick Transvaaler voice yelled.

'I want to go to the toilet.'

'You want to shit, eh,' the voice roared back. 'You goddam kaffir, you just shit on the floor and when you're through, eat it!' The guard slammed the cover shut and kicked the door as he left.

This looked bad. I started knocking again. I was not yet prepared to live in my own excrement. In only a few seconds the door was flung open. The guard was a young man with closely cropped reddish hair. When he saw me leaning against the wall, arms folded across my chest, he almost lost his speech.

'You . . . you *bliksems donner*, you black bastard! *Hak!*' Foul language followed. 'When you even as much as hear me at the door, you stand straight, understand!'

But I still had a free man's habits and thought I could calm him down. 'Please,' I said in my very politest Afrikaans, 'please show me where the toilet is. I promise I'll come straight back.'

His fury dissolved into disbelief. 'Ach, man, where are you from? This is your first time inside, eh?'

'That's right. I'm from South-West Africa.' The pressure on my bowels made it difficult to stand still.

'South-West; so you're one of those guys.' His eyes narrowed as he looked me up and down. 'See the bucket with the cover? You shit in there. The other one has water for drinking. You have all you need right here, so don't let me hear another fart. Fucking terrorists—' He swore as he stepped out. 'And next time you hear this door open, you better stand straight,' he yelled through the peephole.

I spent four long days in my cell wondering what the Boers had in mind. On the fifth day, a guard appeared and told me to follow him. He walked me down the two flights of stairs to the yard, pushing and kicking and cursing the 'goddam terrorists'. In the yard I found Ferreira and Captain Erasmus, another husky, young Special Branch officer in a black South African Police blazer. They had a car waiting to take me to the Kompol building, the Branch headquarters. The sudden change from my dark cell to the sunlit outdoors made me dizzy and weak as the car wound its way through the city traffic. My white shirt was filthy and my jacket and trousers crumpled after being worn night and day since my arrest. The prison guards had taken my tie and belt so I had to hold my trousers up with both hands to keep from stumbling as Ferreira shoved me along the Kompol building's grey corridors and into an unmarked office.

Two men were waiting inside. Major Swanepoel, the chief interrogator of the Special Branch, was already known to the press for his work on prisoners from the South African resistance. The second man, Major Gericke, was the officer in charge of the operation against SWAPO. Gericke was a huge man; standing by the window, he nearly blocked out the daylight.

'Who is this?' he boomed as Ferreira pushed me into the middle of the room. 'What's your name, kaffir?'

My response was greeted with a surprised stare, then a roar of laughter.

'John Ya-Otto! You?' Gericke came over and looked down at me. He was much more muscle than fat.

'So you're the one; the punk with the big mouth, eh?' He looked me up and down as if he were searching for a place to grab me to sling me across the room.

Swanepoel also looked amazed. 'Well, well; here he is, the *grootmeneer* from Windhoek,' he rasped. 'And a skinny fart he is, indeed.' Then he spoke straight into my face. 'Did you ever see Mandela or Sobukwe? They're real men. When they talk about freedom, people listen. But you— what's your name again?'

I had long ago learned to ignore this form of Boer humour. But their laughter would not last long and as I listened to them, I realized that I had not prepared myself for interrogation.

'Is your name really John?' Swanepoel taunted. 'Man, once a kaffir gets a little bit of education, he becomes an Englishman. Your name isn't John, it's Johannes, right?'

There was nothing I wanted less than to provoke these bulls, yet I had still not learned to check my brashness. As Swanepoel was talking, my eyes settled on a photograph of Vorster on the wall behind him.

'But how about your Prime Minister,' I blurted out. 'John Vorster isn't exactly an Englishman, is he?'

There was a long silence. They looked at me blankly.

Finally Gericke motioned me over to the window and pointed to a construction site across the street. Gangs of workers were pouring concrete and putting up scaffolding.

Gericke spoke slowly, patiently. 'What do you see there? For each gang of Bantus there is a white boss, see. Without the white boss that building would never be built. The white man has the brains and there's nothing you can do about that.' His voice grew angrier as he went on. 'You and your "freedom" talk; this whole building is full of tapes and reports about the shit you spread up there in South-West.' He was shouting now. 'I know what you want with your freedom; to screw white women, that's what you want!'

They took me into the next-door office, a large room with two bare light bulbs and water pipes running down one of the walls. Along another wall was a stack of cardboard boxes. Two wooden

tables and a few chairs made up the furniture. Here the four whites were joined by four Africans: Eino Johannes, a Namibian Special Branch agent who had been assigned to Ovamboland during the past few years; Sergeant Zulu; Sergeant Simon; and the bald-shaven Sergeant George who was even bigger than Gericke. Swanepoel greeted them with an expectant laugh. 'Hey, you guys, guess who we've got here?'

The Africans stepped forward, appraising me. None of them said a word.

'Guess who he is, just guess,' Swanepoel kept on.

Finally he made me say my name. Sergeant George's blacksmith hands closed around my neck. 'Grootmeneer Johnny Otto,' he snorted, 'we'll see how big you are now.'

'*Haak die bal, Transvaal!*' I heard Swanepoel shout the strange rugby cheer and the next second everything turned black. George must have struck me from behind.

When I regained consciousness, I was on the floor with George's shoe pressing my head against the linoleum. I twisted myself loose and he picked me up by my coat. My legs would not hold me, so he slapped me about the face until I somehow managed to stand, swaying and dazed. All eight now circled around me, cursing, kicking and hitting. Nobody asked me questions; they had no need to make their pitch until I had sampled their goods.

'This is Transvaal, boy, and you'll know it,' Swanepoel coughed. 'We may just kill you like we've killed others. Your folks will never know.'

I had no reason to think he was lying. But what I thought did not matter. The group let me have it from all sides – blows to my head, kicks to my stomach, every one accompanied by curses and obscenities. They did not use their full force; each hit was just hard enough to hurt me a little more than the previous one, to wear me out. After a while I stopped trying to protect myself. As I stood there exhausted, an immobile target, everything in the room gradually became more distant, as if my mind were departing from the scene. I saw the Branch gang and felt their blows through a fog, knowing what was going on but feeling less and less.

This may have gone on for ten minutes or for an hour – I lost

all track of time. Swanepoel and Gericke had left the room and the Africans were doing most of the beating. Sergeant Simon got it into his head to teach me Bantu politeness. He pointed to Ferreira and Erasmus. 'What do you call people like that?'

This was the first time I had seen a black person so completely aping the ways of his bosses. Had Ferreira asked me, I would probably have called him *baas* right away. But with Simon, this crawling lackey, I just couldn't bring myself to say it. Of course, he finally got his way. By the time we had established that Ferreira was my *baas*, Erasmus was my *baas* and that George, Zulu, Eino Johannes and Simon himself were neither 'misters' nor 'sirs' but *baases* as well, my nose was a bloody mess and my lips were split and swollen.

Sergeant Zulu was the quiet one of the group and somehow didn't seem to fit in with the rest. He was older and much smaller than the others and his greying hair gave him a benevolent appearance. He reminded me of an uncle of mine. The Branch, however, has little room for kind uncles. Whether he liked it or not, Zulu carried out his duties.

'Strip!' he yelled. 'Get your fucking clothes off!' I got out of my coat and held it out for him to take. A fist landed in my face.

'Who do you think is your boy here?' Zulu grabbed the coat and threw it on the floor. He shredded my shirt from my body. My undervest followed, then my shoes and socks. As I was trying to get my trousers off without losing my balance, Eino Johannes reached out and felt my underpants.

'Oh, he hasn't shit himself yet,' he exclaimed, feigning surprise. He turned to me with a fearsome grin. 'Listen, I want to see you shit all over this floor. All your famous friends in Ovamboland, they talk big words about freedom, but here in Pretoria they shit like rabbits.'

The others roared with laughter, and the face of Eino, the only Namibian in the group, lit up. He moved closer to me.

'All the shit I heard at those SWAPO meetings I want to see coming out your arse,' he said. 'John Otto, the big boss from Windhoek, we'll show you what freedom is.' He knocked me to the floor and pulled off my underpants.

Swanepoel, who had gone out of the room, returned as the Africans were kicking away at my head.

'Oh, my dear Mr Otto,' he sneered, 'what have these boys done

to you?' And to the 'boys', 'How can you treat a SWAPO leader like this?'

He took a cardboard box from the stack by the wall. 'Did you ever hear of Braam Fischer, the biggest communist in South Africa? He thought he was clever to disguise himself like this.' Swanepoel pulled some dungaree clothing from the box. 'But we got him; ja, man, we got him all right, didn't we?' The others were all grins as they savoured the memory of good times past.

There were at least twenty such boxes on the rack. Each had a name scribbled on the outside, but I was too far away to read them. Gazing at the rack, I thought about the others who had been through what I was now getting. Some were well known, such as Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu, who had both been sent to rot for the rest of their lives on Robben Island, South Africa's notorious prison where the cold fog and humidity conspire with the prison guards to extinguish the last sparks of life in the prisoners. But most of the Branch's victims were common people, men and women who had quietly, and often secretly, resisted apartheid and who had no fame to preserve once they were in Swanepoel's paws. Most political prisoners were blacks, but there were also Coloureds, Asians and whites who had been active in the Congress Movement or in other illegal organizations. One white, John Harris, had been hanged earlier that year for planting a bomb in the Johannesburg railway station. The others were locked up in Pretoria; Braam Fischer was in the prison in which I was being held.

I had heard that death row was one of the few places in South Africa where whites and non-whites could mix. The Kompol building was obviously another. With political subversives, racial distinctions mattered less, and the wrath of the Branch men was heaped indiscriminately upon all enemies of the state, regardless of race. Several had been killed right here by the very men before me - 'suicides' in the official language. Their only visible remains were the brown cardboard boxes on that rack. That may well be my fate also, I thought, staring at my torn bloodied clothing lying in a heap on the floor. A little brown box, the kind they pack groceries in at the supermarket, might be the only thing left to show that I had passed through the hands of these butchers.

Swanepoel went out again and Ferreira pulled a table into the middle of the room. He ordered me to run around it, holding a

broomstick raised above my head. The gang gathered in a circle and slashed at me with sticks and lengths of thick rubber hose. Only Erasmus used his hands; his karate chops to my chest shot flashes of white-hot pain through me. Time after time I crashed to the floor, out of breath and with my heart racing. The others' kicks to my naked crotch got me back to my feet.

'Show us how fast you ran in the bush,' Ferreira taunted. 'Hold your communist gun high and run, you *tsotsi*!'

Soon the strange numbness returned. The hose left blue welts on the fleshy parts of my body, but I no longer felt the blows. Only Erasmus's karate chops kept the pain alive – thunderbolts that emptied my lungs and made me shake all over. He became my one deadly enemy. If the gang were going to finish me off anyway, I figured I might as well get one back at them. And Erasmus was the one I wanted. He had hung his blazer over one of the chairs and loosened his tie. His shirt sleeves were rolled up to expose a pair of hairy arms with thick, knuckled wrists. A fancy watch flashed every time he brought his arm down on me.

From the corner of my eye I watched how he leaned back to strike, his right arm raised, the left one resting on the table. He hit me once more. I barely managed to get back on my feet. On wobbly legs I staggered another lap, swaying and breathing heavily but clutching my broomstick and watching Erasmus carefully. When he came at me for the next blow, the weight of his whole body behind his hand, I swung around and rammed the broomstick into his jaw.

'Auuugh!' His shout was of surprise more than pain. He staggered backwards while the others came at me and brought me to the floor instantly. I did not care about the consequences. Seeing that brute Erasmus spitting blood and rubbing his sore jaw was worth a hundred karate chops. I had won this round.

'Leave him to me,' Erasmus ordered the Africans. Slowly he came at me, on his toes and with arms raised as if he wanted to box. But all I could think about was getting it over with. I just let my arms down and went out at Erasmus's first punch.

I came to in a pool of water. Somebody was blindfolding me with a wet piece of cloth. My hands were in cuffs with a rope running from the chain between them over a water pipe in the ceiling. A couple of jerks and I was hanging by my wrists, the sharp edges of the handcuffs digging into my flesh. When I stretched, the tips

of my toes touched the floor to take off some of the pressure, but I was able to do this for only a few seconds at a time.

I felt something being taped to my earlobes and, before I had time to think, a blinding flash split my brain as 200 volts of electricity shot through my body. I screamed. I kicked and twisted on the rope. My head knocked wildly against the pipe on the wall. The shock may have lasted less than one second, but I was left panting, cold sweat breaking out all over me.

'This is what we have to do when people refuse to tell the truth,' Swanepoel's voice reached me from afar. 'Why don't you consider it for a few minutes?'

They had asked me nothing. When beating me, they had insisted that I was responsible for sending SWAPO youths abroad for military training. It was put as a statement of fact, not a question, and I had been in no position to argue. As it turned out, this was the only admission they wanted from me. If I confessed, Swanepoel said, all my troubles would be over.

That they were pressing so hard to get this one admission led me to believe that they had no evidence linking me to SWAPO's military activities. Ferreira had mentioned the names of several of our Ovamboland members who had already been tortured, including Hermann Ja-Toivo, but none of them was a danger to me. Only a couple of my comrades knew enough to testify against me and I felt I could trust every one of them. So I was left to rely on myself. But my body still quaked from the electricity. What was the use of resisting? How long can a person stand up against that kind of hellish torture? Wasn't I bound to break down sooner or later anyway? If I talked, I wouldn't have to implicate anybody else. I would be the only one to suffer . . . or would I? How did I know that Swanepoel would stop there? If I started to talk about my own work, he would probably press on and force me to turn against my comrades. What could I gain? Having 'confessed', I, too, would probably spend the rest of my days on Robben Island. Only by going all the way, by agreeing to work for the South Africans, could I be sure to return home. But return to what? What would there be for me in Namibia if I betrayed the movement? I would never be able to face my comrades and friends. I would be ostracized at school. And what would I tell Ali? I could not imagine living with myself and seeing the face of a traitor every time I looked in the mirror. To resist Swanepoel now would at least leave

a glimmer of hope for the future; to break down would be the beginning of a slow death.

When electricity tears through your body, you cannot think, let alone speak. I discovered that for the Special Branch this was the last stage of priming their detainees for co-operation – the last torture before sitting down to ‘talk reason’. When I had nothing to say, they moved the electrodes from my ears to my nipples and then to my penis. Each time it felt as if a bomb of a thousand sharp needles was exploding inside me, tearing my guts apart, pushing my eyes out from their sockets, bursting my skin open in a dozen places. Each time I screamed and struggled like a madman on the rope, crying for my mother and for Ali. My head knocked against the pipe; sweat poured from every pore. But when they finally put away their machine and removed the blindfold, I still had nothing to say in response to Swanepoel’s questioning stare. With a shrug he led Erasmus and Ferreira out of the room, leaving the Africans to look after me.

Ferreira had escorted me from prison in the early morning and it was now only lunchtime. Zulu let me down and told me to put on my underpants. Then the Africans, too, left. I couldn’t walk; my ankles were swollen and every joint in my body was frozen. My wrists were open wounds and I could feel dried blood forming in cakes under each nostril. My left eye was closed and the vision in my right eye was blurred. I hobbled over to one of the chairs and sat down. That hurt the backside of my thighs, but at least it took the pressure off my throbbing ankles. I rubbed each joint carefully, and slowly, very slowly, life returned to my battered limbs.

An African whom I had not seen before brought me fish and chips and a pint of milk. I could hardly chew – my lips felt like rubber tubes – but somehow I managed to get most of the food down. I have never in my life needed rest more than I did then; I thought I would never be able to get up from the chair.

Zulu was the first to return. He pulled a chair over next to mine.

‘You don’t look too bad,’ he said in a friendly manner. ‘You’ll be all right in a couple of days. Want a smoke?’

His sympathy surprised me. But when I looked into his eyes, I could see that his smile went no further than his lips. I looked away and said nothing.

‘Listen, man,’ he tried again, ‘I’m an African, too. I’ve got

children to feed and I need my job.' He lowered his voice. 'Don't think that I like to carry a pass wherever I go and lick white people's arses; it's no easier for me than for you.' He leaned over and draped his arm over my shoulder, like a father trying to talk sense into a sulky son. 'Johnny, you're young, you're intelligent. This thing is getting you nowhere. Swanepoel is dangerous; he'll have you killed right here and now if he feels like it. Just tell him what SWAPO is doing. You don't have to take the blame yourself.'

Zulu had probably been a policeman for a long time. Perhaps it had been the only way for him to support his family – but at what cost? What he was telling me now, even if he was sincere, was in fact: 'Become a slave and you'll be all right.' I knew exactly what I wanted to tell Zulu but I chose a less dangerous course.

'Let Swanepoel do what he wants,' I told him. 'Whether they kill me here or hang me later, I have nothing more to say.'

Zulu retained his 'friendly advice' guise to the end. 'Well, Johnny,' he sighed as he finally got up. 'I've done what I could to help you.' But I had already turned the other way.

There were no more beatings that afternoon. After Zulu's efforts, Ferreira took charge of the interrogation. The questions, filled with threats and the standard obscenities, jumped from one subject to another, from my personal life to communism to SWAPO guerrillas. I could think only about the electric shocks and talked, trying not to reveal anything important.

'How do you make a living?' Eino Johannes asked.

'I teach at a school.'

'The government pays you and you still work against the government?' Eino was trying desperately to prove his worth.

'Fighting for your country, my arse!' he sneered. 'It's my country, too. You think I'd live under your terrorist government?' In Namibia, people thought of Eino as a traitor; whenever he showed up at SWAPO rallies to take notes he was jeered. Even his family refused to have anything to do with him. But here in Pretoria it was his turn to jeer. Besides, he was only an apprentice in Swanepoel's seasoned team and this was his big chance to ingratiate himself with the Boers. When Ferreira gave me a break to go to the toilet, Eino was given the task of escorting me.

The Kompol building has no indoor toilet for blacks; we had to

go outside to a place that could be used by anybody off the street. I was handcuffed and had only my underpants on.

The stench in the toilet was nauseating. Eino pushed me to the filthy floor and, standing in the doorway, tried to urinate into my mouth. I turned my head but could not keep his piss from splashing all over my face. When he brought me, dripping wet, back into the office and drew approving comments for his ingenuity, his face broke into a wide grin.

Ferreira resumed the questioning. 'Admit that you knew about the weapons.'

'I've told you a hundred times, I knew nothing, nothing.' I tried to return his cold, piercing stare.

'How long did you train in the bush? Who taught you to shoot?' His questions were designed to intimidate, not to elicit information. He must have sensed that I was not ready to co-operate. 'When were you last in Dar es Salaam?'

'You know I've never been to Dar. I've never been out of the country before this.'

'Stop lying, you monkey bastard! You've been trained in Russia. You have Russian and Chinese weapons.'

The questioning led nowhere and after a couple of hours I was taken back to the prison. The water in my bucket turned red when I rinsed my face. Sitting on the cell floor, I carefully massaged my wrists and ankles. I could rest in no one position for more than a few minutes before the pain overtook me. Finally, leaning against the wall, I fell into a half sleep, seeing clenched fists raining down on me from the dark and hearing my own screams from the back of my mind. If I had thought that Swanepoel's crew was finished with me, I was soon proven wrong. That same evening, shortly after the lights had gone out, I was brought back to life by the rattle of the lock and the warder's 'Kom, come right away.' With the warder was Ferreira and behind him, Simon and George. Twenty minutes later we were back at the Kompol building for the sequel to the day's events.

'All right, *grootmeneer* Otto, you can save your life tonight if you know how,' Ferreira started as soon as we entered the office where I had first met Swanepoel. He drew up a chair for me by his desk and nodded to the Africans to leave the room. He pulled out his revolver, made sure it was loaded, and put it on the desk top next to his right hand.

'Kaffir, tonight we want no shit. Understand?'

I nodded in agreement; no shit it was going to be. He seemed to have calmed down. Perhaps he thought I had changed my mind, for he came straight to the point.

'Tell me all you know about the military training in Ovamboland.'

'I know nothing about it,' I said.

That spelled the end of the questioning that night – after just thirty seconds.

Ferreira flushed. 'You goddam shithead, I warned you; I want no more of this crap!'

Curses spewing from his mouth, he dragged me next door where all four Africans were waiting. With a blow to my neck he sent me sprawling on to the floor, from where somebody else picked me up. Fists and boots rained down from all sides; I was pushed from one man to the next, from Simon to Zulu, whose punches to my stomach sent me gasping into George's arms. When I was lying face down, faking unconsciousness to get a respite, they kicked until I really did pass out. The last thing I heard was Ferreira's voice, 'This fucking kaffir, we don't care if he dies, eh?'

A sharp pain was spreading down through my arms and shoulders, which held the full weight of my body. I slowly opened my eyes and again found myself hanging from the water pipe, my toes barely touching the floor. The lights were out, but in the glow from the street lamps outside I could see Ferreira, stretched out on a camp bed with a radio next to him. In another room a clock struck ten with a deep, mournful sound that lingered in the empty Kompol building.

All night I was left hanging, shifting the pressure from wrists to toes and back again until both went numb. Blood from my nose and lips accumulated in my mouth – thick globs that were too large to swallow. I twisted my head to wipe the blood off against my shoulder, but instead I almost choked and coughed it out down my chin and torn shirt. My face was stiff and without sensation, just a mask of bruises, cuts and congealed blood.

Every hour Ferreira turned on his radio for news. One of the newscasts reported that police reinforcements had been sent to Ovamboland to track down the 'SWAPO terrorists' still at large. Kahumba Kandola was mentioned as the leader of those being hunted. They were still looking for Kahumba! The old man, so

intense in his hatred of South African rule, had been one of my contacts in Ovamboland. Years of fruitless efforts to persuade the Boers to build schools and hospitals for our people had left him convinced that we would have to fight with guns for our freedom. When he came to visit me in Windhoek in 1963, we spent long nights discussing the question of violence and armed struggle. I was hedging then, still looking for peaceful means. At the end of his visit I knew that he could not be swayed. Already then, three years ago, he was prepared to die for our country; now he was the quarry of the troops combing the forests of Ovamboland.

The news of Kahumba set me thinking about my other comrades. Swanepoel had tried to convince me that both Maxuilili and Jason had co-operated and were now happily back in Namibia with their families. He held up stacks of paper, supposedly their sworn confessions, which included incriminations against me. I was suffering for no purpose, Swanepoel told me. I was convinced that he was lying. Maxuilili would never bend to the Boers. During the years that we had worked together, he had never shown fear. At pass controls or at meetings, whenever there was a confrontation brewing, we had relied on him to deal with the police. Through a combination of personal authority and decisiveness he had accomplished what nobody else could. Maxuilili was much better equipped than I to stand up to Swanepoel's torture.

My thoughts drifted to others. I wondered whether Nganjone, too, had been arrested – and Meroro and Karita? In my mind I analysed my close friends and pondered how each one would react to the kind of treatment that I was experiencing. And if they were not arrested, how were they running SWAPO? Could they get me out of prison? I doubted it; South African law gave the police the power to detain anyone for ninety days without charges, and at the end of that period they could re-arrest him for another three-month spell. In other words, they could hold me like this for as long as they wanted.

Suddenly a feeling of loneliness washed over me. Until my arrest, my political involvement had been overwhelmingly gratifying. My position in SWAPO had won me recognition and popularity in every corner of Namibia. I was young and had built up my confidence; there seemed to be nothing that could stop me – and with me, SWAPO – from reaching our goals. I had struggled

with myself to overcome the early doubts; there were countless hours of discussing, travelling, typing, and preparing meetings and also the hundreds of rands from my own salary that I had put into SWAPO's work. I had made considerable sacrifices, but these sacrifices had also enhanced my authority as a respected intellectual. Not many Africans had the education and money to do what I was doing. When the blows fell, when people were killed or deported, I was the defender and never the one who needed defending. My task was to complain to the Native Commissioner in my perfect Afrikaans and to articulate the victim's cause among the people. Me, the Boers could not touch; my prominence was my protection. Or so I had thought until I arrived in Pretoria. Now I felt completely abandoned. I saw myself forever holed up in a stone cell, cut off from my loved ones and everything we had fought for.

I remained conscious throughout the entire night. Every couple of hours Ferreira got out of bed and lit a match to my face. 'Still not dead, huh?' he would say. 'Well, you'll be *biltong* by the morning.'

With that he went back to sleep, leaving me to my thoughts and the funereal strokes of the big clock down the hall. I had to wait until the Africans arrived at eight o'clock before I was let down. Back in the prison the warders had to carry me to my cell.

The three weeks that followed haunt me still as a long, jumbled nightmare. Days and nights of torture were interspersed with Ferreira's questioning and my pain-dazed spells in the cell. For several weeks I was nearly blind after knocking my head against the water pipes during electric shocks. I could feel my physical strength ebbing. But the brutal treatment also had a curious effect on me. Once I had made up my mind not to give in, every session in the Kompol building became a challenge. The worse the pain, the stronger my hatred for the Branch men, and the more determination I managed to muster. They had the physical power but so long as I resisted, I had the strength that comes from self-respect. In isolation from the rest of the world, I measured myself against my torturers, and each session I survived was a victory - even if I had to be carried into the car.

Ferreira's task was to get a written statement from me. I spoke freely about my background and what had made me join SWAPO. I talked about my political work in general terms, avoiding names.

Sometimes it took several hours, but we always returned to the question of recruiting guerrillas. I got the impression that Ferreira knew of my communications with Ovamboland but that he had no tangible evidence. And so we never got any further; each office session ended with me being dragged into the adjoining room where George, Simon, Zulu and Eino took over.

Ferreira worked under Swanepoel's close supervision. The boss frequently came by to observe the interrogation. He looked as though he were suffering from a permanent hangover. His eyes were bloodshot and the rough, pockmarked skin of his face had an unhealthy crimson flesh. Blueish patches of broken blood vessels made an uneven pattern across his broad nose and on his gigantic, meaty ears. The short neck that connected a nearly square head to a slightly sagging body added to the impression of a battered, ageing wrestler. He spoke in short sentences with a voice that came from deep within his chest. If Ferreira seemed in doubt, Swanepoel would momentarily take charge. Once when I was suspended from the pipe, he came over and slowly, almost leisurely, put out his cigarette in the soft flesh of my thigh. My scream was the password for the crew to follow his example. I still carry many scars from being used as a human ashtray.

Swanepoel also took the lead in perverted forms of torture. While obscene language and gestures are standard armament for South African police, Swanepoel's perversion seemed to be deeply personal. It was he who first spat into my mouth, then forced me to swallow. It was he, too, who first assaulted my genitals, pulling at my penis and shouting, "This is what you want your freedom for, to ram this into white women!" I often wondered about the life this man led outside the Kompol building. What kind of relationship did he have with his wife and children? Could he ever turn his mind from perversion and torture? I don't know whether he had always had this sick streak in him or whether his police work had made him that way, but how I came to loathe him! My repugnance for Swanepoel became such that the very idea of capitulating was out of the question. To let him have his way would be to admit that the dregs of humanity could rule forever.

Swanepoel took pleasure in telling me how he had broken other prisoners. Their degree of collapse – mental and physical – was his measure of triumph. For him, therefore, my refusal to budge took

on the proportions of personal failure. The longer my interrogation dragged on, the more obvious became his frustration.

Finally Swanepoel completely dropped his façade and attacked me in a fit of blind rage. Pressing his two hundred pounds down on my chest, he held me in a stranglehold until I thought my eyes were going to pop out. 'You goddam kaffir!' he screamed, 'I've shot many of your kind, but you, you I want to kill with my bare hands!' But he wasn't ready to kill me yet and so the torture dragged on, and I slipped closer to death.

In theory, Pretoria Local Prison has medical treatment available to all prisoners. Every morning a black warder walks down the corridor shouting, '*Muti, muti!* Medicine!' and then vanishes before the prisoners have time to respond. This is what prison regulations describe as the 'medical inspection'. As a rookie I thought the man could actually help me. One morning, I anticipated his visit and as he paced by my door, I called for him to stop before he could get away.

'Mister, here please!' The footsteps stopped dead. After a pause, 'What do you want?' 'I'm sick. I need treatment.' He called the regular warder - a white - and the door swung open. 'What's the matter with this one?' the guard growled.

The question was scarcely necessary. My wrists and ankles were purple and my thighs were pocked by cigarette burns. My lips were swollen and I had open cuts on my cheekbones. I could feel a huge lump behind my right ear and one of my eyes was closed. I had tried to wash from the jug of drinking water, but flakes of dried blood were still splattered over the upper part of my body.

The first-aid man's eyes opened wide. 'Christ, man, what happened to you?'

'Special Branch,' I said, 'they've been beating me for days. I need to be bandaged.'

He shook his head worriedly. 'These guys, they did it again. All I can give you are these.' From the tray he carried strapped around his neck he gave me a handful of pills. 'Look,' he cut off my protest, 'I have to report every treatment I give and these things,' he looked me up and down, 'these things aren't supposed to happen, see.'

With that he left the cell. I never found out what the pills were for or how often to take them. I used them but felt no better.

Clearly it was no use trying to get medical aid; officially, my wounds did not exist.

By the third week of interrogation I was extremely weak. I could rarely escape the pain – the time in my cell was almost as nightmarish as the sessions in the Kompol building. Nights and days were as one; instead of sleeping I drifted into a state of perpetual semi-consciousness. My hallucinations lasted longer. Images from childhood and life in Windhoek blended with fresh memories of torture as I screamed in anguish. I saw my baby son Kenneth being beaten to death by a laughing Swanepoel and my classroom at the Herero school became the Kompol building. One gruesome scene after another paraded before me as I tossed on the concrete floor. My wounds became infected and the fever kept me hot, despite the cold nights. My muscles felt more and more brittle with each beating; the mere sight of a lit cigarette evoked stings of pain. Every time they hauled me back to the prison, I prayed that they would never again come for me.

The hours with Ferreira at his desk trying to extract a statement were completely futile from his point of view. Instead of giving in, I seemed to fade away before his eyes. I probably shared some of my hallucinations with him, adding to his frustration.

It was during one of these sessions that Ferreira and I had our final confrontation. I had returned from one of my hallucinatory wanderings to find Ferreira and another Branch agent named Van Rensburg whacking at me with rubber hoses. I was handcuffed and could do nothing to protect myself. In my desperation I spotted a way out of my misery. On the desk, unguarded, lay Ferreira's revolver. I had never in my life fired a weapon but all I could think of was to grab the gun, put it to my head, and Bang! everything would be over. There was nothing to plan, nothing to reflect upon, nothing to fear. Just grab the gun and fire. I stole another glance at the desk. Yes, the revolver was really there – no hallucination this time.

I lunged across the desk top. I felt the cold stock of the weapon in my hands as I crashed down on the other side.

Like a panther Ferreira was on top of me. Before I could get a proper grip on the gun, he had me by the wrists. A moment of struggle and I felt the revolver knocked out of my hands.

He and Van Rensburg hauled me back out on the floor. I trembled, crying in despair and disappointment. Ferreira's face

was flushed and he, too, looked as if he were going to cry. His chest was heaving. And when he started to beat me, it was no longer in the calculated manner of the torturer doing his job. Curses flowed incoherently from his lips and his arms pumped like the rods of a steam engine. His wild hissing and the crashing of his fists against my face are the last things I remember of the Kompol building.

Between Life and Death

After that final rampage of Ferreira's, I saw no more of him or the rest of Swanepoel's team. When I regained consciousness, I was in another cell, slightly larger than the first one, shivering, face down in a pool of water on the concrete floor. It was dark and silent. My legs would not move and when I tried to drag myself over to the wall, I passed out again, twice, three times. Finally I found myself propped up in a corner, shivering violently. The cell seemed to be moving as if I were at sea, buckets and blankets floating about in the blurred vision of my damaged eyes. I clutched at the wall to keep from falling over. I felt sick but could not make the effort to retch. The vomit came anyway. I stretched out for the bucket but it floated out of my reach. Fumbling, retching, I toppled back into the pool of water and total unconsciousness.

In the same kind of blur, days followed days, floating, timeless in my semi-consciousness. As my head slowly cleared, the physical pain grew more intense. The burns on my buttocks and back made it difficult for me to sit or lie down. My legs, however, would not hold me and I pulled myself about the cell by my arms like the polio-crippled beggars on the streets of Windhoek. My chest burned constantly; I caught a cold and every cough felt as if it were tearing out my diaphragm, leaving me panting to recover before the next fit. At the worst moments, I could not even feed myself properly - water and maize porridge dribbled from my shaking hands and into my lap. The monitor who came to clean my cell had to drag me by my shoulders into the corridor where I would remain, lying at the feet of the white guard, until the monitor had finished and I could be dragged back in.

Slowly, as my wounds healed, my days became moulded by the strict routine that the South African prison department imposes on

its 'politicals'. When the glare from the bare light globe pierced my eyelids at half past five, I had thirty minutes to fold my blankets – each folded four times to make an exact square – and stack them in the corner, put the two buckets in place by the far wall, the tin mug on top of the bucket with drinking water, and stand to attention exactly in the middle of the cell when the door was flung open. The section warden would then pace by, shouting, '*Klagte, klagte?* Complaints?' but it was more a threat than a question and during my six months in solitary confinement, I never heard anyone raise a complaint. On Sundays there was a special inspection by the prison chief who walked slowly by, peering into each cell. I could feel his eyes upon me as I stood erect, staring at a spot above the door. Our eyes never met; there was never a word exchanged.

My food arrived in an aluminium bowl, slid in through the barely opened door by an anonymous arm. Breakfast consisted of cold, half-cooked porridge and black coffee, lunch was porridge with beans and dinner was the same porridge with beans and coffee. On Thursdays and Saturdays we received three or four dice-sized pieces of meat. I soon stopped thinking about the delicacies I had enjoyed as a free man and learned to appreciate those ounces of old cow. The diet kept one alive and nothing more. On Sundays the guards wanted to go home early, so dinner was brought as soon as we had finished lunch. I was always ravenously hungry by Monday breakfast, even if the corn porridge was half raw.

Saturday was the day for washing and shaving. At the end of the corridor was a cold-water shower and a big concrete wash basin. With a blanket wrapped around my waist, I smeared the coarse brown soap over each piece of my clothing – I still wore the same clothes as on the day of my arrest, including the shirt that had been torn to shreds – and then tried to rinse it out in the cold water. I worked slowly; each minute out of my cell was relief from dozens of hours inside. From time to time I stole a glance at the monitors, those convicts whose work it is to mop the floors or serve the meals. These momentary encounters – a wink, the raising of an eyebrow – were the high points of my week. After showering and being shaved under the close watch of a guard, I was taken back to my cell, with a shiny scalp and wet soapy clothes, ready for the big chief's critical stare the next morning.

Such was the world I slowly woke up to, an existence centred around petty detail. When my head was clear, almost every moment of the week was predictable. The slightest break in routine was a momentous event and subject to much speculation. Why was dinner late? Why did the guard change shifts in the middle of the week? Trivia that would never have entered my mind outside the prison walls now filled my life. The minutes ticked away while I sat in my cell, knowing exactly what would happen next.

I suppose that stripped of human contact and normal activity, a detainee may find some kind of security in solitary confinement. For people who have been on the run, fought the police, been tortured, perhaps this existence is a sanctuary from constant fear and uncertainty. Knowing what tomorrow will bring gives you a chance to prepare. If you learn to accept the present, things may become easier with time. I, too, felt this urge to withdraw, to take the food and shelter and expect nothing more. To live like a rat in a cage.

But how far can a person be driven and still remain a human being? Solitary is the logical sequel to the treatment in the Kopol building – the time for the torture to sink in. The loneliness of the tomb-like cells breaks many of those who have resisted Swanepoel's other techniques. Whether they are eventually sentenced or not, the mental scars of solitary mark them for life.

But bad as they were, my physical pains were at least a sign that blood still flowed through my veins and that I was still of this world. In my clearer moments I tried to analyse my situation. Now that I had survived their interrogation, the police would probably charge me with something. They would probably try for a death sentence. The thought of the gallows did not frighten me much. I was already dead; short of hanging, anything that would get me out of this grave would be a resurrection. But I tried to keep from thinking too far ahead. If I cracked now, whatever happened would not matter much anyway. So I concentrated instead on day-to-day survival, on saving my mind from the deadening present.

I gradually became trapped in the surreal routine designed by the Special Branch. Days and nights became one and strange images drifted by, fantasy illustrations to the equally strange South African languages that reached me faintly through the cell door.

Perhaps this was what death was like; perhaps only my body was here in Pretoria while my soul was floating through some shadowy space between two worlds. At times, in order to ascertain that I was really alive, I jumped up and down and talked in a loud voice. I would pretend to greet people while listening carefully to my own voice. Did it sound like the real me? I spoke Ovambo, Herero, Nama, Afrikaans, all the languages I knew, just to make sure that this was indeed John Ya-Otto speaking. Still I found it hard to be convinced. I had not seen the sun move across the sky; I had heard nothing from the outside; what was the proof that I was not actually in my grave?

These fantasies lasted for hours, maybe days – I don't know. For a while I was sure I was going mad. So what? My fantasies were easier to cope with than the void that was my cell. Hours, days, nights – nobody to see, to talk to, not even a mouse or a spider. There was absolutely no diversion to shorten the day, the twenty-four hours of sixty minutes each, which I could count by counting one-thousand-and-one, one-thousand-and-two . . . And thus passed another one-fourteen-hundredth of a day, while the scoured floor, the steel door, the light globe in the ceiling all remained the same. I forced my mind to wander, I had to. But after months of this, how can you know that your mind has not drifted away from reality altogether?

The 'mural' on my cell wall gave my morale its first great boost, soon after I arrived in the cell. The guard had warned me. 'See that,' he pointed to the wall, 'I don't want to see any more of that shit, understand!' But I was too weak to look up to see what he was talking about. There had been scratchings on the wall of my old cell, too – names of athletes and musicians and the prisoners themselves, together with the usual profanities and words like 'rape' and 'kill'.

But this cell put me in a different category. One wall had been turned into a small encyclopedia of the South African resistance. The name Govan Mbeki was engraved in the cement several times next to a set of dates. Just below that was scratched 'Walter Sisulu' in large block letters, ringed by 'ANC Fight For Your Country!' and 'Amandla!' Mbeki and Sisulu were names I knew well. Both were veterans of the South African Congress Movement and were now serving life sentences on Robben Island. There were other names, too: Mhlaba, Mkwayi, Nkosi. The whole work was

dominated by an elaborate engraving of a spear-wielding Xhosa warrior pursuing a white man who was running for his life. In the background a big sun was rising, its broad rays reaching all the way to the ceiling. Across the sun, '*Umkonto weSizwe. Mayibuye Afrika*' was scratched deep into the hard cement.

The more I looked at the mural, the more I felt privileged to be in this cell. My predecessors here had been active in politics when I was a little boy. When we in Namibia were just starting to organize, Mbeki, Sisulu and their comrades already had strikes and mass boycotts behind them. Threatened and suppressed by the Boers, they had never hesitated to do what they thought necessary. And here in this cell, after torture and with decades in prison ahead of them, they had continued to defy the regime. If they could stand years of persecution, why was I thinking of giving up after a few weeks? Sisulu and Mbeki would forever be symbols of African dignity; if I collapsed now, I would be of no more use, even if I were to be set free.

For hours at a time I sat leaning against the opposite wall, taking in the scratchings, line by laborious line. Then, picking up courage, I used the handle of my tin mug to add my own contribution. First I made an inconspicuous 'J.O. 1967' just above the glowing sun. When the guard did not seem to notice, I went to work on slogans such as 'Namibia Will Be Free' and 'One Namibia, One Nation'. This kept me occupied for days. I would scratch for a few seconds, then stop and listen for footsteps in the corridor. In the end it was a joy to see my own 'works' up there with those of the South African fighters. It made me feel strong; I became so inspired that I did a little dance when I looked at that wall.

Any reminder of the outside world now helped me to gain strength. One evening after lights-out I thought I could hear voices calling far away. When I climbed up near the paneless window, sounds of family life reached me clearly. Children were crying and adults were calling each other. Later, somebody began to play an organ with a full, rich sound. The player must have been an Afrikaner nationalist because the repertoire included such Boer tunes as *Die stem van Suid Afrika*. When I closed my eyes as I stood there under the wire-mesh opening in the wall, the image of childhood classrooms in Aus and Tsumeb where we sat in neat rows, innocently praising Boer tradition with our feeble voices,

appeared clearly before me. I could not help but sing along even now. Aus, Tsumeb, classmates and family, I was back in Namibia, a schoolboy once more. Everything that had happened since was blanked out and only a long, trouble-free life lay ahead. Ben Amathila and I were again Schwester Emma's favourite students; there was Isak exhorting us to work harder and the missionary Rechtemeyer The music finally stopped and I found tears streaming down my cheeks. Would I ever see these people again? Here I could talk only to the stone walls, which seemed to stare back at me, impenetrably guarding the secret of my fate.

One morning there was excited yelling and the sound of running feet on the road below my window. Voices called out in English. My window was eight feet up but when I folded my blankets an extra time and stacked them on top of a bucket, I could just manage to get a glimpse outside. Opposite me was a four-storey cell block with almost no windows. On my left was a wall to the outside, two storeys high, topped by a catwalk. Down below, in a long, narrow yard, a group of white prisoners were playing a game, hitting a tennis ball against the wall, two men in each team. There were ten of them altogether, including one who I am sure was Braam Fischer, the famous lawyer who had defended the ANC leaders before being arrested himself. His hair had turned white and his frail figure was almost lost in an oversized khaki uniform that flapped around him as he ran for the ball. Fischer would spend the rest of his life in that prison; not even when he was dying of cancer did they let him out. Only his ashes were handed over to his family.

Those of the men who were not playing were strolling about the yard, enjoying the few rays of sunshine that cleared the tall buildings. The only guard in sight was standing by the door to the cell block, a good distance away from the prisoners. These white prisoners were probably politicals, too, and would have had their fair share of the torture. Still, their being together, talking, playing ball in the sunshine, seemed like such a wonderful life. Every morning they returned to the yard for one hour and every morning I climbed up to the window, so engrossed in their game that I felt like one of the players as I clutched the mesh. 'Hit it low! Back to the line!' But of course they couldn't hear me, I dared not shout aloud. They didn't even know I was there – or that I existed for that matter – and I had no way to let them know.

My wounds healed and though I still suffered from long spells of headaches, my vision was less blurred than before. It was becoming easier to focus my thoughts too. Yet I often wondered what my place was in this grey, ill-defined realm between life and death. Certainly, the world that I had known still existed; I could hear the sounds and see the people. But was I part of it? I had neither spoken to nor been acknowledged by anybody out there for months. The white prisoners belonged to another world. They laughed, played and acted like the normal human beings I used to know. Inside my cell block, however, guards and monitors went about their tasks like automatons, mechanically performing the same movements and shouting the same commands at the same hour day after day.

Observing the real world only made me lonelier. I began to talk to myself unashamedly and at length. Why not, I thought, in here I will never meet real people. This continued until one morning, shortly before dawn, when I was awakened by voices speaking English.

'Man, you should have seen this beautiful chick who passed by our gang yesterday,' the first voice said. 'Can't wait till I get out there and lay my hands on something like that.'

'Ah, Willie, don't talk like that,' another voice responded. 'Makes a poor fellow sleepless.'

For a moment I thought I was hallucinating again. But the voices were too clear, the topic too down-to-earth. At times, too, the English was interrupted by phrases in some African language.

'Four days now and I'll be back in good old Soweto,' the first voice purred. 'Wonder who'll be there to meet me.' Then followed a long list of names of family and friends.

Above my cell door was a tiny opening barred with heavy steel mesh. In the winter it and the paneless window turned the cell into an icy wind tunnel. But it also brought me sounds from the corridor. Now I moved my buckets over so that my head reached the opening. The man called Willie was in the cell next to mine; the other was across the corridor. They both sounded young, but the still nameless voice was very hoarse and talked so fast that I could understand only half of what the man said. Both men were from Soweto and their whispers were mostly about life in that sprawling township.

I listened intently and all next day I thought about Willie and

his friend. I hardly knew anything about them, and yet I thought of them as old friends. When night came, I did not sleep for fear of missing the conversation. They waited until almost daybreak.

'Psst. Hey, man, you awake?'

I waited for Willie to describe his day on the work gang before I joined in.

'Hello there.' I tried to whisper but my voice sounded so loud that I nearly jumped. There was silence. 'Hello. My name is John Ya-Otto and I'm from South-West Africa,' I tried again with bated voice.

'For chrissake, chummy, keep that foghorn down or we'll have every bloody guard in the whole prison here,' came the hoarse voice.

'It's all right, man; those bastards asleep anyway,' said Willie next to me. 'Where did you say you from?'

'German West Africa.' Hardly anyone from the Transvaal knew of South-West. 'It's north of the Cape.'

'Ah, you're far from home,' the other one rejoined. 'What you here for?'

We talked every night until Willie was released the following week. He had served five years for being a member of the ANC and was now counting the hours and minutes left. His friend Tommie was in for theft and had just started his sentence. I told them about Windhoek and Namibia and they talked about Soweto and Johannesburg. Willie was planning every detail of his first day of freedom; Tommie and I were treated to hungry descriptions of the beer halls and *shebeens* he was going to visit and of his girlfriend who was waiting. Still only twenty-six, Willie was determined to compensate for his years inside. Tommie talked less. After Willie's release we kept up our nocturnal exchanges until the following week when he was transferred from my wing. Once more I was alone.

Several weeks passed with little to cheer me up except watching the white prisoners play. I was resigned to spending years, even the rest of my life, like this. Time did not seem to matter anymore and everything else - Ali, my comrades at home, SWAPO - was so remote that I preferred not to think about it. Thoughts like that only made the daily routine more painful. Then one day I found another prisoner pacing up and down the corridor for his one-minute exercise period.

He was an Indian, dressed in a clean suit and white shirt that made me look like a beggar. He must be a political, I thought. What else would an Indian be doing here in the black wing? My heartbeat quickened as he turned at the far end and started down towards me. His eyes met mine and I saw the flicker of a smile. Then, as we passed each other, he lifted his hand as if to scratch his head, flashing me the thumb-up signal of the Congress Movement.

I was too dumbfounded to respond. When I turned to come back down the corridor, I saw the Indian being locked into a cell a few doors away from mine.

The entire evening I contemplated the whys and hows of my new friend's presence. By now I thought of any prisoner as a friend, though this man surely had to be somebody special, doing one-minute walks just as I did. I thought of a dozen questions to ask him at our next encounter. So many of the things I had not dared to think about for a long time flashed back into my memory. Most of all I hungered to ask him about Namibia, and about our arrest – was it known to the outside world? Our 'meeting' would only be the briefest contact, a whispered word at most, but suddenly I found that I could not stop my imagination from bursting through the prison walls.

My new friend was a resourceful person. The next morning, in my supply of toilet paper that the monitor shoved in through the peephole, I found a ballpoint pen. When I unfurled the paper completely, a piece with writing on it fluttered to the floor: 'I am a lawyer from Durban. Arrested under the Suppression of Communism Act. Who are you?'

The tiny note felt like a hot coal in my hands; what if the guard suddenly opened the door? And the pen – nothing could be hidden in a cell like mine. But obviously the Indian had got away with it and now he wanted me to respond. I read the note several times over, then swallowed it. The monitor had given me more toilet paper than usual. I tore off half the length and folded it as hard as I could until it formed a square. Then I pressed it against the door and began carefully, one letter at a time: 'John Ya-Otto, Namibia, SWAPO, political prisoner. You know my case?' It was the first time in months that I had held a pen. My hand was shaking from the excitement as well as from the lack of practice. Perhaps it was a trap, the guard waiting outside to catch me red-handed?

The pen kept tearing through the porous paper. After what seemed like an eternity, I tucked the pen and the finished note into my trousers and waited for the next move.

It happened at lunch time. When he slid my food through the doorway, the monitor whispered, 'Next time. The pen, too.' Thirty minutes later, when the arm reached inside the door to collect my empty bowl, I slipped the monitor the note folded around the pen, knowing that the guard was right behind him. The wrinkled, black hand moved with the speed of a magician's; the note disappeared under the bowl. The Boer would have had to stand straight over us to notice.

The monitor, Madala, who had put me in touch with the lawyer was an old man with a trembling voice. He had served sixteen of his twenty-five years and appeared to enjoy a great deal of freedom within the prison. 'I was in the Congress,' he told me later. 'We were cutting off the heads of the whites.' But that couldn't be true; nobody in the Congress had been cutting off heads in the early fifties, or at any time for that matter.

The Indian was moved to another cell block before I received a response, but a week or so later Madala brought me another note, this time from Hermann Ja-Toivo who was asking for news about our case. At first I was excited; now I could really find out what Hermann had told Swanepoel's gang. When they were beating me, Ferreira and the others cracked jokes about how they had broken Hermann. I tried not to believe them, but the doubt lingered in the back of my mind. Who knows what they had done to Hermann? But as I sat twiddling the pen, trying to put my questions, I had second thoughts about the note, and about Madala. To get his position in the first place he must have proven to the Boers that he could be a loyal boss boy. No doubt he was good at this. Every time the guards swore or kicked at him, he laughed, a pitched, nervous laughter. He even let the youngest of the guards treat him like a dog. But that was hardly sufficient. The more I thought about it, the more convinced I became that Madala was playing both sides. At last I wrote to Hermann that I was doing fine but that I knew nothing of our case. This is how I approached all the notes Madala later brought me, such as those from Jason and from several other SWAPO members whom I had never met. When Madala finally brought me a note from Ishmael Fortune, a man I knew from Windhoek, I knew Madala could not be trusted.

I continued to grin and nod at his whispered comments but I never let down my guard when he was near.

The monitor I came to trust the most was a tall, young fellow whom the Boers had nicknamed Langgat – ‘Long-arse’. It always astonished me how Langgat could play the guards’ game without really humiliating himself. To their faces he treated them like gods – ‘Yes, *basie*; right away, *nkosi*’ – but as soon as they looked away, Langgat found some way to defy their authority. He could tell whole stories right in front of the guards, using only facial expressions, and when they sometimes asked me a question during the cleaning of my cell, Langgat’s grimaces as he scrubbed away at the floor would advise me on how to reply. When he shaved me on Saturdays, I was always richer by a few bits of news by the time he had finished. Langgat was an intellectual and had been with the ANC when he was arrested in the early sixties. Even though he had many years left to serve, he had not given up hope. ‘Things are difficult now,’ he whispered one day when taking out the night soil, ‘but it will change. Too many people in prison, but others are out there working. You’ll see.’

My contact with Langgat helped me to remain sane. He must have known what hell I was going through, for he would do his best to cheer me up whenever he got a chance. He shared what he knew about the other Namibian prisoners – which was not much since he didn’t enjoy Madala’s freedom – and the odd bits of news that somehow trickled in from the outside world. It was just enough to break the total isolation that the Boers were trying to force upon me.

The music from outside, the white prisoners, my contact with Langgat – these small cracks in the wall of official isolation helped me to endure the early months of 1967 without going insane. I was no longer talking to myself or hallucinating. Gradually I learned to withstand the loneliness by exploiting each daily diversion to the maximum. I learned to pick out each of the white prisoners in the yard; I managed to stretch my exercise period by walking slowly. The guards, who in the beginning seemed ready to attack me whenever they saw my face, now relaxed and sometimes drifted out of earshot when the monitors came to do their work.

Still there were long, long hours, week after week, during which I had nothing to do but think. My thoughts went back to Windhoek. What was Ali doing now? She had always been a strong

woman, independent and capable of getting by on her own. Yet, if she thought I were dead or would never return, would she stay faithful to me or take up with another man? I had spent a lot of time away after we were married, busy – too busy perhaps – with my SWAPO work. In some ways I hadn't taken the time really to get to know Ali and now it might be too late. And Kenneth, who was only six months old when I was arrested, I might never get to know at all. He would be growing quickly, maybe even walking by now. That this warm, soft little bundle of a son, for whom I had wanted the best, might grow up without ever having seen me filled my eyes with tears. Who was going to look after Uncle Isak in Tsumeb when he got too old to work? The sweat and humiliation he had endured so that his children could get something better – would it ever be repaid? I owed this man everything and yet I had done nothing for him in return. I wondered about my SWAPO comrades, too. How many of them had been arrested? Who was continuing the work? Or had the Boers simply outlawed the entire organization? We had never made plans for this kind of emergency.

Hours, days and weeks went by while I stared into the concrete and pondered all this. Beyond the daily and weekly routine I had little sense of the passing time. I knew that winter was approaching because the nights, and the days as well, were becoming terribly cold. The wind whistled through my cell and chilled the cement that surrounded me. The two extra blankets that I received made little difference. I would have needed at least four of the threadbare rags over me, but that would have left only one to protect me against the icy floor. Covering up the best I could, I felt the polished concrete drain my body heat until my underside was numb. If I used one more blanket for the mattress, the wind swept right through from the top. In the morning my joints were so stiff that it took several minutes of careful exercise before I could move normally. During the day, when the blankets had to stay folded in a corner according to regulations, I could never sit for more than five minutes before the cold forced me to exercise once more.

One Saturday afternoon my door was unexpectedly unbolted and an elderly guard waved me out. '*Kom, iemand will jou sien.* Come, someone wants to see you.'

We went through the steel door at the end of the corridor and up one flight of stairs to a hallway lined with offices. The guard

made me stand back as he opened and closed the doors at each level with keys that he carried chained to his belt. He did not say a word. At the end of the upstairs passage one of the office doors had been left open and the guard motioned for me to enter. The room was large and sunlit through two large windows. Much of the space was taken up by a sofa and a group of easy chairs in which four solemn-looking men in suits and ties were waiting for me. The prison chief was standing by a desk near the windows.

'Please sit down,' the chief said in English, pointing to one of the chairs.

What was the meaning of this politeness and the elegant room? Was I going to make my last declaration before execution? I sat down on the edge of the chair. An uneasy silence followed as the four looked at me. I could feel their eyes moving from my sockless feet to my crumpled, torn clothing and shaven head. Which one was the hangman? The others might be judges and clergy.

The silence was finally broken by a stocky, white-haired man in his sixties. He looked like some of the German mine engineers in Tsumeb, and when he spoke it was indeed with a German-sounding accent.

'Mr Otto,' he said, 'how do you feel about this prison?'

What kind of question was this? I saw the chief glowering from across the room. The others, too, were looking straight at me.

'Well, eh—' I began, 'it's not like home, you know—' I was stuttering.

'Do you read?' The German interrupted tersely. He was taking notes on a pad.

'Read?' I repeated. The man was definitely not a prison official.

'No, I don't read. Reading isn't allowed in prison, I think.'

'So you don't know about the prison library?' He looked surprised.

I shook my head. Whoever this man was, I did not like the situation. If it was a trap, my best bet would be to praise the chief who was standing there, frowning, lips pressed together.

The German must have seen how I felt. 'You don't know who I am, do you?' He put down his notepad and tried a polite smile. 'I represent the International Red Cross in Geneva. I am here to look into the treatment of prisoners.' He glanced at the others whose blank faces betrayed nothing. 'South African regulations

require that the prison authorities must be present during our interview. Now, can you please tell me what you get to eat.'

When he said Red Cross, Geneva, my heart jumped. I felt light with elation. Despite the man's dour appearance, I wanted to jump over and embrace him. That he was here meant that our case was known to the outside world. And if the Boers had been pressured into letting him see me, it would be difficult for them to take reprisals after he left. So despite the menacing presence of the chief and his underlings, I began to describe in detail how I was being treated. Whenever we came to something that contravened Red Cross conventions, the German wrote it down. He noted, for instance, that I never got fruit or fresh vegetables and that my blankets did not keep me from freezing.

'How much time do you spend outside?' he finally asked.

'I haven't seen the sky in five months,' I replied. 'One minute in the corridor is all I get.'

The German looked at the chief who in turn stared at me. 'Your turn will come, kaffir' was written all over his face, but he did not challenge anything I said. I wondered what the next morning's inspection would be like.

'Well, gentlemen, that will do,' the visitor said, still scribbling on his pad. 'I have other prisoners to see this afternoon. Mr Otto, thank you very much for your assistance.' He came over and shook my hand as the guard appeared in the door to take me back to my cell.

The Red Cross visit produced immediate results. The next day when I was let into the corridor, the guard was waiting with his heavy key chain. '*Hak!*' he shouted as I started towards the wash basins. 'You're going outside.'

It was a sunny day; only a few white clouds dotted the pale blue winter sky. A flock of pigeons came in over the wall and landed in the yard as the guard opened the door. On the other side of the wall a grove of tall poplars was crowded with starlings perched in the sunshine. The green leaves rustled in the breeze. The yard was long and narrow with cell blocks on three sides. One of the buildings was still under construction. The sunshine reached into the far end of the yard where three prisoners were sitting on a cement bench. Along one side of the yard were two open showers and wash basins similar to those on my corridor. A few naked men were bending down, scrubbing their clothes.

I stood in the doorway, squinting against the bright daylight, trying to absorb every little detail of this vast expanse. Finally the warder pushed me over the threshold and slammed the door shut behind me. Baffled, I looked around once more; there was not a single guard in sight! I started across the asphalt, first a few cautious steps, then running, jumping, stretching my limbs without hitting any walls, metal door or stinking toilet bucket: nothing but the fresh air all around me. I filled my lungs to inhale my new freedom. Oblivious of the other inmates I waltzed into the sunny part of the yard. Blinded by the daylight, I covered my face with my hands and stood still. A prickling sensation spread from my heart as the sun's rays slowly thawed my frozen body. I closed my eyes and faced the sun until I became dizzy. My legs were shaking, but I felt light and free as a gazelle on the open veld.

From that day, I was given thirty minutes in the yard daily. I was free to take a shower, wash my clothes and talk to the other prisoners without the guards listening. Those thirty minutes made me feel like a human being again – a person able to talk, walk and do the other things that free people do. In my cell I returned to the wall decorations. With great care and energy I carved 'Namibians, our country will be free!' in all the Namibian languages. I had survived police torture, I had endured their attempt to drive me insane. Strength and confidence returned. I had a feeling that I was not going to be in this cell for very much longer and wanted all later occupants to read the proof of my victory, in the tradition of Sisulu and Mbeki.

The Terrorist Trial

Early one morning in June, seven months after my arrest, I was taken from my cell and led into the yard where a dark blue van was waiting. The guard pushed me inside. There were already two men in the steel cabin. 'Mitiri, man!' a voice exclaimed. 'Honest to God, I never thought I'd see you again!'

It was Matthew Joseph – or Jobeck – one of my old SWAPO comrades from Ovamboland. His clothes hung about him in ragged strips. He had no shoes. The week-old stubble on his chin could not conceal the sunken, drawn features of the face that had once been round and jovial. But Jobeck's grin was the same as before and his grip was firm as he hugged me exuberantly.

The van was rapidly filling up. There was Jason, laughing as he greeted us. And Hermann, and Kahumba, his hair now white. Many of the others I didn't know. Maxuilili was one of the last to get in. My heart raced as one familiar face after another appeared. Sadness, relief, jubilation: a chaotic torrent of emotions that I had kept pent up for months suddenly burst forth and tears were running down my cheeks. I was once more among human beings, friends. I cried and laughed at the same time, as did the others. The steel box filled with the excited shouting of names and there was jostling as everyone tried to hug and shake hands, even those who were meeting for the first time. Gone was the cold loneliness of the stone cells; whatever would happen next we were going to face together.

When the rear door was slammed shut, we were packed so tight that nobody could move. Somewhere in the back Maxuilili's familiar voice, as commanding as in the old days, started up with 'Boers, go to Kakamas'. Thirty-seven unrehearsed voices filled the

prison yard as our mobile cage, swaying, rumbled out of the gate.

The outside world was still alive. We passed buses packed with Africans, taxis, cyclists and people walking along the road towards town. I kept my face close to the wire mesh to breathe this air of freedom. As the buildings got taller and the streets busier, the van had to slow down. We shouted our slogans to people who stared back in amazement.

The van turned off the street and descended into a basement garage. The door was unbolted. Two rows of police with automatic rifles were waiting outside. Gericke, the Special Branch major, and another officer grabbed each of us as we stepped out and slid us along the cement floor. 'Let's go. Move your arses, you bastards!' Then we were herded through a long, narrow passage and into a large room where still more police waited.

There was a flurry of activity around us. Cameras flashed and men with notepads leaned forward on their chairs to get a better view of us. They looked straight into our faces, scribbling frantically. Behind them, others were talking into microphones. A shouting police captain pushed us towards the front of the room where other officers and dark-suited officials were seated behind a row of desks. One desk, raised above the others, was unoccupied. We were in a courtroom. Soon we would probably hear the charges against us. Our singing had long since stopped. Pressed shoulder to shoulder with my comrades I felt naked under the hostile stares from all around. Finally the judge strode into the hall and called the court to order.

The assistant prosecutor stood up to read out the charges against us. I recognized him from my time in the Kompol building where he had been a frequent visitor during my interrogation. Leaning over a stack of documents, he began to list our names. Kahumba was accused number 1, my namesake John Otto Nankudhu number 2. I was number 22. As our names and numbers were called out, a clerk came over and hung a numbered placard around our necks. From then on we were called only by our numbers, like cattle at an auction.

Then came the charges. The prosecutor's monotonous voice droned on without interruption: 'Number 1: attempting to overthrow the government of South Africa by violent means; conspiring with others to overthrow the government; recruiting

people for the purpose of engaging in terrorist activities’ There were at least five charges against Kahumba and just as many against those who followed him on the list. For each charge, the prosecutor made a reference to this or that paragraph of the law. But only a handful of us in the dock knew enough Afrikaans to understand the charges, and just four of us – Jason, Maxuilili, Hermann and I – had any knowledge of court proceedings. Jason, standing next to me, was stretching to hear what the prosecutor was saying. ‘I can’t understand it,’ he whispered. ‘I don’t know what law they’re using.’

‘Number 22,’ came the prosecutor’s dry voice. ‘Together with co-conspirator Sam Nujoma conspired to overthrow the government of South Africa by violent means; recruited others for the purpose of overthrowing the government; incited and/or instigated and/or encouraged hostility between different racial groups in the territory of South West Africa; corresponded abroad to harm the interests of the Republic of South Africa.’

These were crimes I had never heard of: ‘. . . corresponded abroad to harm the government’. As I strained to catch the prosecutor’s voice, the many ‘and/ors’ and vague descriptions, I realized that they must have passed a new law while I was locked away. I caught Jason’s worried look. ‘There must be *something* we can do,’ I mumbled.

It took the prosecutor an hour to read out all the charges. Then the judge took over. ‘Accused number 1, do you plead guilty or not guilty?’ he whined at Kahumba.

Kahumba looked around helplessly; he had barely understood a word of what the prosecutor had said. Then Jason stepped forward. ‘Your Lordship, we have all been held in isolation for months. We have not seen any lawyer, and we do not ourselves know the law. May we postpone our pleas until we have obtained legal advice?’

The judge seemed baffled. He hesitated and looked at the prosecutor for help. I seized the moment. ‘Your Lordship, we may consider *pro bono deo* defence if that would be permitted. But we need some time to consult before pleading.’

After a whispered consultation with the prosecutor, the judge agreed. As we lined up to leave the courtroom, police officers shouted urgent commands, guns rattling. At the back of the room,

journalists were rushing for the door with their front-page stories for the afternoon's papers.

How could we get a proper lawyer? State-supplied defence could be worse than no defence. Our best chance was obviously with a progressive attorney, one who opposed apartheid, but such a person wouldn't be easy to find. The political trials of the fifties and early sixties had produced several lawyers with the experience we would need, but by 1967 most had vanished from the scene. Some, such as Bram Fischer, had been jailed, others had left South Africa, and still others had been intimidated away from political cases. The laws, such as the Suppression of Communism Act and the Unlawful Organizations Act, gave the Special Branch a free hand. On top of that, the courts had been lined with Afrikaner Nationalist appointees. Everything seemed to point to a summary trial and convictions.

But help came faster than I could have imagined. The day after we had been charged, Hermann, Jason, Maxuilili and I were taken from our cells and led to small room on the ground floor, next to the prison reception office. As we entered, a tall, heavy-set man in a brown suit rose to greet us. 'Good afternoon,' he said in broken Afrikaans, 'my name is Joel Carlson. I practise law in Johannesburg.'

With no further introduction he handed us a stack of papers from his briefcase. The first was a telegram, dated several months earlier, from a London law firm, asking him to represent Hermann in court. There was also a letter in Sam Nujoma's longhand, which I knew well, together with a list of ten names, including mine. We passed the papers among ourselves while Carlson watched in silence. I re-read Sam's letter several times; there could be no doubt about its authenticity. Hermann, who had lived in Cape Town for several years, thought Carlson's name sounded familiar. 'What do you think you can do for us?' Maxuilili finally asked him.

'The frank answer is I don't know,' the lawyer said, looking us straight in the face. 'As you may have realized, Parliament has passed a new law, last week, especially for you: the Terrorism Act. It does not give me much hope.' According to the new law, Carlson explained, a 'terrorist' could be anyone criticizing the government to the United Nations, Amnesty International, or any other 'foreign body or institution'. The law also applied to people who

'caused substantial financial loss to any person of the state' or who in any way tried to 'embarrass the state'. A guilt-by-association clause made, in our case, any SWAPO member responsible for the actions of any other member. The act gave the police the power to hold a suspect incommunicado for as long as they wished without having to say whether the person was in fact detained or not. Visits and legal assistance to detainees were prohibited. The sentences ranged from five years to death, with no provision for parole or suspension of sentence. In case someone were acquitted, the law allowed for immediate re-arrest and new charges based on the same original actions. Carlson went through the paragraphs slowly, running his hand through his reddish, bushy hair. 'There it is, custom-made for SWAPO,' he ended.

'But if they passed it only last week, it can't apply to us,' Jason said.

'Oh yes it does,' replied the lawyer. 'They made it five years retroactive - to June 1962.'

Suddenly the idea of defence seemed pointless; how can you fight a law like this? Jason was mumbling something to himself. Hermann held his head buried in his hands. Carlson at last broke the silence. 'You have seen my instructions. Since I'm not licensed to argue a case before the Supreme Court, I would have to assemble a team of lawyers who are, and that could present some problems. Also, for you to have any chance at all, I would need to know the full truth; I will need your full confidence. Now it is for you to decide.'

Just then, the door was flung open and Colonel Aucamp, one of the chiefs of the prison department, charged in. His face was flushed. 'What are you doing here, Carlson?' he snapped. 'Who the hell gave you permission to see the terrorists?'

The lawyer did not seem surprised. He took off his glasses, looked at Aucamp for a moment before quoting the rights of defence lawyers, now that we had been formally charged.

'All right,' the colonel conceded. Then he suddenly turned to us. 'Have you accepted this man as your lawyer?'

The four of us looked at each other for a second. 'Yes,' said Maxuilili, 'Mr Carlson represents us.'

We began to prepare our defence the next day. Carlson assigned the five of us who knew some English - Hermann Ja-Toivo, Joseph Shityuwete, Jason, Maxuilili and me - to take down the accounts

from each of our comrades. He wanted personal information, as much as possible on each man's work with SWAPO, and an account of his arrest. All this we wrote down in exercise books that Carlson collected when he came to see us, almost daily. Our consultation room had been changed to a small cubicle that we were sure was bugged, so much of our communication was by way of written notes and gesticulation. Between this problem, our broken English and Carlson's bad Afrikaans, there was plenty of room for frustration. But there was too much to be done for us to be sidetracked by such minor obstacles.

Carlson worked tirelessly. If he had been acidly frank at our first meeting, he never sounded a pessimistic note after we began our work together. I think it must have been his many years of fighting pass laws and more serious political cases that enabled him to put so much spirit into the case. Within a couple of days he began to bring us clothing that his friends helped him collect. My own rags could keep me warm only when I used my hands to keep them wrapped around my body. Others were even worse off; some wore only shorts or had no shoes and were perpetually shivering in the cold June weather, even when huddling in their blankets. Carlson also made a trip to Windhoek to tell our families of the situation. Soon after that, some of us began to receive clothes from home as well. It was like a moment of magic when Carlson opened the suitcase he used to bring to our meetings: fruit, newspapers, tobacco – things that had ceased to exist for all of us now reminded us what normal life was like, of what we had to fight for.

Yet the critical task was to find lawyers for the defence team. When it became publicly known that Carlson was representing us, some newspapers began to write about him as 'the terrorist lawyer'. He was accused of being paid from Moscow, when in fact the money for our defence came from a British aristocrat, Lord Campbell of Eskan. The police threatened Carlson's secretaries and forced eight of them, one after another, to resign during the time Carlson worked for us. Nevertheless, two weeks after we had been charged Carlson had pulled together a team of five advocates to represent us before the Supreme Court. A few days later they managed to get our trial postponed for two months, until September.

It was our first victory, a first small sign that fighting back in court was going to make a difference after all. Every one of us

needed this encouragement. We had all suffered the savageries of Swanepoel's crew and the hell of solitary confinement. Now that we had been charged and moved together into cells of four and five, I came to realize that some had suffered far worse than I. Old Ephraim Kaporo, one of my cell mates, was emaciated almost beyond recognition. When our guerrillas set up their base at Ongulumbashe, Kaporo had been one of the first to supply them with food and to get weapon training. Once a week he had walked the twenty miles from his kraal to the camp, and he was there when the South Africans attacked. He managed to get away, but after a few days they tracked him down by helicopter. A man of few words in normal circumstances, Kaporo had confessed to nothing at all. After nine months in prison he could barely talk; his bony chest heaved constantly and he coughed blood. Carlson kept requesting that Kaporo be admitted to the prison clinic, but the authorities turned a deaf ear. Lying in my blankets at night, listening to him struggling to breathe, I sometimes couldn't help wondering whether I, too, wasn't really in Kaporo's situation, doomed by the Terrorism Act. If it had not been for the merry-making of our two younger cell mates, Julius and Kaleb, both captured guerrillas, I don't know how I would have managed to pull through those first gloomy weeks.

Kahumba, too, was worn down from being on the run for months before his capture and torture. But what bothered him the most was his role in the whole case. More than any other SWAPO leader inside the country, Kahumba had been burning to give the Boers a dose of their own medicine. Now that we had been hit back, he wanted to carry the burden for all of us. Time after time he took me aside and recalled our discussions on armed struggle, years before. 'You were right and I was wrong,' he would say. 'Let me confess now; perhaps it will save some of you younger ones.' When I wouldn't hear of this, he went to others, but always with the same result. Nobody blamed Kahumba; we had all done what we thought best, and we had done so voluntarily. Besides, Kahumba gave us a lot of strength. For all his hatred of what colonialism had done to Namibians and his wish to fight back, he remained a profoundly Christian person. He regarded our people in the way the Bible describes the ancient Jews fighting their way out of captivity. 'David slew Goliath because he had justice on his side,' he told the judge during our trial, 'and we Namibians have

faith that we, too, have justice on our side.' Whenever our group gathered, Kahumba led us in prayer, and he was the one who pleaded with Carlson to find us a minister. But the only thing that could clear the solemn look from his face was . . . snuff. His face would light up at the sight of the precious stuff in Carlson's bag, and for the rest of the day he would be the most peaceful prisoner in Pretoria Local, snorting and contentedly rubbing his brown-stained fingers.

If there was any one person we regarded as our leader, it was Hermann. Because of his political activities in Cape Town back in the 1950s, I thought of him as one of the 'fathers' of SWAPO. So did the Special Branch, and they spared no effort to break him. For four days he had hung from the water pipe in the Kompol building before he finally said anything. After that, Swanepoel's strategy was to humiliate him, first in Hermann's own eyes, then in front of the rest of us by telling us during torture how Hermann had confessed to 'everything'.

Hermann and I had corresponded ever since I became secretary general, but we didn't meet until the day in the magistrate's court. He looked older than I had pictured him, and though we embraced and laughed, the disturbed, distant look never left his eyes. Like many of us, he had wanted to be very careful about bringing the guerrillas into the country; yet when they suddenly started coming, Hermann did his best to assist them. He organized food supplies and helped provide stolen dynamite for their training. Swanepoel had not failed to tell him what the judge would think of such actions. When, immediately after we had been charged, I asked him what lawyers he thought we should contact, he cut me short. 'What's the use?' he spat. 'Let's just get this thing over with.' He told me that every time he closed his eyes, he felt the noose taut around his neck and would wake up in a cold sweat, screaming. Nine months of torture and complete isolation had wrapped him in a cloud of despair. He was indifferent towards Carlson, and he didn't want to give us his statement for the defence.

I spent hours with Hermann, trying to light some flicker of hope in him. Persuading him was like persuading myself. Even if we were to die at the end, the trial would give us the opportunity to tell the world about Namibia. It was our duty to the people at home to fight the Boers in court. Having come this far, should we fight

to the end, or should we go quietly like lambs to the slaughterhouse, thereby admitting that we were guilty of some crime and making the struggle more difficult for those left to carry on? Slowly these arguments got through to Hermann. His fighting spirit returned and he again became a leader who could rally us when the trial was going badly.

The street outside the courthouse was packed when we arrived at the opening day of our trial. For weeks the papers had written up our case, speculating on how many, and who, among us would hang. Interviews with police and military men stressed the need to set an example lest hordes of terrorists cross over South Africa's borders. The Special Branch were the heroes of the day. Officers with walkie-talkies and field glasses barked orders to their troops as we unloaded. Inside the large converted synagogue the gallery was filled with excited spectators. But if they had expected to see monsters with fangs and claw-like hands, they must have been disappointed. By this time most of us were well dressed and looked like our own lawyers as we filed into the hall, Kahumba with his number 1 placard leading the way. In the small 'non-white' gallery at the very back of the hall I noticed the hostile faces of Sergeant George and the other blacks from the Kompol building.

The leader of our defence team was Nick Phillips, a career lawyer with many Supreme Court victories behind him. His strategy was to begin by challenging South Africa's authority in Namibia now that the United Nations had revoked the old League of Nations mandate. For that purpose he had called on John Dugard, a professor of international law at Witwatersrand University. Dugard was still busy arranging his papers when we entered the courtroom. Phillips was out on the floor talking to the chief prosecutor, Oosthuizen, a tall, lean Afrikaner who appeared fearsome in his black robe.

We had not seen much of Phillips or the other lawyers on the team. Our meetings continued to be with Carlson who was instructing attorney and formally not part of our defence. Carlson briefed us on Phillips's plans and asked our opinions. But while I felt close to Carlson – I think he really understood what we were struggling for and the hatred we felt for our accusers – the distance to Phillips and the others seemed to move the whole trial out of my reach. Perhaps this was necessary, but it had made me

uncomfortable in the weeks preceding the trial. Now, watching from the cramped dock while Dugard and the South African government advocate spent days interpreting and polishing definitions that seemed to have nothing to do with the reason I might hang, I had to control myself not to show my frustration. After a week the judge ruled in favour of the state, and our real case could begin.

Phillips had not been permitted to bring one single defence witness to Pretoria. The prosecutor, on the other hand, had lined up no less than seventy state witnesses, many of whom were SWAPO members and had been imprisoned with the rest of us. The one who did the most damage to our case was Louis Nelengani, one of SWAPO's founders and a leader of the guerrillas. The Special Branch must have worked hard to break him, because when I saw him in prison once, just before we were charged, his face was still distorted from the beatings. It was demoralizing to watch him in the witness stand, detailing the acts of the comrades beside me in the dock. Most of the other state witnesses, however, did not have vital information, but because of the terms of the Terrorism Act, Phillips and his team chose to do battle with every one of them in cross examination. Our team was sharp at this, making the witnesses who had never before set foot in a courtroom contradict themselves again and again. But it was a slow and fatiguing process; almost every question brought objections from the prosecutor, and everything that was said had to be translated back and forth between Afrikaans and Ovambo. And with the law being what it was, did it really matter?

I never thought for one moment that any of us would be acquitted. If we made a good stand, perhaps a few less would be sentenced to death. But the sentences were only part of our reason for fighting back; everyone in our group had agreed that we must use the trial to tell the truth about South African colonialism and the brutal Boer regime. And as the trial ground on and the judge constantly ruled in favour of the prosecution, we became even more convinced that we were right. If we could not escape the clauses of the Terrorism Act, making a strong political statement became more important than ever. But Phillips had a different view. He had made it clear from the beginning that his job was to have our sentences reduced as much as possible. In order to make the best of a bad case, he had felt it necessary to make deals with

the prosecutor. Phillips was particularly worried about the statements that we had made to the Special Branch. Many of them contained admissions that were more than sufficient to have us hanged. The prosecutor agreed not to use these statements, but on one condition: that we make no statements about our torture and treatment in prison. But some of our 'confessions' were of the kind no sane person would have made voluntarily and we wanted to use them to raise the issue of torture, which in our opinion would challenge the basis of the whole trial. Phillips, however, was adamant; he had less interest in Namibia's struggle than in the rules of the legal profession. He had taken our case for professional – not political – reasons, and a good showing in this first case under the Terrorism Act would give a great boost to his career. Besides, as long as he led our defence, we had to do it his way. If we didn't accept his strategy, he would resign.

Hermann, Jason and I had the task of presenting our lawyers' plans to the rest of our group and then feeding the reaction back. But some of the questions regarding legal tactics were so difficult for our comrades to accept that we needed special plenary meetings. Of course, in the end we let Phillips go ahead, both on this particular trade-off with the prosecutor and with the plea-bargaining that followed later. It seemed that the state could get no evidence against Jobeck and very little against Jason, Maxuilili and me. The prosecutor was also eager to neutralize us three leaders from the south by preventing us from taking the witness stand. His offer to Phillips was to let Jobeck go free and switch the charges for the three of us from the Terrorism Act to the Suppression of Communism Act, provided we pleaded guilty to the new set of charges. Jobeck was furious. 'If I'm innocent, I'm innocent. Why are there conditions?' he insisted during a heated discussion with Phillips. Jason, Maxuilili and I would probably get shorter sentences, but our cases, which were beginning to draw international attention, would be out of the limelight. The government would also appear more reasonable in the eyes of the world and might get a freer hand with the rest of the comrades. When we finally agreed to accept the prosecution's offers, it spelled victory for Phillips and his colleagues but led to terrible demoralization for the rest of us. It was we, who had felt the fists and boots and burning cigarettes on our flesh, who had to watch in silence when Swanepoel and Ferreira paraded unchallenged

through the witness box and were written up like heroes in the newspapers. I felt like having nothing more to do with the whole trial. My life was in the hands of people who knew almost nothing of what I had done or why. They had never seen the dungeons where contract workers were forced to live or had to bow and scrape before anyone of another race. For them it was a quibbling over legal terminology and interpretation, a lawyers' game that had little to do with why we were here in the first place. Perhaps Hermann had been right after all – was there any point in fighting on?

In November, about halfway through the trial, old Kaporo became too weak even to sit in the dock. For weeks, Carlson had pleaded with the judge to have him admitted to the clinic, but it was only when Kaporo collapsed in court that the judge was willing to listen. Since the beginning of the trial, Kaporo had hardly been able to eat, regardless of how much his cell mates tried to feed him. His cough sounded as if it was tearing away big chunks of his insides, coming up as blood and saliva that ran down his chin. At night we took turns sitting next to him, wiping his face with a cloth and trying to keep him warm. Finally he collapsed and the judge agreed to admit him to the clinic. With Kaporo on my back, I staggered into the ward only to be forced out by the doctor. 'We don't waste our time on terrorists here. You are all going to hang anyway,' he said. In the end, through Carlson's intervention, Kaporo got a bed, though it didn't matter much any longer: he died that same night. When the proceedings resumed the following morning, the judge simply announced that 'number twelve' had died of 'natural causes' and his name was no longer on the list of accused.

Ali's first letter reached me soon after Kaporo's death. It was not the usual kind of letter; the envelope was inked black and the stationery had a thick, black border. What was wrong? My hands trembled as I began to read: 'My dear husband, this will come as shock to you' My eyes flashed down the lines, looking for a key word, a name. I found it; it was what I had feared the most. Kenny was dead. He had died soon after my arrest. Kenny, for whom I had wanted everything, was no more. Torn away by illness before I even got to know him. Thinking of that warm little bundle at home had given me so much strength in solitary, yet by then he

was already dead. The Special Branch had known but had not bothered to inform me.

I dropped the letter and buried my head between my knees. What was there left to fight for if not my child? What was there for Ali to give her strength to, with me wasting away in this place and only Kenny's grave to visit? My cell, my comrades, our case – it all ceased to exist. The whole damned trial seemed further away than ever. What was I doing here when I should be taking care of my family? Was I guilty of such a crime that I could not be allowed to see my son, not even lay him to rest in his grave? And these Boers, who hadn't even bothered to tell me – *what* were they? Yes, they had tortured me in the most bestial ways, but at least I could understand why. They wanted information and would do anything to get it. But not to care enough to tell me about Kenny, how could human beings act like that? My numbness turned into bitter hatred, into something I had never in my life felt towards anybody. I shook with rage. I was ready to explode, but I couldn't even force out a tear. Then suddenly, after a couple of days, something broke inside and I went into fits in the cell, screaming and hitting the stone walls with my fists. I hated them, all of them, not only the Special Branch but every Afrikaner policeman, administrator, farmer and businessman who had anything to do with that vicious system of theirs. If they thought of us as animals, why should we think any better of them? Kahumba had always been right, we had talked long enough to these monsters. The only language they would ever understand was their own: brutality. I knew then that I would be able to kill. In my mind I saw my enemies – Swanepoel, Vorster, Blignaut, all of them – die the most painful death. One day we would get them and they would deserve every bullet that tore through their slave-keeper's fat. If I could only get out of here, just long enough to get to one or two of them, then anything that followed would be worth it.

Two months into the trial the proceedings had become, in our eyes, a pointless ritual. It was nothing but a show put on by the state to legitimize the predetermined end. The legal compromises and plea-bargaining might have slightly modified the Boers' plans, but only slightly. Phillips and his colleagues kept fighting for every point, but a minor victory now and then was no longer sufficient

to dispel the gloom that hung over us, defence and accused alike.

It was Carlson's idea to take the battle out of the courtroom. Our SWAPO comrades abroad had done what they could to draw attention to our trial. They had persuaded a few governments to follow the proceedings, and every once in a while members of Pretoria's foreign press corps would drop by the courthouse. But it hadn't been nearly enough; the regime shrugged off protests from abroad while it continued to whip up local white hysteria. Fortunately, Carlson already had a passport – something that could be difficult to get for critics of the government – and when the judge called a two-week recess, he slipped out of the country before the police could stop him. He visited Europe and the United States, handing out copies of the Terrorism Act and meeting lawyers and politicians.

The results came right away. Another Red Cross representative visited us in the prison, and soon after, the doctor who had refused to treat us was replaced. When the trial resumed there were several observers in the diplomats' section of the gallery, to the side of the judge, and the foreign journalists began to attend regularly. What a relief it was to know that for once the spectators' attention was on our accusers and not only on us. After a few more days the police dogs were removed from the courtroom, and most of the policemen with machine-guns disappeared as well. But what heartened us the most were all the telegrams and letters of support that began to pour in – from Britain, Sweden, the United States, East Germany and a host of other countries. We read these messages aloud during our meetings; we could hardly believe that people in all these places, so far away, were now following our trial. If this had happened two months earlier, we would never have made any compromises. But something might still be done if we used every opportunity. Again I began to participate actively in the proceedings. I listened carefully to the state witnesses and the government translator. When they said something I felt should be challenged, I passed a note to our defence who used it in their cross examination.

The prosecution must have been equally aware of the new twist of events. It was curious to observe how the prosecutor and his assistants changed their comportment under the gaze of the foreigners; speech became subdued and polite and they became

much more careful with their questions to the state witnesses. But if this changed the tone of the proceedings, it would not necessarily change the outcome. There had never been any question in my mind that the trial was in reality being conducted from some government minister's office and that our sentences would be decided in that same place. The question was, how much international pressure would be necessary for the Boer government to change its plans? We heard of American congressmen sending protests to Vorster and of British MPs raising our case in Parliament. When, in early December, the UN General Assembly voted to demand that our trial be stopped, the Afrikaans newspapers were finally forced to pay attention. And when Hubert Humphrey, who was then America's vice-president, condemned both the trial and the Terrorism Act, Vorster was no longer able to ignore what was going on. He made our trial the main subject of his Covenant Day speech to the nation. We were nothing but murderers, he said, and all this foreign interference in South Africa's business could not influence the course of justice. It was clear from what Vorster said that the government had no intention of letting us go. With the end of the trial in sight, the shadow of the gallows still darkened our lives.

Despite all the attention our case was getting, Phillips and his team were hesitant to change their tactics. They were worried that all the criticism from abroad served only to drive the government into a corner, from which it would strike back to prove to its racist constituents that South Africa could not be bullied. So Phillips said that we should continue to play down the politics. This way it would be possible for the judge to show leniency without appearing to lose face before the public. Our last disagreement with Phillips was over the final statement that we were entitled to make in court. Our group had elected Hermann to speak for all of us, and he had prepared a speech that condemned both the judge and the system that had put us on trial. Phillips thought the statement was too provocative, and one of the other lawyers was opposed to our making any statement at all. But this time we refused to back down. All the observers would be there on the last day of the trial; if we declined to speak up, we would have lost our best opportunity ever to state our case - Namibia's case - to the world. And Hermann was the obvious candidate for the speech. Since the beginning of the trial he had never given up hope. At the darkest

moments, when most of us despaired and withdrew in apathy, Hermann would be the first one to rekindle our spirits. That the prosecution had singled him out for humiliation did not bother him any longer. The judge, too, had mocked him openly in court, calling him a coward for not joining the guerrillas. Clearly, Hermann had to speak up. If the anger that showed in his speech provoked the judge, so be it. Jason and I worked with Hermann to polish the text. When he stood up in the dock, on the very last day of the proceedings, and told the packed courtroom that it was apartheid and South African colonialism that were being condemned by this trial, I finally felt we had accomplished something. If these were to be our last words, at least we had said what we felt: no repentance, no doubts, only belief that our cause would prevail in the long run.

Sentencing was set for 9 February, the day before my thirtieth birthday. For the last time we filled the holding cell in the courthouse yard with our freedom songs and hymns. Kahumba led us in prayer. For five months we had faced death together. All of us had been through difficult moments, but there had been no need to hide our feelings. I don't know what kind of a situation could bring people closer together than the one we had been through. Among ourselves, there was no need for long speeches. In a few minutes each one would know his fate, whether he would die or live, whether he would be likely ever to see freedom again. During the last few days we had talked about how Namibia would probably soon become independent and those of us in prison would then be set free. But as we embraced and exchanged last wishes of good luck, our voices were muffled. I looked at Hermann, Kahumba and the others who had the worst charges against them one last time as the call came to line up. Kahumba caught my eye and smiled. Then he picked up his number 1 placard and led us into the courtroom.

Jason, Maxuilili and I were the first to be called. There wasn't a whisper in the hall as we rose in the dock. The red-robed judge held the gavel in his right hand as he read: '... I find you guilty of creating hostility between the races in the territory of South West Africa. I find you guilty of inciting the population of South West Africa.... I sentence you to five years of incarceration, of which four years and eleven months will be suspended.'

I could hardly believe my ears – all but one month suspended!

In one month I would be on my way back to Windhoek! It had worked; the Boers had given in to the pressure from abroad. But what about the others? The next group to be called numbered twelve, including Hermann. They were given twenty years. The other twenty, Kahumba among them, were sentenced to hard labour for the rest of their lives.

Coming Home

The squeaky screen door of Jobeck's café had not moved for hours. The only sounds were the annoying buzz of a solitary fly and the distant laughter of Jobeck's children and their friends playing outside. Two labourers from a South African road gang sat drinking silently. The only other paying customer that day had been a white businessman from Windhoek who did not know better than to come to Jobeck's. Otherwise the café had as usual been empty all day, and Jobeck and I both knew that I was one reason why.

'Have another beer, *mitiri*.'

'No, thanks,' I replied, getting up to look at the newspaper the white had left folded on his seat. 'I'm not thirsty.'

'Not thirsty? In this heat?' The fly landed on the counter and I swatted it with the paper. I missed. Jobeck laughed and placed an open bottle in front of me. 'Don't worry about paying,' he said. 'It's not your fault they won't let you get a job here.'

I opened the paper, a *Windhoek Advertiser* dated 26 February 1969. That seemed current, although my sense of time had suffered in exile. Nothing seemed to happen in Ondangwa; one day appeared much like another. In contrast to my confinement in Pretoria Prison, here there were no walls on which to scratch a tally of the days; my cell was as extensive as the borders of Ovamboland. About a year had passed since our trial and my deportation. Ovamboland had been a bantustan for three years now, which meant only that my jailers were Ovambo chiefs appointed by the South African administration. I knew also that it was February because Ali had mentioned my thirty-first birthday in a recent letter. I felt old.

I sipped the cold beer and scanned the paper for news of

SWAPO in the south. There was none. There seldom was, since our trial. Was the press pretending that SWAPO was no longer a threat – or was that the truth? The remaining members of our once-strong team of SWAPO leaders were few in number. David Meroro and Jason Mutumbulwa were in Windhoek and still active as far as I knew, though it was difficult to get word from them. Maxuilili had been given a five-year restriction order that confined him to Walvis Bay and forbade him to speak publicly or even to meet more than five people at a time. The rest of us who had not been sentenced to prison – Karita, Nganjone and many others – had been deported to remote areas of the country, where we were isolated and kept under surveillance. In Ondangwa at least I had Jobeck and he had his family and business, although business suffered with my arrival. But Jobeck was optimistic. ‘Don’t worry,’ he would tell me, ‘business will come. We must be patient.’

The screen door creaked open late that same afternoon and two boys in the uniform of the new Ovambo high school entered. One saw me and nudged his friend, who whispered something in response, but in keeping with the unwritten law in Ondangwa neither said anything to me. I watched them as they tried to buy beer from Jobeck, wondering if students today were the same as in my days at Augustineum or if times had changed. Did they still have clandestine political discussions, or was it just girls and music and beer?

Jobeck refused to sell the boys beer, though he needed the business, and when a tall, well-dressed Boer walked in they fled. The South African looked around and then approached me. I had seen him before. He was the local Bantu Affairs Commissioner.

‘Hello, John! Decided you want that job yet?’ His leer made my skin crawl. The job he had offered me some days earlier was as a clerk in the pass office. In the pass office! It was an offer calculated to humiliate me. On the other hand, it was a chance to work and at least to earn some money. Since arriving in Ondangwa I had been hired and soon thereafter fired as everything from construction worker to schoolteacher before I understood what was happening to me. Losing the teaching position after one hopeful week had hurt the most. My classroom had just begun to feel like home again when the Ovambo principal came in to talk to me.

‘Fired?’ I raged at him. ‘For what reason?’

'Not enough experience,' he said, looking away.

I had to laugh. 'Seven years isn't enough?'

'I'm sorry, but please don't ask why. This isn't my doing.'

'I know. The Boers told you to get rid of me.'

'No, it's not the Boers,' he said, suddenly firm. 'I don't take orders from any whites. Our own chief ordered this.'

'What's the difference! The Boers give the orders to the chief and he passes them on to you.'

'But if I don't do what he says, it's him I have to answer to. You've seen what he does to people who disobey . . .'

The old leaders had been respected for their positions within the church, for their education and for their years. But these new chiefs were feared simply for their power – or rather the power of South Africa behind them. 'All right, I understand. It's not you, you can't do anything. I'll go.'

At the door of the little classroom he caught my hand and shoved a five-rand note into it. 'You're a good man, I know. You're not a communist like they say. Maybe you'll find another job . . .'

But I knew it was no use trying. Without work I had to rely on money that Ali sent from her job at the dry-cleaner's in Windhoek and on the kindness of Jobeck and his family. I had moved in with them, initially working in the café and their adjoining home and teaching the children to sing. But soon afterwards the place was firebombed by local policemen, so I moved out. Now I lived alone in a one-room shack with a bed, a lamp, a broken table and – my one luxury – a padlock on the door. I still felt bad about the trouble I had caused Jobeck's family and about the food I continued to accept from them.

I tried to read Jobeck's face as he and the Bantu Affairs Commissioner awaited my answer. Finally I turned to the Boer and said, 'Go to hell.' I felt more weary than angry, and my words came out without much force. 'You think I'm going to work for the same pass system I've been fighting all these years?'

'Be realistic,' he said, the grin gone. 'You're not fighting any more. SWAPO belongs to the past. We're willing to forget all that and give you a nice job. Why can't you forget, if we can?'

I shook my head. 'Never. SWAPO's not dead. We're only —'

'Your friends, they're not fighting any more.' The Boer twisted his face into a malicious smile. 'You heard about your friend Jason, didn't you?'

I rose from my seat to face him. Jobeck cried, 'John!' I waved him off. 'What about Jason?'

'An insurance salesman!' He feigned an attempt at repressing his glee and laughed out loud anyway. 'Imagine it! A travelling salesman, going door to door peddling life insurance instead of communism!'

Jobeck, thinking I was about to hit the man, grabbed me and sat me down. 'Get out,' he said to the white. 'He doesn't want any job from you.' The man shrugged, satisfied with the effect of his taunt, and left. The door squeaked shut behind him.

Alone with Jobeck in the quiet of his empty café, I mused aloud, 'What if he's right? About Jason, I mean.'

'So what if he is?' said Jobeck. 'We can't give up just because one or two others drop out. Our time will come. We just have to be patient.'

Two years later the screen door of Jobeck's café had lost its squeak or I had stopped noticing, because it was not until I heard my name that I noticed the stranger. Jobeck led the man, a contract worker by his appearance, around the customers at the counter to where I sat drinking a beer and writing notes.

'A message from Meroro,' the man said quietly.

We waited. 'Well?' He glanced at Jobeck. 'He's all right,' I said. 'He's SWAPO too.'

'Excuse me,' said the worker, 'but my strict orders are to tell only John Ya-Otto. Better we go outside, eh?'

I stood, paid Jobeck for my beer and said I would see him later.

'Tonight,' he reminded me. 'Don't forget.'

Outside, children at play stopped to call me 'Mitiri, teacher.' I waved back, smiling. They didn't know it, but I owed my reinstatement to them, small members of the choir I had organized, which involved me in the church and so led to my gradual acceptance by the Ondangwa community. When Jobeck's wife, a school board member, nominated me for a vacant position, most of the church elders approved. This time the Special Branch, apparently satisfied that I was a defeated man, did not interfere. That was six months ago.

'Something very big is being planned in the south,' said the

stranger, looking around and finally at me. 'Exactly what, I cannot tell you.'

'Something to do with the World Court decision?' That month, March 1971, the World Court had declared South Africa's occupation of our country illegal, prompting demonstrations all over the country, including one organized by the local high school students.

The stranger shook his head. 'Bigger than that. Much bigger. And it will take months, maybe a year to prepare. When the time draws near, then you'll be told more, so you can prepare also.' He paused as a passing friend greeted me. 'Do you have an organization here?'

'Yes. In fact we have a meeting tonight.'

'Don't tell them anything, yet. Meroro says there must be complete secrecy.'

I was full of questions, but the stranger, a regular SWAPO member on his way home after the end of his contract, had told me all he knew.

When I got home Ali was there – she had joined me in Ondangwa when I began earning money again – and I could barely conceal my excitement over Meroro's cryptic message. The vague promise of 'something big' was enough to assure me that my frustrating years in exile were about to end. The Special Branch was wrong: I was not defeated, I had hung on. In spite of their intimidation and my own doubts, I had survived in Ondangwa and even helped resurrect the Ovamboland branch of SWAPO.

That night I felt Jobeck watching me carefully as we discussed with Shamena, Shoombe and Skinny Hilundwa what we should do in response to the high school demonstrations. Shoombe, who had been in the movement since the early days, said it would be a mistake to involve ourselves now. Skinny, an old friend of mine from Windhoek, agreed: the police had their spies everywhere; one slip and our tiny SWAPO branch could be wiped out. 'Let the students organize themselves for now, just as we did. Our time will come,' I added, conscious of Jobeck's smile. 'We must be patient.'

Patient we were. Six months later, in September, Meroro and Maxuilili sneaked into Ondangwa to see me. Their eyes glowed as they revealed the plan: 'Strike.'

I must have looked puzzled or disappointed, because Meroro

quickly added, 'Not just a strike in one factory, or one town, for better food or higher wages, but for an end to the entire contract system.'

'Don't you see, John,' said Maxuillili, 'They're going to shut down the whole country!'

And they did.

On 11 December 1971 I travelled to Windhoek, disguised in overalls, work boots and a tattered cap. I left behind my most trusted comrades in the middle of their preparations for the second phase of the strike. The police and the Special Branch would soon be too busy to be concerned with my whereabouts. Within five days every town in Namibia, including the mining centres of Oranjemund and Tsumeb, would be struck.

In Windhoek it began with the eight thousand contract workers who locked themselves inside the huge compound at the edge of Katutura, refusing to go to work and for the moment refusing to talk to employers and government officials. The sudden strike took the whites completely by surprise. Secrecy had been preserved throughout nine months of planning, right up to that morning, in spite of the many police informers in the compound. When I arrived late that day South African troops had only begun to cordon off the compound; four armoured cars rolled into position in the square outside, where thousands of location people had gathered to watch. I left the crowd and approached the gate, but it was only when I removed my floppy cap that shouts of recognition went up and the gate swung wide open. Inside, I felt the enthusiasm of the workers as they talked excitedly and earnestly about what lay ahead for the strike. They were tense and apprehensive about the troops surrounding the compound. But for the three weeks that the workers stayed inside, there was no violence. That would come later.

That first night I visited friends in the location, where news of the contract workers' strike roused the location people to follow suit. 'Have you heard? Nobody's going to work tomorrow!' seemed to rise from the night. At midnight police cars with loudspeakers cruised up and down the streets, warning people against following the example of the contract workers but only ensuring that everyone knew about the strike.

The widespread effectiveness of the strike was startling. Clerks, domestic servants, and even those Coloureds who had considered

themselves above their fellow Africans, stayed out. The buses that normally came to the location to pick up workers every morning were met with showers of rocks. Women brought food to Meroro's door for the men in the sealed-off compound, who still refused to negotiate with officials. As long as they held out, everyone in the location would respect the strike. For three weeks Windhoek was a dead city.

For the first time in their lives Windhoek's white population found out how much they relied on blacks. No milk was delivered. There was no fresh bread, fresh meat or produce in the shops. The foul smell from uncollected rubbish spread from the back lanes in the well-to-do Kasteel suburb, and the unswept streets and pavements lent an appearance of decay to the downtown business district. Trains from South Africa lined up at the railway station but couldn't be unloaded; retail stores sold out of goods while fruit and vegetables rotted in the warehouses.

Windhoek employers had to hire white schoolboys on holiday to collect rubbish and unload rail cars. A contract worker had earned three rand a week and a man from the location twenty, but a sixteen-year-old white schoolboy who could not lift a sack of flour on his own made seventy rand. The news of the wages that businessmen were paying these youths told the workers more about their exploitation than we in SWAPO ever could have.

One reason contract workers could be paid so little was that at the end of their twelve- or eighteen-month contracts, they returned to their small farms in Ovamboland where they struggled to scrape a meagre living from the barren land. White employers never had to provide in any way for workers' families, and only for the duration of the contract did they concern themselves with keeping the workers from starving. But the last two harvests before the strike had been better than usual. At the end of December the striking contract workers, out of food and money, demanded to be sent back home to the reserves.

When I returned to Ondangwa, thousands of workers who had returned were detained in a large fenced-in field. Labour officials released them to continue on to their villages just as the first train load of strike-breakers from Angola arrived on their way south. The South African soldiers stood by indifferently watching the bloody battle that ensued before eventually firing tear gas to end the violent encounter.

No more strike-breakers came through Ondangwa. The embattled workers returned to their villages and held meetings with the people, denouncing the Boers and the chiefs and the cruel injustice of the contract labour system.

By May 1972, when the workers finally called an end to the strike, a new spirit had swept through Ovamboland. People who had quietly gone about their business for reasons of fear or apathy now joined SWAPO. Many came to my house to ask what they could do for the movement. There were meetings after church, in schools, at the hospital – wherever people gathered. The hundreds of young people who had been deported from the south formed a chapter of the new SWAPO Youth League. People were once again looking to SWAPO for hope and direction, and away from the chiefs who had been discredited for serving as the government's lackeys during strike negotiations. Stories of how chiefs had been stoned and driven from occupied compounds helped dispel people's fear of them. The chiefs and their Owambo bantustan lost credibility abroad, too, setting South Africa's propaganda campaign back several years. When Kurt Waldheim, Secretary-General of the United Nations, visited Ondangwa in April 1972, several thousand SWAPO members met him at the airport to demonstrate to the world our desire for Namibia's national independence.

To the strike and everything we gained by it the government responded with brute force. South African troops indiscriminately rounded up villagers, strikers and others into makeshift camps for interrogation. There was one such camp in Ondangwa, close enough to the location for us to hear the prisoners' screams. The nurses at the hospital told of soldiers bringing in bodies mangled beyond recognition, so many that the doctor in charge finally refused to accept any more. Unmarked graves appeared in the bush surrounding the camps. Out in the villages the chiefs reasserted their authority with public floggings, some of which I was forced to witness.

A large crowd turned out at the Ovambo government buildings to watch one such scene. The prisoners were chained together in the middle of the square, under the hot noonday sun. The chief's personal secretary was seated at a table. A lawn chair had been placed in the shade of the main building; we were still waiting for the chief. At last he arrived, Chief Filemon Elifas of the Ndonga

people, Chief Minister of Owambo, and a massive man. The chair disappared under him as he sat down. A servant placed a fresh bottle of whisky at his side.

The first prisoner, a young woman, was brought to the table. 'Member of SWAPO. Has shown disrespect for the chief,' the secretary read out.

The headmen huddled around Elifas's chair for consultation. 'Thirty rand fine,' the judgement rang out in the tense silence, 'and fifteen strokes.'

A tribal policeman brought out a chair and forced the woman to bend down across it. Four policemen held her down while a fifth pulled up her dress. One of the chief's messengers was ready with the *makalani* - a thorny palmbranch with a razor-sharp edge. Hushed murmurs of dismay rippled through the crowd. There is nothing traditionally Namibian about flogging; the Boers introduced it with their *sjambok* whips. A pistol shot erupted in the silence, followed by a scream as the *makalani* hit the woman's bare buttocks. More screams followed. Pink, raw flesh appeared in patches that soon yielded dark, red blood, which splattered with each successive descent of the cane.

When the woman's screaming abruptly stopped, Elifas took a swig of whisky and leaned forward in his chair. 'Ask her how she feels,' he laughed. 'Is she still in SWAPO?' But he got no answer; the woman had lost consciousness. Elifas shrugged and ordered that the remaining lashes be applied.

I never wanted to kill a black man as badly as I wanted to kill Elifas then. In fact, two years later, someone else did kill him in an Ondangwa liquor store. But at the time no one could do anything but rage silently or weep. There were hundreds of us watching this sickening spectacle, but we were helpless against the armed tribal policemen posted around the square. The reactivated SWAPO guerrillas could not prevent the floggings either, as they had to contend with thousands of South African troops and the new Owambo Defence Force.

For two years the intense repression continued. In 1973 alone, over eight hundred of our Ovamboland members were arrested, at least twelve were killed, and over a hundred were wounded in encounters with troops and police. Scores of others simply disappeared. In Swakopmund, eight Youth League leaders were sentenced under the Sabotage Act to eight years each on Robben

Island. In Rehoboth, 155 people were tried for holding a public meeting. David Meroro and Axel Johannes, two of our most important leaders, were held in isolation and tortured in Windhoek Prison. A plan to eliminate me, I calculated, was just a matter of time.

My suspended sentence from Pretoria ran out in 1973, but in April of that year I was arrested on charges of inciting people to violence. On the day of my trial police attacked the several hundred supporters who had gathered outside the courthouse. The trial was hastily adjourned in a chaos of flying glass and tear gas that left many of my friends wounded. Eventually I was sentenced to six months, and while my appeal was being considered I was rearrested on similar but separate charges. I had to report to the Ondangwa police station every day, and agents trailed me wherever I went. With such notoriety, what I could do was limited: I collected affidavits and other documentation of the repression in Ovamboland and passed it on to Bishop Richard Wood of the Anglican Church in Windhoek. He in turn relayed the information abroad; we needed international pressure on South Africa to stop the clampdown.

A year later, with my cases more or less settled and new charges yet to come, the bishop quietly brought me to Windhoek to be interviewed by representatives of Amnesty International and European governments and by journalists, none of whom was permitted to enter the north. I brought my family, hoping to stay for a while and work with SWAPO in Windhoek. But the Boers had other plans for me.

Bishop Wood called me to his house early one June morning in that year, 1974. He led me into his study where another missionary, a German woman whom I knew well, was waiting. She had driven all night from Ondangwa with an urgent message from Jobeck: Special Branch were once again looking for me; they had started an extensive man-hunt in the area. My comrades were telling me to get out of the country, and quickly.

Leave Namibia? Three or four years ago, when I was isolated and depressed, I might have welcomed the idea. But now? There was just too much that had to be done. And wouldn't I be safe so long as I stayed within view of Windhoek's lawyers and foreigners?

'For heaven's sake, listen to your colleagues,' the German

woman pleaded. 'The police are planning to spirit you away. You'll never be seen again.'

Instead of arguing I thanked her for what she had done and went back to my mother-in-law's house. She pulled me inside and closed the door. 'The police were here asking for you. They said they were coming back.'

I found Ali still in bed, nursing our new-born daughter. The baby was resting peacefully in her arms, just as Kenny had been on that day eight years ago when I was taken to Pretoria. I had never seen him again after that.

'I can't go,' I said.

Ali and I had already talked about leaving. She had wanted me to try to escape to Botswana in the previous year after one of the Ondangwa headmen had shot at me with a rifle. But I had always put off the decision.

Ali was now calm, firm. 'You *must* go,' she said. 'This time they'll kill you.'

'But what about you, and the baby?'

'We've talked this over before, John. We can follow safely once you're out. It's you they want.'

The danger, close as it was, did not seem real yet. As I spent the day in hiding at the bishop's house I brooded about exile and what it would mean: foreign countries full of strangers, surely; distractions; difficult times; more of the doubts and loneliness that I already knew from Ovamboland. On the other hand, I had friends outside, comrades including Sam Nujoma, SWAPO's president. I could learn to do something valuable, as Vinnia Ndadi had with his broadcasts for SWAPO's Radio Namibia. I might even travel to those strange countries and convince the people there to oppose South Africa and to help SWAPO. Possibilities existed, even if they were a little frightening. What scared me most though, as I packed my small suitcase, was the idea that I might never return to my country.

Early the next morning I said hasty farewells and left in a Volkswagen with a British woman headed for Oniipa, a Finnish mission in Ovamboland. Following in an old van were Collie Nujoma and several Youth League members who were likewise headed for Angola. Since the April 1974 coup in Portugal, Angola's border was no longer guarded by hostile soldiers; the best route out of Namibia was now due north. Our plan was to bluff our way

through the Ovambo checkpoint, meet Collie's group at Jobeck's café and then proceed to the mission, where my friend Philip Alwendo was to be waiting with another car for the final and most dangerous leg of the trip.

Just after dark, as planned, we reached the checkpoint where the road enters Ovamboland. When the bright floodlights appeared ahead, I took off my glasses and joined the two Youth League women in the back seat, leaving our British friend alone in front – any other arrangement would have looked suspicious. All the woman knew was that there might be a problem at the gate because I didn't have a pass, nothing more. Still she was nervous, and her faltering Scandinavian accent would not have fooled anyone other than a dim-witted Boer.

He asked a lot of questions but waved us on as soon as our timed diversion, Collie's misfiring old van, rattled into the circle of lights behind us. But her nerves gave out and she stalled the engine. It spluttered a few times but refused to catch.

The guard leaned in through the open window to see what was wrong. I buried my face in a jersey, pretending to be asleep. The floodlights lit the interior clearly as day.

'Hey, you,' the Boer shouted, 'don't you see the lady needs a push!'

I stirred and looked at him, at a loss to explain.

'Ja, you,' he repeated staring at me.

Before I could move, however, Collie's friends swarmed around our car. One big push and the engine finally caught. We shot into the safe darkness of the desert, not waiting for Collie's van. We had agreed to drive separately to avoid suspicion, and to meet later at Jobeck's café.

The choice of meeting places proved a bad one. It was Friday night and Jobeck's place was crowded. We sat in the car and waited for over an hour. I pulled my jersey over my head again as the girls tried to fend off curious drinkers who came over for a chat. Where was Collie?

A pair of headlights appeared on the road. 'At last!' I thought. It wasn't the van, but a police car! The vehicle slowed, came up the driveway and parked right in front of us. Four white policemen in full camouflage outfits jumped out. One shone a flashlight into the back seat. 'Everything all right, missus?' he enquired.

Now that we were past the checkpoint, our driver no longer

knew why I was hiding. 'Ja, ja, everything all right,' she stuttered in a ridiculous accent.

The policeman lingered for a long moment, unsure.

'Something that you look for?' she added more convincingly.

'Terrorists,' the Boer said grimly.

Our driver's laugh of relief was genuine. 'No, I see none of them,' she said.

The police car circled the café and made its way along the rough road and into the location. Its headlights passed over my old house, dark and deserted.

At last the van arrived. They had stopped for a beer or two, and by now a few of them were getting excited, too excited. They got out and headed for the café, laughing and joking loudly. 'Soon now, the Boers will get what they deserve; yessir, we'll be back! C'mon, *mitiri*, let's have a beer.'

The fools! I called Collie over and told him to collect his group and continue. Then our Volkswagen sped off for Oniipa where Philip Alwendo would be waiting for me. I wanted to get across that border *tonight*.

Oniipa is the headquarters of the Ovambo-Kavango Church. The mission had been a haven for SWAPO since Hermann first began to organize in the area many years previously. When our British friend had gratefully retired to the guesthouse, I tiptoed around looking for Philip. But he was not to be found. It was almost midnight.

I had no choice but to wait. One of the nurses gave me her room while she stayed up to watch for Philip. I was exhausted but could not sleep. As I lay in the dark I heard a great church clock strike off the hours. At three o'clock, still no Philip. Now it was too late to reach the border before dawn.

The nurses' residence was too busy during the day for me to hide there safely. After breakfast my host went to her wardrobe and drew out a large dress and a woman's headcloth. 'Don't be shy,' she laughed. 'we have to get you across to the other building.' Fortunately there was nobody else in the yard as we shuffled over and slipped into the room of a white missionary woman, the last place the police would look.

My nurse friend decided I needed company and fetched one of the pastors, a man I had known a long time. He closed the door quickly behind him. 'John, I've prayed for your safety—'

'And I've prayed for your good health, as well, pastor.' I tried to sound casual; the fewer people who knew of my escape, the better.

But the pastor knew more than I did. He told me of a meeting of the Ovambo cabinet early that morning. Jannie de Wet had demanded that the chiefs track me down and arrest all other SWAPO leaders in the north. The Boers were setting up road-blocks around Ondangwa and at every crossroads towards the border.

Trapped! Why hadn't Philip been here last night? I could have been in Angola by now. But when I told the pastor about the foul-up, he started. 'But Philip is here, upstairs! He waited for someone all last night, but wouldn't say who.' He disappeared for a minute and returned with a confused Philip.

At noon the mission filled with people who had come to celebrate the publication of the first Ovambo-language Bible. Philip and I stayed behind drawn curtains while guests outside leaned, chatting, against our window. Tensely, we kept silent. At the end of the event, the pastor returned with a colleague from Engela, another mission only a few miles from the Angolan border. The newcomer looked us over with a smile. 'I don't know where you're going, but I'll get you to Engela all right.' His minibus, filled with church workers, was waiting outside. With my little suitcase tucked under the seat and a prayer book in my lap, I huddled between two dignified matrons and eyed the police as they checked the driver's papers at each road-block on the 45-mile stretch to Engela where Collie's group was waiting.

Dark was still several hours off and our group had become too large to go unnoticed. Quickly we found shelter with a village shopkeeper I knew from Jobeck's. From the shop store room we could hear South African military trucks roar past on the road that runs along the border. When dark fell we could see their searchlights dart through the sparse forest to the north. The shopkeeper stuffed our bags with enough canned food and bread to last us several days for our trek through Angola to Zambia. One of his workers offered to show us a good place to cross the border and then take the van back to Ondangwa. Eight o'clock: it was time to go.

The moon was rising in the black sky. Two lines of jeep tracks in the sand showed us the way. The van bumped and groaned along

in low gear, lights out. Engela disappeared behind us. Inside the van it was so quiet that the squeaky suspension seemed that it would alert every South African patrol within miles. Every few minutes we stopped to listen for them. I could hear nothing but my heart pounding. After what seemed an hour of this stop-and-start – probably ten minutes – the tracks turned sharply and we descended into a slight hollow. Collie turned off the engine and the van quietly emptied. We looked out over the open grassland; it was perfectly still. The galvanized fencing shone in the moonlight.

I walked up the slope behind the car and my feet sank into the sandy soil. I picked up a handful of sand and let the dry grains dribble through my fingers. I thought of Levy Nganjone and how we used to kneel and sift sand like this at the sacred grounds of his Herero ancestors. I wondered what had become of Nganjone after his deportation. And Karita, where was he? Good people: deported, imprisoned, killed or driven into exile. How long could this go on?

Two beams of light cut through the brush. Dogs barked in the distance. 'Mitiri, we can't wait any longer,' someone whispered. The others were across the fence and our guide had turned the van around, preparing to leave.

Was this how I had to depart, running from the Boers, hiding from those headlights? Namibia was my home. I belonged here, with my friends, my family, the elders who had raised me, with all my comrades who continued to challenge the Boers in spite of the risks.

'For God's sake, man, they'll be here any minute,' Collie called from the fence. The van had left.

I opened my mouth to answer, but my voice failed me. Tears streamed down my cheeks. I grabbed a handful of leaves from the nearest bush and stuffed them into my pocket.

The patrol jeep was now close enough for me to hear the engine. For a brief moment I stared at the pair of headlights. Then, with a deep breath, I turned and walked to where the barbed wire fence had been forced apart. Eager hands helped me through. Without looking back, I picked up my suitcase and joined the line of dark figures heading into the bush, walking north.