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Preface

“Everyone has a story”, Sephiwe, the librarian at the Robben Island Mayibuye Archive, said to me as he handed me the newspaper file I needed. He was looking at my greying hair and the creases under my eyes, and said quietly, “It’s been a long journey!” He was right! The journey I describe is both personal and political. The politics referred to is not about the science and art of government, but more often about the tensions between principles and political practice. At its core is a lifetime’s struggle with commitment, identity, choice and rejection.

Biography and history are compatible, provided the writer (present company not excepted) is aware of the verbal fencing that sometimes masks attributes of pride, ambition and enmity that have a way of creeping into the text in a work of this nature. Besides, memory can sometimes be capricious and self-serving, especially when I am writing about events that are contentious and extend over half a century. I have tried to take these concerns to heart, aware that probing the past is not a dispassionate undertaking even for the least partisan. I am sure that there are occasions where there are lapses, but to the best of my ability I have tried to avoid errors of fact and judgments that are intemperate. Where I have thought other witnesses were necessary to support an opinion or offer an alternative view, I have referred to independent commentaries and used biographical references. As a general rule, I’ve avoided an instrumental approach, whereby leaders decide upon an action and as a consequence everything falls neatly into place. The actual unfolding of events is of course much more complex and frustrating.

I was often as intensely influenced by events as an observer as I was as a participant or as an ordinary onlooker. There are events that I describe in which I did not participate directly, but which influenced the historical context profoundly and continue to excite interest and argument. The Broederbond is a case in point. Its reach was extensive and influential. Few at the time could be aware of its secret presence. Its leaders were steeped in the philosophy of National Socialism and they avowedly supported Hitler. Their influence from the 1940s to the 1990s was as salient a part of the context of this narrative as the repressive actions of the apartheid government. Later I wrote about the mindset of the mine owners as I have here about the Broederbond.

While the effect of the Broederbond was insidious, the 1946 miners’ strike was the seminal event of the labour force in the 1940s and helped to rebut false illusions as to whom the state served. It was a watershed in the relations between government, the CPSA, the trade unions (and later) the national movements, prompting what I refer to as a

spiral of trials, starting with the Treason, "Fischer", Rivonia and ARM trials (in the 1950s and 60s), extending into each decade of the century until 1990. The unintended consequence of the miners' strike was the revolt of the relatively conservative councillors in the Natives Representative Council (NRC) where the paternalism, condescension and political exclusion of the African representatives by government and white officials appeared as a classic case study in the futility of working within the system, thwarting future possibilities of African co-optation. The NRC's proceedings were, for me, a significant moment of African assertion to justify its inclusion in this narrative.

My purpose in revisiting the seminal campaigns in the two founding decades of apartheid, the 1950s and 60s, was to examine the steady slide towards fascism when the apartheid government created the "enabling" legislation for perpetuating white rule. The Defiance Campaign (effectively civil disobedience) was in part a response to this legislative framework of social engineering. The innovative concept of the 1955 Congress of the People (COP) evolved during the course of the campaign for the adoption of the Freedom Charter. It was a salutary reminder that the COP did not just happen as initially conceived. Its format changed as the campaign proceeded. Similarly the Freedom Charter was more than the sum of the "demands" that were sent into the regional offices of the COP; it was a document that reflected the social and political thinking that informed the struggles during the half century and found its enduring place in the Bill of Rights in our democratic constitution. On the Bantu Education Act, described by Chief Luthuli as a "devil's piece of legislation", I have virtually brought the reader into the makeshift "classrooms" of the Cultural Cubs, established as a tentative alternative to education in the state schools.

While the chapters on solitary confinement, the "Fischer" Trial, exile and prison are intensely personal, they are also political. Like the other chapters in this memoir they are more than monographs. My intention is to make this book a critical resource for everyone, including participants in the struggle and the generation of young people who need to know more about the historical events – the successes and the failures – that led to Mandela's presidency. This history is well within the memory of the present generation but what of the generation for whom the apartheid past is fast becoming an abstraction? While I have sometimes lightened the narrative with anecdote, my main concern has been to move beyond the merely humorous. Accordingly, I have stressed the substance of the charges against the accused in the trials rather than make light of the allegations and the incompetence of the prosecutors and state witnesses, although one might be forgiven for dwelling on their immense ineptitude.

I was an activist in most of the struggles I have described from the mid-1940s to the 1990s and was an accused in the Treason Trial (1956–1960), the Fischer Trial (1964–65) and sentenced to three years in prison in 1965 after a period of solitary confinement

during 90-day detention. The memoir records this as well as my experiences of exile. The final chapter in which the anticipated features of the new democracy were discussed in seminars and conferences in Moscow, Zimbabwe, Zambia and Cuba are of interest today for the vision we had then and the reality that confronts us now. The lesson is that the journey referred to earlier is not really over.

Lastly, I could not have written this memoir without the assistance of friends and colleagues – stalwarts of the struggle and many others – who read and commented on this manuscript. They are too numerous to mention, but they know who they are. My sincerest thanks to them all, including the librarians at the William Cullen Library at the University of the Witwatersrand; the National Archives in Pretoria; the Robben Island Mayibuye Archive at the University of the Western Cape; the African Studies Library at the University of Cape Town; and the Schomberg Center for Research in Black Culture (a research unit of the New York Public Library). Last, but by no means least, my loving thanks are due to Carole Silver, my wife, friend, mentor and formidable editor. Without her enthusiastic support I would not have completed this memoir.

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Cape Town

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