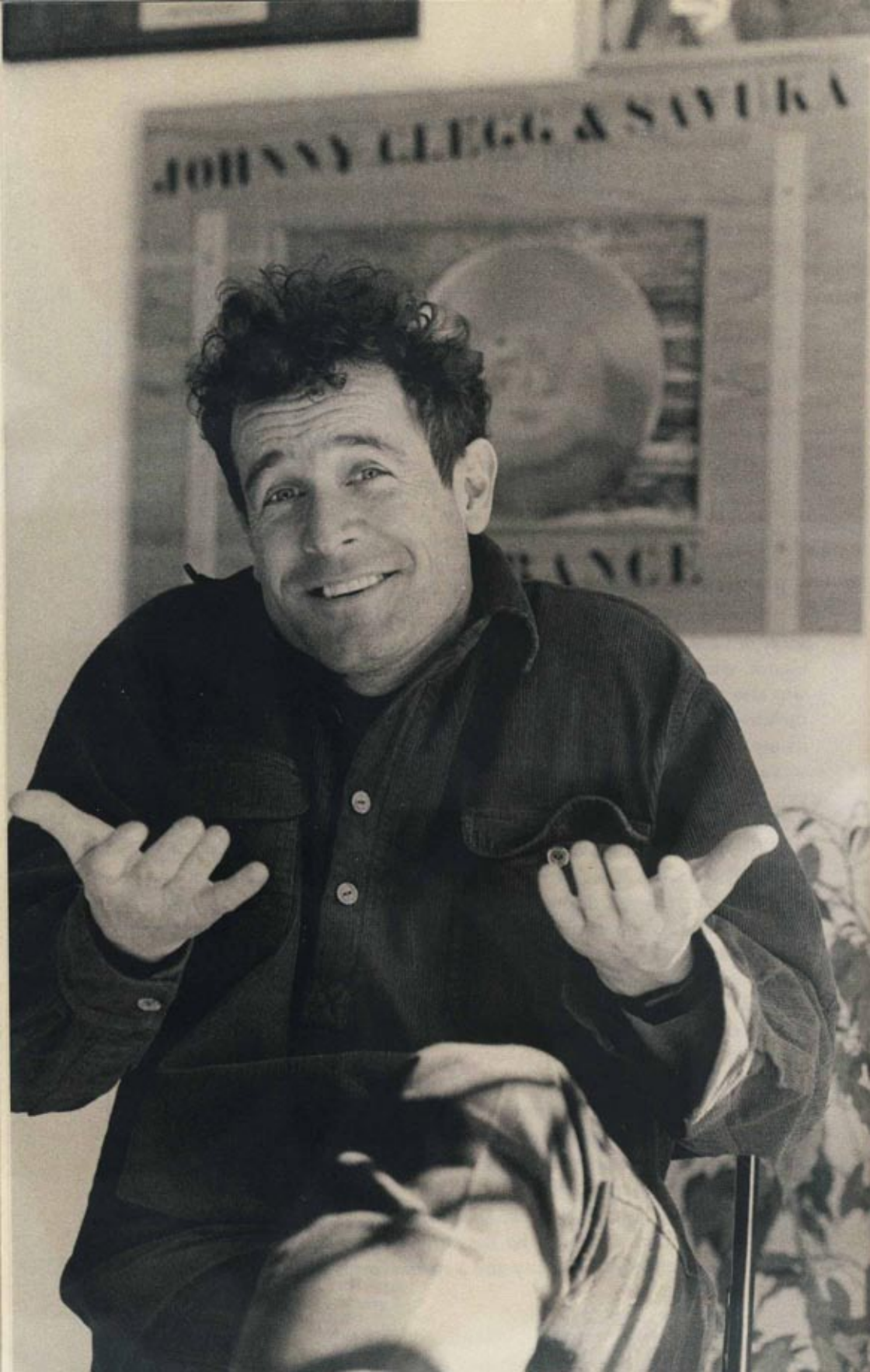

JOHNNY CLEGG & SAVUKA

find work for local bands nationally and internationally. His increasing involvement in business reflects a growing understanding of how power impacts on, and frequently sets the agendas for the music industry, and the communications industry as a whole. Juluka was relaunched in 1996, first locally and then with a tour to the States. Clegg is married to mentor consultant Jenny, and they have two children.

Interviewed by Immanuel Suttner
11 and 12 July 1995
Johannesburg

At the moment I'm reading *A History of the Jews* by Paul Johnson. The thing that I find immensely accurate in his overview is that there's always been this kind of rationalist and irrationalist element in the development of the Jewish world view. I think that there's always been and always will be a conflict between the secular and the religious, between the rationalists and the irrationalists, between the universal and the insular. He points out that because of the diaspora, and because the Jews had no place of their own, they were always able to be in the forefront of change in any society that they found themselves in. They were not attached to the sedentary ways of the landed, or to a particular national culture or tradition, they had no stake in keeping the status quo going, and therefore, whenever there was a conflict in which there was going to be some kind of movement or change, they were always at the forefront of the intellectual ferment behind that movement. I felt this view of the Jew as insider who is an outsider was very strongly part of my subconscious location in South Africa.

That in that, if anything, you are Jewish.

Yes...

Why are you reading that Paul Johnson book?

I went through a period of severe depression in 1990. I'd been on a nine-month world tour. On 24 January I had left, and just before that I had done a national tour of South Africa. I did four big concerts in Johannesburg. The whole show was quite a highly politicised presentation. Leon Wessels[1] saw

1 Then deputy minister of Law and Order, later one of the Nationalists' chief negotiators at Codesa II and minister of Manpower.

Left:
Johnny Clegg: Why do Jewish men have short necks? (Photograph: Gisèle Wulfsohn)

this show, and afterwards he went to see F W de Klerk and said to him 'You're losing touch with these white youth', and apparently De Klerk said to him 'Have you been to a Johnny Clegg concert?' and he said 'Yes'. De Klerk said, 'One of my other ministers has been there... and I've got the same report from this other fellow.'

Wessels phoned my management and said, 'I want Clegg to know that he had an effect on our thinking at a critical time.' Anyway, I left the country, and then on 11 February Mandela was released. I watched his release from Rome, and I felt completely dislocated and cut off from a very important rite of passage, both nationally and personally. Something I had been working towards in my own funny cultural way. I had this incredible slog of six months touring Canada, Quebec, the whole of America and the whole of Europe, and I came back for six weeks in September for a rest. I came back to a completely changed country, and I wasn't prepared for it. I discovered that certain key people I grew up with in the Zulu migrant labour community were involved in various acts of murder and destabilisation of the townships, and the trains, around George Goch, Denver, Jeppe hostel.

I entered into a very painful debate. And I realised that what was blooming in South Africa was a powerful conflict between traditionalism and modernism, because the way the message had been articulated to migrant workers was not a political message. It was about their way of life. So when I came back from overseas, I went into a depression. It was a very difficult time for me because... the social construction of Zulu masculinity was part of the construction of my masculinity, and still is. My organic migrant worker community who had constructed for me a very strong identity inside myself was perpetrating acts which I found completely abhorrent and unacceptable, and I was truly then marginalised.

What happened is that Dudu [Ndlovu][2] and myself were associated with the hit single, 'Asimbonanga', which was banned in South Africa. When we returned we came back to a new country and Dudu was cast in the mould of an ANC supporter. He went through a tremendous personal struggle with this, because he's a traditionalist. And he saw himself as above politics. He didn't join Inkatha, or the ANC, he just said, 'I'm a musician and I'm not interested in this, I can do more by celebrating a common humanity than by taking a fixed angle on this thing.' We both went into the hostels and we argued with people about this. We would say to them, these Afrikaans policemen who are coming in and giving you weapons and guns – six months ago they were torturing you to give up your weapons. How do you deal with this? Don't you find it strange?

We refused to join and go to rallies. We just cut ourselves off from all the activities of IFP supporters, and the people that they had press-ganged into

2 Dudu Ndlovu was the percussionist as well as the star dancer of Savuka.

helping them. When Dudu was assassinated I was exposed to the ancestor worship culture in a very profound way. The Zulus believe that when you die, before you accept your death you go through a period of wandering for about a year. Various rituals are performed to try to convince the spirits to move on to the next level of ancestral life. I wrote a song, 'The Crossing',[3] which is about this transitional period, and I also used the metaphor for my own personal crossing that I was going through, and for South Africa. The crossing became a theme for me, and the album *Heat, Dust and Dreams* was an album about my personal transition, one which I'm still coming out of and which is why I am also reading this book on the Jews. At a certain point I became obsessed with the notion of sacrifice and I was talking to a friend who said to me, you should go and speak to a rabbi. You need somebody who can actually help you through this and also give you a different perspective and maybe a few ideas that you can hang on to. So, I went to speak to this guy. In Yeoville. He used to be a doctor. A medical doctor.

Akiva Tatz. Quite a powerful individual.

Very. I can't remember the specifics of the conversation, but he did a very Jewish thing to me. He said to me, using this dialectical thinking, with the use of irony and paradox, he said, what do the Zulus believe? I said, well, the Zulus believe that when you die, you become an ancestor and this ancestor then influences the fortunes and the fate of the living. And one has basically to ask for their favour. One has to sacrifice to them . . .

Then he said, do the ancestors affect the lives of the living, and I said, well, they believe they do, and they believe one might have a very special relationship with one's grandfather when he dies, it might be an ancestor who really cares for you.

He said well, the Jews also believe in ancestors, but it's the exact opposite. He said, it's not what your ancestor can do for you. It's what you can do for your ancestor, and to bring back your spirits who are dead to this world is a negation. We believe that by living a blessed life and a holy life you bring your ancestors closer to God, so it's what you can do for them.

And you elevate them by saying kaddish.[4]

You elevate them — yes.

3 'We are coming, we are coming. We are coming, people of our clan. We are crossing over into the distance, by those very dark black mountains, and when we arrive on the other side, we will put down our burdens.'

4 Kaddish is a sanctification of God, extolling and enunciating His/Her greatness and indescribable magnitude. It is recited by mourners for eleven months after the death of a parent or, in certain instances, siblings or close relatives. S Y Agnon, the Nobel Prize-winning writer, explained that when a Jew dies, it is as if God's greatness has been diminished. Hence the prayer.

Did that move something in you?

It stung me. It was the first time that I had a really powerful sense of spiritual/cultural contradiction, and he did the same thing again to me on the issue of sacrifice. I had a very functional definition of sacrifice. Sacrifice is an attempt to influence the realm of the other world, of the spiritual plane, through the taking of a life. It's a kind of transaction. It's a very powerful — in fact the most powerful — way that you can attempt to influence events. And he said, sacrifice is really to do with hierarchising values. You know, I won't go to the theatre tonight. I'll paint my aunty's bedroom. He says what you've done there, is you've given up something and you've said that you are going to hierarchise and place certain things in preferential order. You've acted out a choice, and you've said something by your action. So sacrifice is critical for the ordering of values. When you are sacrificing the actual efficacy of this activity is not important. What is important is that a statement is being made, that certain values are being elevated above other values, and this is communicated to everybody. So, I went away with that, and I was impressed by the non-doctrinaire, non-pedantic way that the conversation had unfolded and I was interested in the intellectual aspects of the debate. I wasn't interested in the content of the debate. I was interested in the way in which the rabbi had perceived the argument and put it on its head at times . . . There was also the ideal of living with paradoxes. I came out with a sense that living with paradox is an essential part of being Jewish.

What do you mean 'is an essential part of being Jewish'? As opposed to being . . .

OK, Western-like. The Western culture is based, amongst other things, on the Greek logos. Logos is three laws of logic. One of the laws is the law of identity, and that says that A cannot be non-A simultaneously, but in the Jewish faith it can.[5] So now we have something like an epistemological rupture. Because you can't say that this bag is a bag and not a bag at the same time, and it's very interesting that people like Marx and Freud utilised this particular dynamic in paradoxical thinking to get deeper into the substratum of either society or the psyche, the human psyche. I see it being applied in the kind of very humble workings of daily life, in business or whatever. On the one hand, there's A, but on the other hand, there's not A. How do we weigh these two things up? They are both important. They are

5 '*Elu ve Elu Divrei* and *Elohim Chayim*' — 'These and these are the words of the living God'. Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Eiruvin, 13B. This statement occurs in the context of a long-standing argument between Hillel, a Talmudic sage, and Shamai, another Talmudic scholar. A voice comes out from heaven and says that both the opinion of Hillel and the opinion of Shamai are correct, even though they are diametrically opposed.

at levels exclusive, but at other times they're not exclusive. How do we hierarchise this if we want to?

And it comes out in the joke: Why do Jewish men have short necks? [demonstrates, laughter]. So I, in the last four, five years have been trying to get to the intellectual fabric of Judaism, [to certain cultural mechanisms] which make sense and which I realise have been part of my ability to adapt and adjust because my mother innately did this.

So you believe in cultural mores being passed on unconsciously. Your mother got it from her parents, and passes it on to you . . .

It's there in the arguing, the way my mother argues drives me crazy. She can change her position. She'll be able to flip, and there's a kind of an ability to entertain, all the time, both sides of something. She can be very wildly imbalanced, but the fact that she's got both sides there is for me a very interesting point. In my understanding, the advent of Greek logic is an epistemological break with the East, and with traditional Jewish intellectual tradition.

In fact 'Judeo-Christian tradition' is a misnomer.

It is. It is a misnomer. And I think that that for me was quite a powerful discovery in 1992.

The point about getting stuff from your mother. Are you saying that there's cultural things which imprint themselves on you whether you choose them or not?

It's your environment. It's your family.

Your mother's parents, your grandparents. Do you know anything about them?

My grandfather came from the Finnish/Russian border, a town called Vidz. He left Russia at age ten, went to the States, then came to South Africa. My grandmother came from Minsk. She spoke only Russian and Yiddish, and basically refused to learn English. My grandfather moved to Zimbabwe, then Rhodesia, and after two or three decades he became a farmer there. His surname was Braslovsky but they changed it to Braudo. My mother was born in Zimbabwe. She was a tomboy. She was also very academically strong, in the top two or three in her class, and still is well informed, very well read and articulate. When she was of university age, she came to Johannesburg, to Wits, did drama and English. She got involved with the Zionist movement in Johannesburg at the time. She told me that some of the camps she attended were secret training camps.

They weren't secret. Habonim bought Balfour Park and Hashomeyr Hatzair used to run a farm there, a model farm, to teach people agricultural skills, so that they could go to Palestine and be **chalutzim** *[pioneers].*

She was involved in all that stuff. She spent time in Israel during the War of Independence, as a volunteer. But on the other side she had very strong feelings against the insular world of the ghetto. It was a reaction to that kind of very oppressive Eastern European headset. Ja, probably to her mother. Her mother was a pivotal figure in her life. A wild, crazy, superstitious woman, who spoke mainly in Yiddish. It's a dramatic language, and it could be used in such a devastating way, and my grandmother had a very sharp tongue.

What do you think the temptation of Zionism was for her? The romanticism of a frontier society struggling to survive, the empowering of a people marginalised by the diaspora and decimated by the Holocaust?

Ja, they were all exposed to that, and I think that throughout her life she's been somebody who's searched for a meaningful identity and a meaningful connection with the world around her. She calls herself a Buddhist now, but a Jewish Buddhist. I said to her the other day, you know, you didn't really give me a Jewish upbringing. She said, 'Yes, but the important thing is that I never ever denied that I was Jewish. I didn't give you any religious upbringing. All I said to you was, study the Ten Commandments, and if you can get half of them right, you're way ahead of everybody. That's all it is, you keep to the Ten Commandments – don't worry about the rest.'

My mother never ever eschewed her Judaism, but on the other hand she felt that she couldn't actually get on with her generation of Jewish girls, and she ended up falling in love with an English RAF pilot in Gwelo. My grandfather was devastated. She emigrated to England, and I was born in Rochdale, the chief borough of Manchester, just outside the city.

My grandfather waited for my mother to have to start dealing with the new reality that was setting in. Here she was in the middle of the cold English winter, surrounded by people who still believed in the blood libel, and there wasn't any other Jewish person in the area, and my father's father, my grandfather on my father's side, was very opposed to his son marrying a Jewish colonial. My biological father was an open, warm, friendly and humorous chap, really a fun person to be with. The problems were not with him but with the broader context in which she now found herself. She was feeling isolated. My grandfather appeared when I was six months old. He came over and told my mother he's going to say a prayer for the dead if she did not come home. He saw me as the only male issue on his side of the family, and therefore it was critical to try and get hold of me. Then my parents got divorced. And I never saw my father, ever.

Where is he today?

When I was twenty-one I met him, but for the first twenty-one years of my life I never saw him . . . There's a dark area in the story, which I've tried to understand, and which I still can't actually get to the root of. It seems there was a deal struck between my grandfather, my father and my mother, and my father agreed not to write or contact me.

Your grandfather sounds like quite a domineering figure.

I didn't really know him, he died when I was only three. What I know of him came from the stories about him. I know that my mother loved him, she said he was warm, caring and kind. But he had a position, and he would stand and take the position, and he would stick to that. I didn't know what it was to have a father — it was just my situation, and I accepted it. Some kids had fathers, some kids didn't. It was only when I went through adolescence and I was searching for a male symbol, that I wrote a message to my father in England.

Anyway, when my mother and father got divorced my mother, together with me, went to Israel. It was either a year or six months that we spent in Israel and then we went back to Zimbabwe, to the farm. I'm told I spoke Ndebele before I spoke English. I have no recollection of these events, I'm just recounting what I've been told.

Did your mom's time in Israel 'cure' her of Israel, or did she retain some sort of romantic attachment that was later transmitted to you?

No, it cured her of Israel. It cured her because she met the Israelis and discovered that she had nothing in common with them, and that they were a hard, tough people. She really felt that she was English . . . she grew up with Shakespeare, she grew up with an incredibly literary English world view. She loved poetry. To this day she can quote at length hundreds of poems of all the great English poets.

When we returned to Zimbabwe my mother wanted to be a singer, tour the country, so I had to go to a boarding school outside Salisbury for six months. It was my first taste of the real world. I had been cocooned on the farm. The only male figure that I had was my grandpa. Then I was suddenly in this boarding school and had to deal with all the regular stuff. I remember feeling an incredible sense of abandonment. My mother would come on the weekends and I remember the car driving off after we had spent the afternoon together, and I'd be crying . . . standing at the gate and crying. My crying . . . I think that was a very important formative element in my consciousness.

When I was seven, my mother remarried. Again it was out of the faith, which shocked the family. She married an Afrikaner in self-denial, a crime reporter, Dan Pienaar. Pienaar was seven years her junior, a sensitive, highly strung, highly intelligent man who eschewed his roots and who was very

enamoured with the international image of the foreign correspondent. He had this tremendous love/hate relationship with Africa. He was based in Lusaka and covered the tribal wars in Northern Zambia. I think it was in the first year of independence of Zambia. A powerful tribal sangoma by the name of Alice Lenshina launched a war against the Kaundan government. She told her followers that they would go directly to heaven if they died challenging the government, and she sold them little passports for two or three kwachas. My father went out with the Zambian army, and watched them put down this rebellion in the most brutal fashion. He also saw some stories which never even reached the media. And I think he was overwhelmed by the brutal massacres, the internecine tribal conflict, and the terrible, tremendous psychological and physical devastation which these tribal and other traditional conflicts generated, both in the protagonists and in him. He used to quote Hemingway, who said 'In order to understand life in Africa, you have to understand death in Africa'. On the other hand, he was completely enamoured by the energy, the life energy, the incredible resilience, the music, the art of Africa.

I mean, when we came back from Zambia, we had hundreds of artefacts. He had the biggest Kwela music collection I ever heard. I grew up in Johannesburg listening to Spokes Mashiyane and all the great urban African crossover musicians.

When did you come back to Johannesburg?

It was about two years later, when I was nine or ten. I went to six schools in five years, in three different countries. I went to a Catholic school, I went to Marist Brothers in Koch Street for standards one and two, and in standard three I attended Woodlands Primary in Lusaka, Zambia. At the end of standard four I came back and went to Yeoville Boys. I went to Kensington South. I went to Roseneath. And then my high school was Athlone Boys' High.

When I came to Zambia, I was confronted with a situation of an independent black country, a non-racial school with more black schoolkids than white, and more black teachers than white. I had to adjust to that, and I became part of a gang of young black boys in our area. We had a garage and we made these wire cars, they were incredibly well made. Better than the wire cars I've seen in Alex and other townships. These cars were so sophisticated . . . like a see-through model of a motor car, and we used to spend hours getting the corners and the angles of the wire perfect. Fight over the pliers, fight over the tools. We used to spend hours after school at this garage, our 'garage', you know, and make up wonderful stories about each car. There were different copies of various vehicles that were popular at the time in Lusaka. They had suspension, they had everything.

Coming back to South Africa was difficult. It was a new environment, and,

as a kid, I just adapted, but I do remember feeling a sense of displacement and dislocation... a sense of isolation. I felt marginalised. I've been a marginal person ever since. Also my father, my stepfather, was trying very hard to establish his own identity, and that came at a time in my life when I was trying to do the same thing.

Around the time we returned to South Africa, there was this huge row brewing between my uncle and my mother. My uncle tried to run a traditional Jewish family. They did the Friday night thing every week, and he was an elder at the shul, and he used to say to my mother and stepfather, 'You know, this boy's going to grow up outside the Jewish faith, he's not going to know who and what he is. You guys live like gypsies. You should imbue in him some sense of what being a Jew is.' This uncle took me to my first shul service, when I was around nine years old. The irony was that it reinforced my sense of marginalisation. I was dressed very funnily, and in shul they were speaking a language that I had no access to, and I felt totally outside of it. I had a sense also that it was for old men — it was mainly old men who were there — all the young Jewish kids who were there were either playing outside, or, if they were in the shul, they didn't seem like they were enjoying themselves. For me, it was exposure to something which was very arcane. It didn't arouse my curiosity, and I couldn't make the connection between it and my identity.

My life has been a journey of trying to discover what it is to be an African, and what elements of African culture I could utilise to construct for myself a world view, a value system, a set of beliefs, a set of behaviour patterns, a sense of humour. And I must say, it was my stepfather who was a primary model, because that was part of his personal journey, and I saw him in that way. We were two marginalised males, and he was more like an older brother to me than a father. He was twenty-four, you know, and I was seven when he came into my life.

Did your mother and he stay together, so that he was there accompanying your adolescence?

No. He went through moments of great instability. You know, he had affairs, and then my sister was born when I was twelve, and he wanted to leave. He wasn't prepared to have a child. All the classic problems of a young man who's got himself involved with an older woman plus child, and who doesn't want to settle down, and who's still got romantic adventures he wants to pursue.

I think he actually left, but one incident turned him around completely. My sister had a very bad ear infection. I was babysitting — I had the phone number of the restaurant that my mother and father had gone to, and she went into a kind of very still sleep, and I thought I saw her breathing stop, and I was really nervous. So I phoned the restaurant, and my father arrived. As he

walked into the room she went into convulsions from a very high temperature, and then she stopped breathing altogether. He screamed at me to run the bath with cold water. He blew very gently into her mouth, and brought her back to life, weeping the whole time. Then he rushed and put her into this bath of cold water. And then he walked around for hours, crying, with her in his arms.

After this incident there was this complete, 360-degree conversion to the child. She became a focal point in his life.

It's one of the great paradoxes and ironies that she's become a completely Orthodox Jew. She's married to a Jewish psychologist, a religious psychologist, and they recently moved from Toronto to Israel. They live in a frum neighbourhood, and she has two children. She gets a lot of sustenance and a lot of meaning and structure from her faith.

My stepfather never really had any true friends. The role models that he chose to emulate were the wrong role models for him. He had grown up in this sort of tough pub-drinking, crime-reporting subculture of the Johannesburg journalist community, and he was far too sensitive for that. You know, he would go out and cover a raid in the townships, and the police would take these guys into the cells, and he'd witness them being beaten. Then he'd come home and he'd start crying. He couldn't deal with the reality . . .

He was trying to be this hard, cynical individual, and the other side was bursting through.

Correct. And the tremendous gifts that he gave me were all indirect and they were all unwitting. He'd talk to me like a complete equal, and confide in me his deepest anxieties and fears.

I found that overwhelming, but at the same time I felt a little proud that I had been selected to be his confidant. I was eight or nine, and I didn't realise it then, but I could only be his confidant because there was nobody else he could confide in. I was safe because I was a child.

He introduced me to the townships when I was eight. On Sundays, in Alexandra township, he taught the bugle band. He had been a drummer in a bugle band, so he taught them military drums. They used the church for these Sunday teaching lessons. My father was also very involved in aiding and assisting black individuals who he felt were talented. He gave Credo Mutwa his first typewriter. He was constantly trying to explore the mystical and magical cultural landscape of the townships, of the rural areas, and he imparted that to me in a very indirect but clear way. So I grew up knowing that there was another Africa, another people, another culture out there, people who were living another life, and who were giving that life another meaning. I was really impressed by that.

That appears unique in your story — the way you interpreted your first contact with blacks and township life not as a lesser life, but as a richer, greater life.

And a secret life, and a life which held a message and a code which I wanted to decipher, and it peaked for me when I first discovered Zulu dancing.

When I was fourteen I met Charlie Mzila. He was a Zulu guitarist. He lived around the corner. He was twenty-four, a completely traditional person, a tribalist, couldn't speak English. I was on an errand one night — I went to the café to buy milk or bread or something, and I saw this guy playing his guitar outside. I was into the Celtic folk music, because it was the only kind of link I had with my biological father. The Cleggs were Scottish in origin. At the battle of Culloden they switched sides and joined the British, and they settled in the British midlands. So I loved pipe music and the whole Celtic thing, because it was the only vestige of cultural connection to England that I could engage in sensuously. When I heard this guy play the guitar, I heard echoes of a Celtic 6/8 rhythm. I went up and watched him play. I was quite shy. I could see that the guitar was tuned completely differently, and that there was a unique picking style. I'd never seen or heard anything like this before. It was really just sheer curiosity, and I went up to him and said, 'Can you show me?' I pointed my hands, and he got the idea. He burst out laughing and said, 'Sure.' He pointed across the road to a block of flats, and he said, 'I'll see you there tomorrow.' After school, I went there, I took my guitar, and that's how I started. I used to go there for lessons.

The caretaker of the building was a very aggressive young English guy, who used to go off to work. I knew I must get out the building by about 4.45 because the caretaker would return and come straight up to see if I was there. One Saturday, I was in Charlie's quarters — the servants' quarters on the top of the building. I was playing there with him, and the caretaker came in drunk. He was going to call the police, and a fight ensued and Charlie beat him up. And Charlie said to me, 'Don't go, you stay here.'

I felt very awkward, because I didn't want anyone to get into trouble over me, but at the same time, I felt great that somebody was fighting for me. At this time, my father had emigrated with my sister, and here was a guy who was like a very strong powerful warrior, courageous, a male image for me.

Sure my mother had fought for me, and my stepfather had on occasion sort of stood up for my rights, but this is somebody from another culture, and he had no vested interest in it, so for me it was like a very pure . . .

. . . bigness of heart.

Ja, and I was really seduced by that. I felt I owed him one in a way. So they had this fight and I was never ever hassled again. And Charlie introduced me to the migrant labour cultural community here. I discovered Wemmer hostel, I discovered the other hostels, I discovered the shebeens in

Hillbrow. I discovered the rooftop musical community on the weekends when guitarists, fiddlers, violinists would congregate and drink and play, and try and out-perform each other. I discovered the gambling communities and the marginal street life. It was all thrown open to me, and I felt extremely privileged. I used to wander around the streets with my guitar and with Charlie. This was 1967. Then in Killarney I was arrested by the police, and charged with trespassing. The caretakers there didn't want me to go up to the buildings. They thought this was very abnormal. Here's this white fourteen-year-old boy with a guitar going upstairs and being with the servants while they were drinking, and they didn't know what was going on. And there was this constant sort of innuendo put across to me by the police when I was arrested, and by the caretakers, that there's something else that I'm after . . . am I being abused, or . . . they could never have accepted it for what it was. I realised that these people couldn't see the reality. There was a reality there that they could not actually perceive. I was arrested again at Wemmer hostel, three or four times. I became very aware of having to enter and exit black areas with care and caution. And I became very good at it.

When they arrested you, what was the formal charge?

Group Areas contravention in the hostels and the municipal compounds. And trespassing on private property was the other. But it was the only way I could get to play with other musicians, black street musicians. I remember the first time I was arrested at Wemmer hostel. I was fifteen. I was dancing with Richard Zwane's Shameni team, and it was a new style. I had danced with Charlie's Bhaca Emabomvini team, learnt Bhaca for two years, already been arrested at Charlie's compound, and now I was going to Wemmer hostel. I was in the hostel when the police arrived and took me away. The team just said the whites have come to take their boy, we won't see him again. They didn't fight for me. The police took me to my mum and said, 'Listen, we've caught your boy inside Wemmer hostel, it's extremely dangerous, two or three bodies come out there every weekend from intertribal warfare, and it's a place of illicit gambling, stolen goods, prostitution. We go in there armed. It's no place for a young white boy. In the first place, it's dangerous and in the second place it's illegal. And, you know, as he gets older, we're going to arrest him and put him in jail. So you just keep him out the way.'

My mother and I used to have these huge arguments about me going into these areas, and I must say that in the end she understood one thing, which I played on, she understood the love of music. She loved jazz. She wanted to be Ella Fitzgerald. If she could, that's who she wanted to be. I wanted to be a Zulu street guitarist and she could understand that, and she could understand the frustration of wanting to be that in a country where it was basically against

the law. So she just said, 'Look after yourself. I'm not going to come bail you out any more. You carry money in your pocket, you pay your fine.'

I went back to the hostel the next weekend... So, they said, you came back. Oh that's very good. And about a month later, the police raided the hostel again, I was caught again, but this time the dancers put up a fight. They defended me, and they said no, he's a dancer. He's our boy, and he's a good boy. He's not a crook, he's not a criminal, he's been dancing here for four hours, we can vouch for him. The police still took me out, but it was a rite of passage for me, and I had basically passed, the dancers let me in because I went back. And I kept on going back, and I was arrested again and again. Eventually my headmaster found out about this, Dr Davies. He called me in, and said it had come to his notice that the Hillbrow police had arrested me at Lady Dudley Hospital compound and they'd informed him that I was constantly trespassing there and hanging out with the black workers in the compound, you know, playing guitar. That time was actually quite a nasty arrest for me. As a youngster I used to go to the Lady Dudley on a bicycle, and when the police arrested me they thought that I was going to run away, so they tied up my bicycle, and I was really made to feel like a criminal. I was held in the charge office. At other times, some of the police were actually curious. You know, they'd arrest me, they'd kind of intimate that they'd saved me from a very dark fate. They were young guys, and they would sit there, puzzled, as I said no, I'm having a great time, and I'd explain to them how I really enjoyed dancing and learning to stick fight.

It's quite symbolic, this enthusiastic teenager surrounded by all this fear and suspicion.

Anyway, what happened was I would arrive at the hostel. And they had what they called Blackjacks, who were municipal police guards at the gate, and these guards would make sure that no white people came in, and that no women came in because it was a black male hostel only. The dance team would come out, singing, and I would be hanging around outside the hostel. Then I would infiltrate, I would sneak into the middle of the singing group, and then they would go back into the hostel, with me in the middle, and go into one of the rooms where we would dance for four or five hours, and then they would escort me out again. And most of the time, the guards never knew I was there. Eventually there was a deal struck between Zwane, the dance leader, and Malevu, who was the senior compound manager.

I was allowed to go in and out, but when the police arrived they would say I had been snuck in by the dance team. So after about six or eight months, I was a regular at Wemmer hostel... There were also guitar competitions between different itinerant musicians, and I became fluent in Zulu street music, and I became an excellent dancer. I was a very keen student.

Did you think there was something special about your doing this?

Well, let me go back to the moment when Charlie had taken me to see the dance team, in 1967. That was the first time I saw the dance. It was at the Lady Dudley Hospital compound. There was a single electric light, and there was a concrete sports yard, very big, surrounded by buildings. You had to come in through a side entrance. The first thing I heard . . . I heard the dance before I saw it . . . I heard an incredible humming sound . . . and I saw these sixty or eighty men performing this dance, and I had an overwhelming sense that I was the only young white person who at this moment was being exposed to this.

I had a sense that the universe was winking at me saying, there's a very big secret here, and it can be yours if you want it. As I watched, I saw these people so given to what they were doing, so committed and so enjoying it. And these body positions and movements were so different from my culture. For the first time in my life, this strong awareness came to me, that these people did not need my culture. They did not need me, they did not need what I stood for. They did not need my motor cars, they didn't need my rockets to the moon. They were completely self-sufficient in their own cultural identity. It was an overwhelming realisation, and I was jealous. And, at the same time, there was another level there, in that they were so intensely celebrating their maleness. I responded to that, because I was a young adolescent male with lots of conflicts. My stepfather had run off. As a husband he was totally a failure. My own father never communicated with me, and here were these men celebrating their maleness in a way which was just so complete.

The other thing was that their bodies were coded and they performed these movements in series and patterns which clearly had a meaning, and yet I was unable to decode them. All of those levels moved me, and I said to myself, 'Even more than the guitar, I want to be a dancer. I want to understand the dance, because in the dance there's a key to understanding my masculinity and understanding an identity for myself in Africa.'

There was a wonderful irony that they were doing this in the middle of an advanced medical research compound. They were performing these movements oblivious of the environment, and basically saying this is who we are, we couldn't care a shit. I found it to be a form of resistance to a world in which they clearly felt they did not really have a stake, and I realised that I didn't have a stake in that world either. All of these feelings kind of zipped through me . . .

Consciously?

It became conscious later. The first level was definitely conscious, that they didn't need me. They were self-sufficient, self-contained, a hundred per cent at home in doing what they were, and really enjoying it. I'd never seen that

before. Because most of Western culture was very conscious of itself, very aware of itself, and it was very affected. These guys were just naturally doing this and being what they were. I wanted to be like that, and I felt that for the first time, the possibility of wholeness was at hand.

When I see a *giya*, when I see a war dance, when I see a praise poem being executed by a good poet, I'm very moved. Certain values which we learned when we began to stick fight, when I was fifteen onwards, were very important to me in my ability to be successful in my life. They were there when my Western and Jewish/English values were not able to get me up off the ground, or give me enough resistance and determination.

I found that my Western values undermined my ability at times to take a stand on issues, because they tended to be very intellectual, and the moment I got into a debate there would be five or six alternatives which would suddenly pop up, and would start to complicate everything. By contrast, the Zulu warrior value system is really the power of one idea. It's saying, what exactly is the way forward? Identify the one idea, identify the one way forward. It might be the long way round, and there might have been a shorter way, but once you've committed, and once you've given yourself over to that concept, or that aim or goal, you must then be prepared to give it all you've got.

Is that Rorke's Drift? People coming in waves, and . . .

Ja, it's Rorke's Drift. It's the ability to say, whatever the consequence, my point is to get to that point over there. In the war dancing, if you really are a good dancer, you have to develop the ability to summon energy and stamina and inventive artistic thinking at critical moments, especially if you're doing individual competitive dancing.

You might have twenty rounds. Each round is about thirty seconds long, like a boxing match. You kick your leg high into the air, and you stamp the ground. By stamping the ground, you do two things: you emphasise a rhythmic pattern, and you also symbolically deliver a blow to an enemy . . .

For me, the dancing was a very important skill. When you have to stand up in front of other aggressive young men and perform aggressive and provocative movements which are making a claim about yourself, it's very difficult. And that was something it took me years to overcome, and finally I did after I became confident in stick fighting. At some point, you have to be able to back up your claim. Sometimes after dance competitions stick fights would break out. Other people would say, you make astonishing claims with your body and with your movements, and you look like you're an excellent dancer, but can you back it up? There are many movements, coded movements, which, even before I dance, I allow people to see. I will *Qosha*[6]

6 To *Qosha* is to project a very haughty and exaggerated and almost humorous version of oneself, to 'strut one's stuff'.

the way I leave the group, just to enter into the competitive arena. It's a very creative act. I might pretend that I'm rushing toward an invisible enemy, and when I get there he might be too big for me, so I'll withdraw and the crowds laugh.

They can't see who the guy is, but they can see what I'm trying to say, and then I'll go forward again, and with a little movement indicate that I managed to overcome it. This is just before I dance, and this ability to give meaning, and to create your story, is for me the most powerful gift that I received from the Zulu culture.

What I want to emphasise here is that every person has a story.[7] I don't know your story, but if you were a Zulu, I would go to your age mate, and I would say, what are his praise names, and the guy would smile and say, his praise names are the following, and in saying your praise names, I will get a very good indication of your life story. And your praise poem would be very concise, at times very humorous, at times very deep in the sense of opaque and dark images and metaphors which seem to make sense, but when you try and undo them, they don't make sense, they're just powerful images that have been coupled together.

From that you will get a sense of the person, and the claim the person makes. What I've got from this is that to be a warrior, a true warrior, you have to tell your own story. You are always part of someone else's story, because you are a son, you are a father, you're a husband, you're a worker, you're a worshipper, you play many roles in life. But you have to have a hold on the core of what you are, and you have to be more than just a passive support of someone else's story. You have to act with your own voice, and to have a poem about your own life. All the great Zulu kings, they are said, their story is recounted and retold, and so they live on through their praise poets.

Everybody has a name. I have a dance name, I have a warrior's name, and a bunch of other affectionate names in Zulu . . .

If you are adept at unfolding your life as a story, it will also be recounted in the wider society, because your age mates will recount to remember you, and they will celebrate you. When I was first exposed to that, and when people shouted out my name, and they shouted out, in the context of the values of the young *amabhungu*, or young emerging warrior, it was deeply moving, and I was open to it. Because these are the things that were hinted at when I first saw the dance. These are the things which made me feel . . .

. . . a possibility of wholeness . . .

Yes, a possibility of completing myself.

You know, one grew up in South Africa with this image of the Zulu as sort

7 See the Barney Simon interview (p 124): 'God made human beings in order to listen to their stories.'

of tough hardened warriors and one didn't expect any form of sensitivity or any form of cultivation or any form of complexity. That image does not reflect the reality at all. For example, if there'd been a conflict between two dance members before a dance which had developed into a fight, the dance leader would call together the elders in the team, and they would start to unpack these events and go through them, level by level by level. You know, something was said, and the weight of what was said was heavy. And then they talk about the heaviness of the weight of what was said, and why it's heavy, because in another context it wouldn't necessarily be heavy. But because of this context it was a heavy thing that was said, and there's silence and we understand, and we try to suck in that heaviness, to understand what motivated that person to hit the other person. There is a highly evolved sophistication in the acknowledgement of the human feeling and sentiment.

The courage to find your own story . . . that's in a way what you've done in terms of South African music. South Africans are always struggling to find their own voice, our singers and actors and broadcasters always have to battle with the 'anxiety of influence' . . . American voices, British voices, are so omnipresent, that when South Africans look into the mirror of popular culture it's always someone else's reflection they see. But your tones are Athlone Boys' High, unmistakably South African. Do you think you had the courage to be what you are because of what you learned from the dancing?

Yes. The dance was a confidence-building thing because it wasn't simply dancing, it was making a statement and a claim every time you got up, and that's exhausting. You're in a community of males, who are all celebrating this ability to make these statements and claims. At times they will challenge each other's claims, but it's essentially a positive context. People shout your praise name, and they encourage you to tell your story. Even when you're tired and you're flagging, and you are like fifteen rounds down, and your opponent is getting the better, they'll shout, and they'll encourage you, and you suddenly become intensely serious, and intensely focused, and intensely moved to finish the duel, to finish the battle.

So, that was my training period, or training ground. I never really knew what it had done for me until I thought about it much later, when I had to deal with many contradictions in South Africa and overseas, especially during the early eighties, when Juluka was received in a very ambivalent way. I had to deal with the cultural boycott and also all kinds of local problems. When we played in a township, like Duduza, the police would allow the show to go on, and fifteen minutes or half an hour into the show, they'd stop it. That meant that the audience had paid money which the promoter — the moment the police came — would abscond with. The audience would then say, well, we love Juluka, but every time we go to see them, we pay and we see fifteen

minutes, and then the show's closed down, so we're not going to go to the next show. On top of that, the police would harass the black members of the band, and we would try and intervene but they would go by the law, they would say where's your pass, have you got the right to be here?

They would go through this incredible harassment of the black members, which would embarrass the white members, and it created tensions inside the band. I'd have to spend a lot of energy, of time, bridging that. Sipho was very good at this as well. Both of us became quite accomplished at keeping the band intact. And the more we were hassled, the stronger we eventually became, but there were moments of extreme crisis along the way.

You were talking about coming back from overseas, and some of the people you'd known in the Zulu migrant community were now involved in destabilising townships or causing havoc on the trains, and you mentioned Jeppe hostel . . .

At Jeppe hostel there were certain unemployed gangs who saw the Inkatha situation as an opportunity to consolidate their position inside the hostel, to have access via the police to firearms, and to basically establish themselves as mini-warlords. I have a taped interview with a young man of nineteen, who I interviewed after the Sebokeng massacre, and he described how they were sitting in the hostel, and Inkatha war captains came in and said, 'The buses are outside, everyone on to the bus.' He and others asked 'Where are we going?' and they said 'We are going to a rally in Sebokeng.' So they said 'But that's the ANC area, and we have no weapons', and they were told there were weapons on the bus. Some people began to argue, and then the war captain said, 'Look, all we are going to say to you is those who don't get on the bus, don't ever come back to the hostel, and those people who we find when we come back from Sebokeng, who didn't participate in this, we are going to give them a severe beating.' So, he got on the bus. His particular bus got lost, and was isolated, and the Sebokeng youths began to stone it. And he said they were terrified, and they jumped off the bus with their sticks and the various hand-made weapons which they found on the bus, which included iron bars, hand axes, pangas, *ntshumentshus*,[8] and an assortment of clubs. They started to attack and a huge thing ensued.

In the interview, he just said, 'I have a room in the hostel. It's taken me a long time to get the room in the hostel, and if I am to keep my room and to keep my place there, I'm just going to have to go along with this.'

It was really like an economic consideration for him, a life style consideration. He had no understanding of the actual politics, even after the

8 A *ntshumentshu* is a sharp metal instrument, eg a bicycle spoke or sharpened length of concrete reinforcing rod. The weapon is often hidden in a piece of steel piping and withdrawn when needed.

fighting and the conflagration. He really didn't articulate a clear sense of what was going on. So, I think that there was a lot of that, a lot of confusion, a lot of press-ganging.

When I spoke to individuals about the ANC/Inkatha conflict, my sense was that they had no real political passion. They were seeing it from a much broader perspective. The ANC was perceived as a threat to the traditional way of life, and a threat to the ways of their fathers. A lot of the time it was incoherent and very emotional, but there were some cogent arguments from their perspective. As you and I know, and as they would tell me, 'We are at the bottom of the pile. We have always been in tension with the urban black working class because in times of the apartheid, we were always migrants, we never had section 10b rights.[9] And, for this reason, we would accept jobs that they wouldn't accept, or we would take jobs that they would accept, but for less money.' So there was this structural tension between the urban black working class and the rural black migrant working class. I heard things like, 'This is the war between *isikhaya* and *nesithanishiphi*, between the tradition of the rural homestead, the rural way of life, and the modern urban township way of life.' Essentially, in a more articulate explanation, it seemed to be a conflict between traditionalism and modernism. Migrant workers, you know, have always been looked down upon as country bumpkins, uneducated, many of them not Christian (Christian being a generic term for Westernised) and following traditional religious customs.

The migrants were, in their heads, fighting for a traditional way of life. They were fighting for a traditional world view which celebrated the worship of ancestors, non-Christian, uneducated, rural, tribal . . . a mindset which held various superstitions and magical perceptions about the world. And the ANC was seen to be this organisation which was going to destroy the traditional, political and cultural structures and impose a kind of white man's modern Christian and anti-traditional political system.

Did you get married with a Jewish wedding or a Zulu ceremony?

A mixture. Essentially, we had a problem, because I wanted to incorporate my migrant community as part of my wedding. And what we did was, Jenny was dressed in a Shangaan traditional dress, barefoot, and the wedding march was a traditional Sotho song — it wasn't a Zulu song — a Sotho song, which she liked. She came down the aisle, and then we went to the ceremony — the rabbi announced certain things in Zulu.

9 Section 10 of the Blacks (Urban Areas) Consolidation Act, No 25 of 1945, restricted the right of blacks to remain in certain areas in the following terms: (1) No black shall remain for more than seventy-two hours in a prescribed area unless . . . (a) he has, since birth, resided continuously in such area or (b) he has worked continuously in any such area for a period of not less than ten years.

Which rabbi was that?

Gavin Michal. Sipho was a pole-holder. There were two Zulu pole-holders. And after I broke the glass, Jenny was given a traditional beer pot and a traditional hand broom to show that she had come to build a home, those are the two important gifts.

I was given a shield and a stick, and I had to perform a *giya* which I did, and we then moved off directly from there into a huge war dance celebration. There were certain older members of the Jewish community who were very upset with this, although they didn't make too much of a fuss. My mother-in-law and my mom picked it up from some of the old aunties down the line, saying, 'Ah, it wasn't really a Jewish wedding. What's going on here?' Later on, I had a Zulu wedding. The Jewish wedding was for the parents really. For my mom, and I think maybe for Jenny's parents. I think there was pressure on us to formalise our relationship in some way from the community.

Not your migrant community? The Jewish community?

The Jewish community. From the family. And we thought OK, if we're going to do it, let's do it in a way which truly reflects what we feel, and truly incorporates all facets of our life. Anyway, the initial marriage ceremony isn't necessarily the main one. You know a woman is called *makhoti*, which means a young wife, before she has given birth. Once she has given birth to a son, a daughter, she has performed 80 per cent of the conditions of the marriage... then she's a lady, an *inkosikazi*, and sometimes the marriage ceremony is only held after the birth. There's a small ceremony before, but the real big one is often held after the delivery of the first child. The delay can also often be because the father doesn't have enough money at that time to have a proper ceremony. So there's a technical small celebration, and there's a big one later. And that's what I did. So when Jesse was born, I celebrated the birth of my son.

Your own brit milah [circumcision] was done while your mother was with your father in Manchester. I wonder why it was important to her to have it done? She's in Manchester trying to distance herself from what she perceived as her mother's ghetto Jewishness, and yet she thrust it upon you in the most indelible way.

Well, the crisis that I had with my first son's bris was similar, because when Jesse was born, we had this incredible argument about it, and I was actually saying I think he should be able to make the decision later on in life when he's conscious, and the argument was that if you're born from a Jewish womb it's it, tough luck.

Whose point of view was that?

Most of the people around me, I think even my mother. My wife was ambivalent. At times she'd say, yes, he must have a bris, and at times she'd say, maybe we should allow him to make the decision himself. And we have a friend who's very Jewish, but who came from communist parents here, and he put himself into a hospital when he was fourteen and had a bris, because he decided at that time that that's what he wanted. And I used that as an example. I said, here's a guy who went and made a conscious decision, and I'm sure that that decision was a very powerful one and shaped his Jewish identity very much. His parents were communists, they eschewed the Jewish faith, and they eschewed religion, and the son grew up and decided otherwise.

Anyway, a lot of my Jewish friends also put pressure to say look, you know, this has got nothing to do with you and your son, this has to do with a covenant between your son and God. It's not even between your son and the Jews. It's between your son and God. And this is the covenant that was made thousands of years ago, and it should be observed. However, if you don't want to, that's also all right, but it should be observed. What decided the issue was that, in the argument, they said to me, what has your bris done for you? Has it limited you in any way? It gives you the right to claim a position within the Jewish faith or as a Jew, but at the same time you don't follow the Jewish way of life.

To choose a way of life is different from choosing a bris. And if your son wants to be a Jew, he can be a Jew. If he doesn't want to be a Jew, then let him not be a Jew. It's up to him. Anyway, I gave in to the pressure and these black hats walked into my home and claimed my son, and I had this incredible sense of frustration and compromise — a sense of deep compromise inside myself over this issue. Jenny's grandfather held him, I had to read the Hebrew. I can't read Hebrew, but I had to read the phonetically spelt Hebrew, and as I started reading it, I started crying. Everyone thinks it was because of the event, but it was because these people, who I had kept away all my life, had come right into my home and taken my son and, within a few minutes, claimed him.

A kind of incredible entitlement.

Yes, absolutely. As if this child belonged to them. And I had no say in it.

Is there nothing in the Zulu tradition?

Oh yes, there is a circumcision ceremony that used to take place. Shaka stopped it, but it continued in a distorted form. It happens, I think, after your first nocturnal emission, and the boys did it to each other. It wasn't really a circumcision in the sense of taking off the foreskin. The foreskin remained — it was a rupturing of the fibres under the head of the penis that

kept the penis head down. This has the effect of raising up the angle of the penis head when it is erect. It was done with a thorn through the fleshy part, and the hair of the tail of a fierce bull would be pushed through and tied, so that the blood circulation would stop and then the connecting tissue would just automatically fall apart.

After that experience at the bris of your first son, where your individual concerns were completely ignored, what happened with your second child? Was it traumatic going through it again?

Yes, it was traumatic, but the precedent had been set. But on this occasion I invited a huge team of fifty Zulu dancers from Makhabatini to witness the event. They danced here. In fact, all of this is from them [points to uneven brick paving on his patio]. And we invited a bunch of different people and it was a very nice event. There was a bit of a fight, because you know the Orthodox are trying now to enforce kashrut — you know, not enough people are keeping kosher. I don't know whether there's been a reduction in the sales of kosher food at delicatessens, but there seems to be some economic imperative which has caused them to put out a thing saying that every ceremony has to be kosher. If you want to bris your son, it must be kosher... I don't run a kosher home so I resisted that. I said, the rabbi will have a kosher section for himself, separate, and that's as far as I'm prepared to go. I just felt that this was like an imposition.

In terms of the actual bris: is it difficult inflicting what I imagine is a fairly painful mutilation on your child?

Oh, it's a mutilation. I think every father who sees his son go through this experiences extreme stress and emotional trauma. In a funny kind of way, maybe it's like re-imprinting on your consciousness as a male Jew that claim that the culture's making over you and your son.

I mean, does God want our foreskins?

Precisely. Does he want our clitori? Does he want scarification on our foreheads? Clearly, these are all devices to generate social solidarity and a cohesive identity and a sense of a mutually coherent cosmos and universe — and they work. As an anthropologist, having studied religion, I understand that all societies have developed these techniques.

They're all part of the various rites of passage, which unfortunately in the modern secular world no longer exist. For me, rites of passage are really important, because they delineate and they make coherent life passages. It's wonderful when you see how in traditional society everything is made coherent through the demarcation and delineation of the beginning and the

ending of a particular stage. It could be the changing sexuality, it can be a marriage, it can be birth or death, it can be harvesting. Even entering or exiting a house is a rite of passage. From out to in, which is from light to dark.

Do you have mezuzot *on your doors?*

When my sister came here, she wanted to put one on, and I said no, and then she wanted one inside by her room. So, it's not inside the house.

Is there a Zulu equivalent of a mezuza? *Something which reminds you of who you are, or identifies or perhaps protects your dwelling?*

No. The only Zulu symbol I have is the wedding box — *ibhokisi* — in my room. It's a symbol of commitment, having come to make a home. You know, the trappings are important.

You've emphasised — both in this interview and in others — how central the quest for an individual meaning is. Yet we all imbibe the unspoken beliefs and fears of our parents and their community. We get embroiled in a corporateness which often seems to be at odds with our personal story . . . how do you get past that corporate identity when it's so deeply embedded?

I'm not trying to get past it. I'm just trying to take from it what is meaningful to construct my own world. That's what I've done all my life. You know, I haven't sought to become a member of a particular culture, or to refine it, or improve it, or destroy it in any way. Every culture has got some incredible contribution, or some incredible insight about human nature, or the world, or the cosmos.

All parents shout at their children, it doesn't matter what culture you come from. But the way in which a Jewish parent does it is different to the way Zulu parents do it. Where there's been a deliberate transgression of a certain rule, a Jewish parent intervenes and shouts, but in the shouting there's a kind of explanation, it's not simply a block, a wall. It's not an authoritarian 'You don't do that because I'm your father'. I've noticed that there's always an explanation at the same time: 'If you do that, this could happen or that could happen. I'm really cross because you could have got hurt . . .' There's a communicatory element in there, which leaves it open. It's an open-ended thing. And that's a manifestation of Jewish culture.

The other day I went to a party up the road, and I met some very frum young Jewish guys, who were also interested in what my experience of Judaism is. And I had this argument about Jewish culture as opposed to Jewish religion. I was saying that secular Jews, because of the diaspora and the ghettos, and the dynamic interaction between an insider/outsider world view, have developed certain traditions which are just survival techniques.

Displacement develops certain cultural survival techniques, whatever they are. The ANC people, or whoever, who've been in exile — you actually have a much more sophisticated and sensitive perception of your culture, your life afterwards. Because of the length and extent of the exile of the Jewish population, a culture, as opposed to the orthodox religion [has developed]. It's got nothing to do with whether you believe in God or not. And these frum guys couldn't accept it, this was like a heresy.

Most of the people in this book had overtly political trajectories, they contextualised themselves as part of a collective political struggle. Your story doesn't really unfold like that.

I was just interested in developing an African identity. I was trying to find a place for myself. My exploration of the Zulu culture and my entry into South African black experience was not a political decision. It had political ramifications.

It was a very selfish decision in a way, because it was based on my personal needs and requirements and journeys, and when I did come up against political problems, I dealt with them in a way which was at times naive, but when I look back I think it was actually the best possible way. As a youngster of fourteen there's at least two ways of dealing with a fence. You go up to a fence and you want to get to the other side. You can say, oh there's a fence, how do I get through the fence. Holes, find a tree near the fence, jump over the fence, and get to the other side, and forget about the fence, because I'm past the fence. A more sophisticated approach is, ah there's a fence, why is there a fence? Why should there be a fence? Why should I be prevented from going to the other side? Who put the fence here?

. . . I was of the first variety. I wanted to be in Wemmer hostel, I wanted to be with black musicians from the servants' quarters, from the workers' compounds, and there was a fence. That's the way things were, and all I did as a youngster was to find a hole to get through, and once I was through I forgot about it. I didn't have any political awareness whatsoever. You know, I would feel terrible when I saw my friends being abused or harassed by police, because of my presence in their area. One of my praise names is *Bakuzonda abelungu, bakuzonda eKilarney, bakuzonda okhethika.* 'The whites hate you, they hate you in Killarney, the people in the flatland hate you. And particularly the caretakers hate you.'

It was a terrible thing for me, because I would go into these buildings, on to the roofs, we'd play, the police would arrive, called by the caretaker, and then I would be taken down, and these guys would land up having their stuff searched, and just being harassed, and that used to really freak me out . . . Later on when I got to university, there was almost the first emerging awareness of the broader political implications. And I didn't know entirely why, but I realised that there was a very strong, positive feeling towards me from my

peers, because my engagement was a natural engagement. I spoke the language because I enjoyed it. I liked Zulu guitar, I enjoyed dancing. I didn't do that for any other reason, except for what it offered me, and the people who I did it with recognised that, and so it was real.

At university I joined the Wages Commission, which was a Nusas initiative. I also translated the workers' magazine into Zulu for the Industrial Aid Society, which was one of the forerunners of the current unions. I had to translate things like, 'the contradictions in the capitalist system will soon reach a state which is going to cause a huge confrontation between labour and capitalists . . .'

At this time we were pamphleting the Newtown abattoirs. They were all migrant workers, and I would give them this pamphlet, and they would say things to me like, 'What are you schoolkids trying to do here?' They had no respect for white university intellectuals. So, at a very early point there was a hiatus between rural and urban consciousness, and the urban, specially the intellectual university paradigm was, at moments, untranslatable and inaccessible, and was really irrelevant. And I found myself not entirely fitting in with the broad left in the student movement. I was called a 'crypto-tribalist' because I said the workers wouldn't 'get it'.

I was arrested by the security branch in Pietersburg, in Seshego township, for the work we did for the Wages Commission. We were looking at the base wages that were being given by international companies, particularly British companies, and we prepared a report, released in the British parliament, which was a damning conviction of British investment in this country. They were paying below poverty line wages. I was taken in, questioned, charged, and then released.

Three weeks later we had to travel by train and go to the Seshego magistrate's court and appear. To make things easy we pleaded guilty and paid the fine. We were given a warning and they confiscated all our stuff.

Did you ever have a strong critique of the left, in terms of its sometimes hysterical adherence to its own dogmas?

I had a critique, and I shared it with people who I felt would listen to me, but there was such an overwhelming momentum . . . and the left had such a moral authority, that even if their arguments were incorrect, the moral and ethical weight of where they were coming from was very intimidating. I was politically active in the trade union movement between 1971 and about 1974. And then an incident occurred which made me realise that I was not cut out for this kind of work. I was working with the Industrial Aid Society, and we had discovered that there were some workers working for Carlton cardboard boxes, manufacturers, and that these guys had been hired illegally, and they were being paid really bad wages, and there had been certain fraudulent practices by management against them. I was sent out

there to gather all the information I could. The workers were mainly from the rural areas. Their leader was a Zulu preacher, a kind of lay preacher, who was quite educated and fluent, and they rallied around him. He gave me the lie of the land, told me what was going on, and asked was there any way that we could help him. I went back, reported, and was instructed that they should strike.

I went back and said, 'Well, umm, the idea is that first you should ask for a raise and if they don't agree then you must say, well, then we will have to down tools. You must do this in a very polite way. Don't be confrontational, but be firm.' So they did it. And the management just said, off you go, we'll fire you now, and you won't get any wages at all. So I got this phone call — they'd been out on the strike two or three days, and the preacher said we've done this on your recommendation, and now we've been fired.

The people at the Industrial Aid Society were intellectuals, but we were still struggling with the dynamics of the real process, of negotiation, and the kind of bag of tricks that management had up their sleeves. You know, we were students. And I really felt terrible.

Shock of messing with people's lives . . .

Yes, absolutely. Ja, that really affected me, and I went back to the IAS and said look, is there any way we could offer the strikers some kind of stipend, and they said no, we haven't got funds and the only thing we offer is legal aid, and if someone dies, we give the free burial, and a few other minor welfare services that you could claim after being a member for three years.

Anyway, I went back to these fired workers and said, 'Look, you know, the most important thing is for you guys to get your jobs back. I can see that you're not going to be able to speak to these people.' So their leader went back and tried, and management said no, we don't want you. You're untrustworthy, and communists, etc etc.

Then I went to see the manager, and I said look, you know, I'm just a silly Witsie, and I got involved way over my head, and I've caused a lot of problems and I'm really sorry. Hell, and the guy, he knew he had me, and he said sit down and have a cup of tea. What's your name and where do you come from? He said, 'Why on earth should I re-employ these people if any little Witsie can come in and get them to strike? I've got a company to run. So I apologised and eventually they called the old preacher in and they worked out a deal, and it got them their jobs back, but the money that had been deducted and all the other illegal things that were going on just continued.

After that particular experience I thought, I'm a musician. I'd rather be involved in concerts, that's where my forte is, that's what I really understand. Maybe I'm not tough enough or I don't really have the feeling for it . . . and I turned my energy back to music.

You were already putting in place things that might come after, post-reconciliation . . .

We were living in the future. I mean, Juluka was long, long before its time. One of the reasons why it received such a mixed welcome from the left was that it was untimely. South Africa was supposed to be a place where black and white couldn't get together, and we were touring overseas as a mixed band, and this was really hard for people to integrate and reconcile.

Not that there haven't always been crossover points. In the fifties and the sixties you had mixed cultural gatherings happening, sometimes legally, sometimes illegally. You just had to be clever and careful to get around the fences.

I got back into politics when I became part of a support group for a friend of mine, a social worker, Terry Sacco, who'd been implicated in activities of the ANC and jailed. We'd send her messages and stuff.

At that point the security police and the whole process of intimidating witnesses and families really got to me. Also, David Webster, who was a mentor in the Department of Anthropology where I had been teaching earlier, would debate with me, and he basically re-recruited me.

I became culturally active in the UDF, and we formed SAMA, the South African Musicians Alliance, in order to have a body with whom we could legally and officially represent musicians and work with the UDF. It wasn't easy — we had to deal with all sorts of controversies like the information affair, peace songs where people like Steve Kekana, Blondie, and many others had given their services to the Department of Information. They were later harassed by the comrades and their houses were burnt down. One of Steve Kekana's guitarists was killed in these incidents. It was really ugly and we had to intervene to try and pull the musicians into a unified position which said that we don't care what you are, but we really don't want you to become associated with the apartheid regime, and you have to take a position on this. We actually managed to get them to do that, and there was a consensus which wasn't so much pro-ANC as anti-Botha.

So I became involved in UDF cultural politics, which involved a lot of internecine warfare between different constituencies, very subterranean and tortuous at times, and weighed down by having to get mandates from here and there.

It was a really tough job to get all these people involved in SAMA and I was funding it at the same time. I would fly down to Cape Town and meet with MAPP [Musical Action for People Power], to Durban to meet with the South African traditional music association, and we tried to pull all these cultural bodies into one group.

In 1986 we put out our album, and our single was banned. It was a song to Nelson Mandela — the first commercial song released and published here using Mandela's name, because there were a lot of songs released which made

oblique reference to Mandela, Chicco put out a song called 'Manelo, we want you Manelo'. His song was played, because of that technicality, but my song was banned, as well as the video. It was a very strong single. It did very well overseas, and my career took off.

Some elements of the cultural boycott were incredibly obtuse. It must have been frustrating to be condemned by people who weren't engaged, risked nothing and wanted a quick and easy halo of moral rectitude by association.

... I've got some letters that I can show you. Oooh. From the Dutch Anti-Apartheid Movement. Anyway, it was all part and parcel of the incredible multilayered and complex paradoxes that South Africa had thrown up. And, you know, there was a massive propaganda war which was being waged at the time, and in propaganda all issues are simplified, made black and white.

I think Sipho particularly became frustrated because when we went overseas, they would say, well, what is the significance of you and Johnny playing together as black and white. And he'd say, nothing, I like him, he's my buddy, we're friends. I don't understand the political significance of it. He was not a political media superstar. He was a cultural superstar.

He could talk about the guitar and all the various instruments and traditions that linked up to make our music. When it came to politics, all of these issues became like a burden, it frustrated him, and I think was one of the contributing factors to Juluka's demise in 1985.

On Nelson Mandela's birthday, in '88 or '89, I was denied permission to perform in England at Wembley Stadium. The Anti-Apartheid Movement said they couldn't support my presence there. So, I just said, well, I'm not going to make an issue out of it any more.

What was their rationale, you can't perform because ...

I don't know, it was around the 'problem' of having a white South African in a multiracial band coming out of South Africa. And I had letters from JODAC, from the Detainees' Parents Support Committee, I had letters from the UDF, there was an intervention by the UDF to actually say this guy is legit. And it had no effect outside South Africa. So, I just left it at that, and then at the second concert, when Mandela was released, I was invited to play and I played.

It's been a very chequered history for me, and my relationship with the hardline left has been obviously one of a yoyo. At moments, I've been really sort of in their bad books, and other times our interests and our beliefs and our values have merged into one, and we've been able to work together and do great things.

Jews have always had a disproportionately large presence in opposition or liberation politics, both here and elsewhere. Are there insights you are getting from Paul Johnson's book as to why that was the case?

There was a statement in the book that a race without a country becomes a global people, and I think that one of the main themes that seems to be emerging is that through the period of the diaspora, the Jews were very much concerned with the law, and also with the concept of justice and injustice because they were always on the receiving end of their host communities wherever they lived, and so I think a very strong sense of what is fair, what is just, what is right, became part and parcel of the Jewish psyche . . .

. . . just for themselves, or what is fair and right for everyone?

Well, what is fair and right, I suppose in terms of their own culture. I think the Talmudic tradition is obsessed by that. If you just look at the kinds of debates and argument, it's all about balance, it's all about finding the balance and a means of effecting a judicious apportionment of [resources]. You know, [first] a critical reflection on something, getting a grasp on it, and then from that a law or a concretisation of that position which could be developed so that it could actually be enacted. That's very important, that the theoretical thing gets enacted in the law, which is then followed, practised. I think that there's a schizophrenia as far as that's concerned. I think in the Orthodox tradition there is a very strong sense of a certain kind of internal justice for Jews only. And then, on the other side, you have the universalist rationalist tradition which is essentially trying to make the world [better], like the coming of the messiah. There's got to be a balanced world. Fixing things, and that fixing is a judicious fixing.

It's called Tikkun Olam, the healing of the world.

I also think that Hitler said something, which I first read in a racist text, it was quoted in the *Spearhead* or something, which is a British National Front publication. I was lecturing on racism, and I got this publication, and Hitler said, and I think this is the way he phrased it: 'While Abe Cohen is in the boardroom promoting a policy of firmness against the workers, his brother Moishe is down amongst the workers fomenting strikes and labour unrest.' He was identifying this incredible aspect of the Jews articulating paradox, articulating contradiction . . . And he was using this kind of perspective to imply that the Jews were basically a social evil, a political, economic, social evil and that their deepest ambition was to undermine and destroy German society.

'You get rid of them, you get rid of ambiguity' sort of thing . . . Sartre says the anti-Semite wants to be a rock, to evade the human possibility of choice by becoming a hatred which never varies . . .

This perception is like a theme that goes all the way back in time, and it basically derives from the fact that the Jews were always part citizens, they were marginal, they were never made full citizens of the society that they were living in.

They were therefore rarely committed to a particular tradition in that community, and if things changed they could actually manage the change and promote it, and I think there was a certain element of that in South Africa as well.

They weren't invested in a dominant social order.

Yes, they weren't stakeholders. And from the point of view of this idea of justice, the conservative Jewish businessman in the boardroom is concerned with a certain perception of justice, of economic justice, [that people must display initiative and create their opportunities]. The trade unionist is also trying to articulate a certain vision of economic justice, and they are both incredibly powerful, because they are both coming from a very, very well articulated tradition to do with justice, and to do with apportionment. The idea of balance and apportionment is fundamental to the Jewish cultural psyche. So I think that when you're looking at the trade union movement here, you're looking at a Jewish tradition that was drawn on and developed. I don't think you can actually say that there's a one-to-one correspondence between the Jewish culture and various emancipatory movements. I do think that the Jewish culture (which also has negative features) has emphasised, elaborated, critically reflected on, and perhaps been a bit obsessed with this problem of justice, and with finding a way not only to theorise, but to make it real through the law, or through trade unions, or through the constitution or whatever.

What values are you passing on to your children, in terms of their identity?

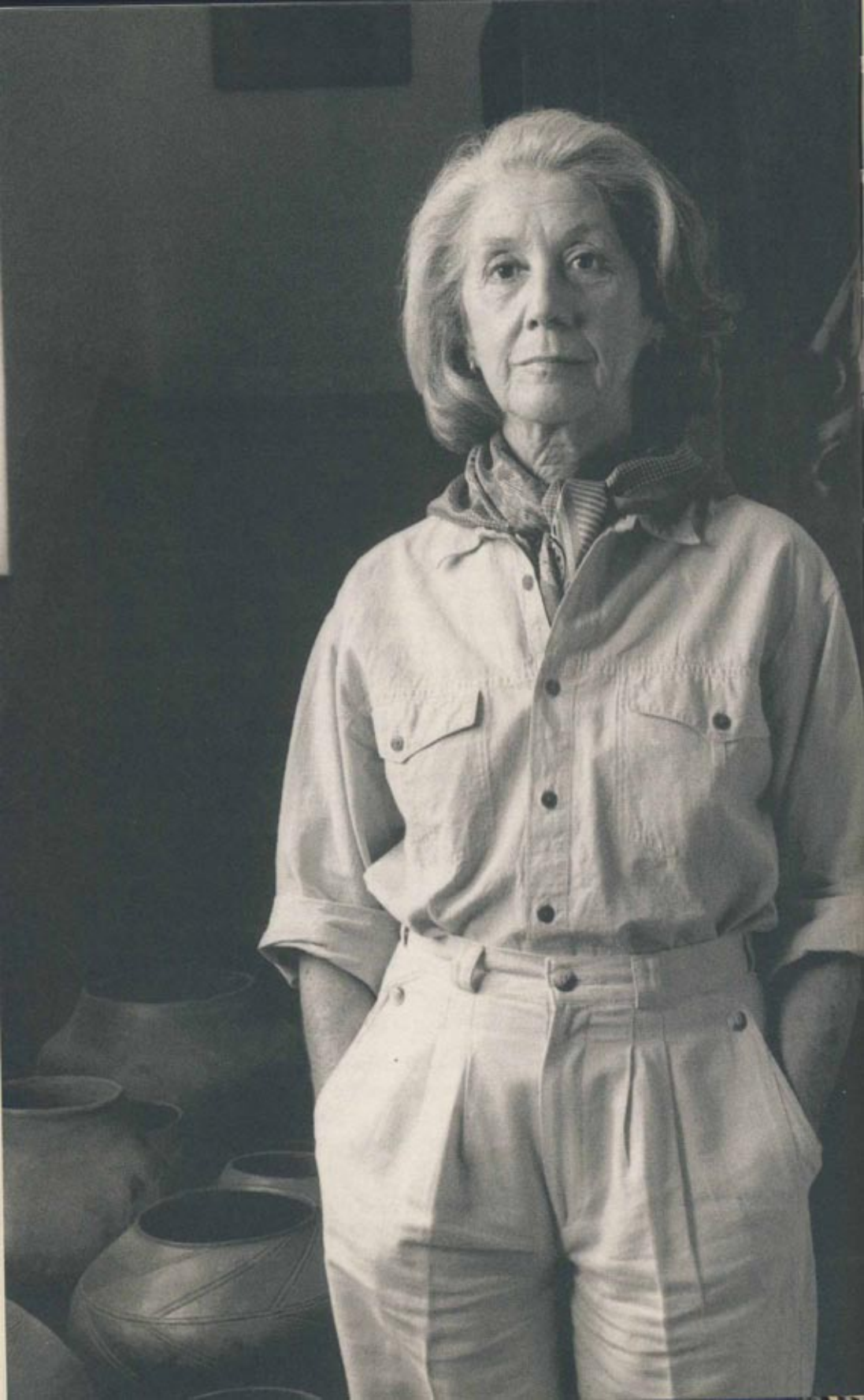
My son knows that he's Jewish. It's a choice I've made. We say a little prayer every Friday night. We bless the wine, we bless the bread, but nothing profound or deep, nothing which inspires a sense of awe or profundity. I just want it to be like the air we breathe.

It is profound because that's what he'll remember. And of the Zulu heritage, what passes on?

What passes on, I think, for him is his best friend is a little coloured boy in his class. They're very close emotionally. He's at Sacred Heart.

Is he exempt from participating in the Catholic stuff?

No, he comes home, and he says why did the Jews kill Jesus, Dad? And we have these wonderful debates. He must deal with it, I dealt with it. I want him to be able to realise that there are different traditions in the world, and that the Jewish experience is part and parcel of many other traditions.



NADINE GORDIMER

'If you ask me what I am, I say I am a South African.'

Nadine Gordimer is – internationally – South Africa's best-known writer. She was born in Springs, Transvaal, on 20 November 1923, and began writing at an early age. Her first story was published in a magazine when she was fifteen. Her prolific output over the next three decades reflects the changing South African scene as seen from a white radical perspective. Her collections of short stories include *Friday's Footprint*, *The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, *Some Monday for Sure*, and *Jump*. Among her many novels are *The Lying Days* (her first), *A World of Strangers*, *The Conservationist* (joint winner of the Booker Prize), and *My Son's Story*. Gordimer is also an important and accomplished essayist, and two anthologies (*The Essential Gesture*, *Writing and Being*) have appeared to date.

Of the many literary awards Gordimer has received, the most prestigious was the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1991. (She donated all the prize money to the Congress of South African Writers, a politicised writers' body loosely aligned with the ANC.)

Because so much of her work centres on the impact of apartheid on the lives of individual South Africans, the demise of apartheid left many speculating that Gordimer would be left without a subject. Her latest novel, *None to Accompany Me*, has partially allayed this suspicion. Yet despite, and perhaps because of, the enormous recognition accorded her internationally, some local critics have accused her of over-using South African stereotypes, and claim that her writing – specifically her novels – is both humourless and sanctimonious.

Notwithstanding these attacks, a large body of critical thought places her amongst the finest living writers of short fiction in English. It is indisputable that, whatever its artistic merits and demerits, her work has educated millions of readers around the world about the cruelties and dehumanising effects of racism and economic exploitation in South Africa.

Left:
Nadine Gordimer (Photograph: Gisèle Wulfsohn)

Interviewed by Bernard Levinson
8 May 1995
Johannesburg

I read an interview that you gave to Natan Sharansky[1] in Israel where you spoke of your father.

I wish now that I had asked my father more, but it was a curious fact of my childhood home. My father thought that he had married above his station. My mother came from a Jewish background, but they had been in England for generations. She came to South Africa when she was six years old. Her father had immigrated here. He had come to search for diamonds, leaving his English wife behind with her mother. Then he sent for her. My grandmother was pregnant with her first child (not my mother). They were living in Roodepoort. At that time you may remember, in the early part of the century, there was this idea of bringing Chinese to South Africa to work on the mines. These people were to live in a compound. Apparently there was some terrible fight and one of the Chinese staggered to the kitchen door about midnight. She heard something at the kitchen door. Now my grandfather was a typical frontiersman. He played poker the whole night. My grandmother was used to being alone. She thought it was her husband knocking on the door. She opened the door and in fell a Chinaman with his throat cut. He promptly bled to death under the kitchen table. So grandma Phoebe Myers left immediately. She took a coach or whatever it was to Cape Town and took a ship home to her mama in London where she stayed. My grandfather started another child with her and then returned to Kimberley. My mother was born but didn't see her father until she was six years old. By this time my grandmother had got over the traumatic experience and so she brought her two children back to South Africa. My mother went to Barnato Park School in Johannesburg.

Now my father came from a typical little shtetl. You couldn't get a high school education so when you were about twelve you either learned to be a shoemaker or to mend watches. He mended watches. He had an elder brother who was here already. The reason why they found ease in getting here was that my paternal grandfather, who of course I never met, my father's father, was a clerk in a shipping firm. He was able to get cheap steerage passages for his sons for whom there seemed to be no future at all in the shtetl. The eldest one, Marcus, had already been here when my father aged thirteen, without a word of English, was put on a ship and sent out. He somehow made his way and ended up with a little shop in Springs. From mending watches and selling jewellery he became moderately prosperous. Somehow or other he met my mother.

1 See *Jerusalem Report* Magazine, 24 October 1991. Natan (Anatoly) Sharansky is a 'refusenik' and human rights activist who immigrated to Israel after being imprisoned for many years by the Soviet Union. While in jail his plight attracted a great deal of media attention.

She was educated?

Yes, and was middle class and he was not. He came from a very poor background. She was suffering, I discovered afterwards, from what was known as a broken heart. She had fallen in love with somebody during the war, the 1918 war, and it hadn't worked out. She had been jilted, as they said in those days. My father fell in love with her. There were other psychological and physical factors. My mother was much taller than my father. I take after my father, a very tiny person. My mother was quite a tall woman. So there was this inequality, even in height, which I think operated there. He always felt timid talking about his background because she always sneered at it. 'Where you came from people slept on the stove to keep warm.' Her whole idea of status was how one lived and how one comported oneself, and what one ate. Her idea of cooking was good English cooking. Roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. So all the things he had at home he never ever had again. It's a long way round to telling you my father's background was never discussed. It was indeed despised. My sister and I were brought up to think that these poor things sitting in some village in Russia were not even worth thinking about. Whereas my mother's parents were in South Africa. We loved them. I loved my grandmother and we had all the tales of their life in London. So it was very unequal. As I say, I wish I had asked him more.

There must have been a great disparity in their attitude to Jewishness.

He wasn't allowed to have any Jewishness. My mother didn't go to the synagogue and we never went. I was never in a synagogue except to go to a wedding. Fortunately we were two girls, so there was never any question of having a bar mitzvah. For instance, on high days and holidays we would go to pick him up. On the Day of Atonement he would walk to the synagogue and we would then pick him up. We stayed at home then. We went to a convent school.

We realised later how embarrassing it must have been for him. Everybody was in their best; just as Christians are on Christmas Day, so Jews have nice clothes for the Day of Atonement, and we would come along in the car with my mother and we would be in shorts and barefoot because we were not part of it at all. We just used it as a holiday and I think it must have been quite humiliating for him.

He never said anything, never complained?

Never. He was totally dominated by her. You don't understand your parents until you get to middle age yourself. I can see a lot of reasons why she made an unfortunate marriage.

It takes you as long as that to forgive them.

Yes, and all the awful things they did to you. But then you begin to suffer from your own children . . . So that was my childhood background.

Did any of this ever seep into your novels?

In a recent book of mine, a collection of stories called *Jump*, there is a story called 'My Father Leaves Home' and this came about because I didn't know anything about him, and I have never been to Russia, and I had never been nearer than Scandinavia to where he came from. But a few years ago I was in Hungary and went to a small town on the Russian border. Travelling around in Hungary I could see the remains of what a shtetl was like. In Hungary certain incidents happened at a little railway station and I began to think that it must have been at a railway station like this that my father left home. Slowly a story came out of it. A kind of imaginative idea of what it must have been like for him. Did somebody go with him on the train? Was he put on the ship with family seeing him off or was he just put on that train alone?

He was thirteen?

Yes. When I think back now, when you think of your own childhood, or of your own children at thirteen — no wonder he was as timid as he was. I think he was what you would now call 'burnt out'. He had used all the courage he had to somehow survive this. Without any English, I don't know how he managed. My father was quite a clever linguist because he spoke without the usual accent and he finally picked up Afrikaans and quite a bit of Fanagalo. A lot of his customers spoke this language. In the beginning, he would go to the compounds selling cheap watches. He had a gift for languages which unfortunately his daughter has not.

Who was the story teller when you were a small girl?

No one was a story teller, but my mother read to us from the time we were tiny little things.

So that's where the stories began.

My mother made me a member of the library when I was about six years old. I have to thank my mother for that. My father, I think, read only the daily paper. He never read a book in his life and that was another reason that it was such a bad marriage. My mother was an intelligent woman, interested in many things. As I say, he seemed to be burnt out just earning his living in

his little shop, coming home and reading the paper and that was it. I can't remember stories being made up. They were read.

You began making up stories early?

Very early. I wanted to be a dancer. I was mad about dancing and I was quite a good dancer. There are photographs of me in the most contorted positions doing acrobatic dancing.

Age what — twelve or thirteen?

Much younger. So that was the beginning of some kind of self-expression. I now realise that relates to writing. I was also a mimic. I was always listening to my mother's friends at tea parties and so on, and then imitating them. It was quite an unpleasant thing that I was encouraged to do this. When old Mrs So-and-So had been there, and had had some funny quirks, afterwards, when another friend was there, my mother would say 'Come on, Nadine, you do Mrs So-and-So'. So with the dancing and the mimicking and with other little friends, I was always putting on shows. I had these sort of show-off ambitions.

Then when I was about nine I began to write. It was strange how it began because I used to draw and write the text of the newspaper. Take a sheet of paper and divide it into columns and then I would make up things that happened. I obviously took the idea from a terrible local rag that we had in Springs, called *The Springs Advertiser*. The main news was whether the mine manager had had a farewell party for the shift boss who had been there for twenty-five years and was presented with a gold watch which sometimes, of course, came from my father's shop. And then weddings. Describing what the bride wore and what the bridesmaids wore. I would make this all up and the names as well.

You would create your own newspaper?

Yes, my own little newspaper. I thoroughly enjoyed doing this.

This goes back to another lifetime — in the forties with your first book The Lying Days. *How awed I was that you were very much a part of it yet were able to stand outside it and see it so clearly.*

That is my only autobiographical book. I am not a writer who depends on her own life. There are many different points of view, many different characters. Of course the first novel is the kind of story getting it all off your chest. The relationship of that girl with her mother.

Wasn't there also a Jewish character there, Joel?

Yes. But mainly the conflict between the girl and her mother. It was my background. Some people think that I am an anti-Semitic Jew because I don't go to synagogue. I've never been a Zionist. These things were happening when I was a young girl. The social life of Jews was indeed centred around Zionism. People training to go off to kibbutz and youth *aliya* camps. There was quite a strong Zionist movement in South Africa. For the reasons that I already told you, I didn't have any part of this. In any case, my interests very early on became simply reading. So for me Yeats and Rilke were more interesting.

Of course, there was quite a strong Zionist movement in South Africa. When the German Jews began to come there was a feeling that they must be helped, that they were victims. My mother's attitude was very strange. She felt it had nothing to do with her. She simply didn't want to have anything to do with it. Neither simply because she was a Jew, nor because if you are a human being you have feelings of empathy and you have responsibility for fellow human beings. She didn't seem to feel that. Though in other ways she was a very charitable person. She had a social conscience. She was one of the people who started a crèche for black kids in the township. She had a lot of guilt feelings which she put into practice about blacks. I don't know whether she didn't believe what was happening when the whole Holocaust story came out.

She couldn't identify with it.

No. You know, many of the German Jews were cultivated people. They survived and started the musical society in Springs. You can't say they were an intellectual set at all. But if there was any kind of intellectual activity started up, it was certainly started by the German Jews. So again there was this business. My father felt in awe of her because she was superior to him and she felt that these people were rather snobbish and better than anybody else because they were playing the cello and doing whatever it was. These things are really quite strange.

I realise now she was wasted because she had no work. She was a frustrated housewife with a good brain and she longed to be a doctor. But with her kind of background, she was taught to play the piano gracefully and to get ready to marry. She ran the Red Cross during the war. I was even forced into it. She organised all the relief nursing services. She was passionate about medicine and about healing people. She would have been a really good doctor.

How did she meet your father? It seemed such an unlikely sort of match.

She had been crossed in love and my grandfather Mark Myers had a sister who was married to the Mayor of Windhoek. We're talking now just before the First World War. I don't know what happened to him during

the war because it was German then, that's all vague in my mind. He was a Jew, must have been a German Jew, but probably like many German Jews felt more German than Jewish and was probably all for the Germans not losing that territory. Somehow they landed up in Springs. I don't know what he was doing. He must have started some kind of industry or something. His wife was rather old. Aunt Rose. Very ugly, and six foot tall. I remember her when I was a child.

She had a very strong Cockney accent. I can remember her always saying 'Oh my Gawd'. She became quite a socialite and kept a salon in Springs. My father by that time was comfortably off and had a carriage and horse. He was a gay bachelor in the old sense of the word 'gay'. There was a little race course and he used to go to the races. He had a light baritone voice. He took lessons and he used to sing and so Aunt Rose sort of took him up. He would be at her parties. She invited her niece, my mother, from Johannesburg for the weekend and that is how they met. That is the sad tale of that marriage.

And she was frustrated all her life.

Utterly frustrated. I think you don't know these things about your parents. Her attitude to men extended even to the moment I produced a baby boy. I already had a daughter. She said she didn't like male babies. So I think sexually there was something terribly wrong with that marriage.

There was really nothing that they could share.

Nothing. Very sad. All they had in common was their two children. But she possessed us and he really had so little to do with us.

Did he live long enough to see grandchildren?

Yes he did, which pleased him very much.

Was he excited about your writing?

He was still alive for the first two books. He was extremely proud of the fact that he had a daughter who had become a writer.

And your mother?

I don't know about my mother. It only occurred to me when that first book was published, what on earth would my mother think of it. She may be furious. She may be offended. She never said anything. She certainly read it.

She knew exactly what you were saying.

She never discussed it. She never discussed anything. There was no adult friendship with them. That's why it seems so different with one's own children. We have different ideas.

I know you are intimately aware of the American subculture of Jewish writers. We don't have such a thing, do we?

Well, I don't think so and I'll tell you why. I think it would seem strangely limiting. In America it may mean something more, though I think the percentage *vis-à-vis* the population is much the same. I know that in New York the percentage of Jews is roughly the same as in big cities here. But the enormous influence of Jews in American life in the arts, in music, in fields of communication, originally in newspapers and now television, seems to be very strong. There does seem to be a culture there and indeed there has been a whole school of writing where people like Bellow write mainly about the Jews, and Jewish life there. Also Philip Roth and so on. But here with this enormous problem of the wider racism one can't say that Jews have suffered anti-Semitism. Right, we did have neo-Nazis. They may have talked loudly, but the real animosity was against blacks. I don't think it was ever really against Jews. I must say in my own life the only thing that ever happened to me as a Jew was when I was a little girl at kindergarten. There was another child roughly the same age who lived two houses from the kindergarten. I always remember her name because I think there was a tennis star called Farquharson. Her name was Ella Farquharson. We wore little panama hats. Terrible-looking little pork-pie hats. Ella Farquharson rushed out of the house one day when I was coming home from school. She had a pair of dressmaker scissors and she attacked me. She cut my hat and said 'You killed Jesus'. The poor little thing had been told this at Sunday school, that the Jews did this, and seeing that I was the only Jew she knew . . . That was the one and only incident in my life. So I have been very lucky. It was only when I was in my twenties and became interested in comparative religion that I learned really what the Jewish religion was and what it meant to be a Jew. Not that my mother ever wanted us to hide the fact.

We were completely open that we were Jews and we were always taught that this is what we were, but when you are told you are something — to have a name stuck on you — it doesn't really explain the reality. I believe that being Jewish is like being black. You simply are. Why should you not accept yourself? You've got something you can be particularly proud of and it certainly isn't anything you need to be ashamed of. As soon as you start saying I'm proud to be black, I'm proud to be Jewish, there's something a little uncertain there. But acceptance of yourself, is that you know you are a Jew and there it is. I don't think my concern, or what you might call social

conscience, comes from being part of a persecuted race. I honestly don't think so. I think if you have to be a Jew for it to go without saying that you ought to be appalled by repression — there is something very wrong there. It should come simply from the fact that you are a human being. If you have to be black to care about racism, it doesn't say much for the rest of the world that isn't black or isn't Jewish. So that has been my attitude, or my explanation, for the fact that I have, since I was very young, been appalled by what is happening in this country, what I have seen happen to people here, and have tried to do whatever I could.

If you were Jewish or not?

I think I would have been the same. My concern and my support for the black struggle would have been the same whether I was Jewish or not. I don't think my being Jewish had anything to do with it.

I think you made the point to someone that of the two [white] people who were sentenced to life imprisonment one was Afrikaans and the other one Jewish. Bram Fischer and Denis Goldberg.

And where were the Anglo Saxons? I've always thought that's a very striking factor in our history.

Why the Jews? Why were we there?

Well, again, I don't think that the fact that Denis Goldberg and Joe Slovo and others were Jews made them particularly sensitive to racism. Look at the other people who were not Jewish. We are more inclined to say how can Jews be insensitive to racial oppression because of our history. There were many Jews who didn't do anything or, indeed, either tacitly and in a few cases even quite actively supported the apartheid regime.

How did you fit into your first husband's Jewish world?

I don't know. I was very young.

He was a fine person.

He certainly was a fine person. He didn't really fit into that Jewish world and doesn't. I really think that is the answer. They were like most Jews. Really not interested. Simply accepted that there are the blacks, and here are the whites, and obviously this is the way it is. The sun comes up in the morning and goes down at night and it is ordained that way. Funnily enough, that background was similar to mine. They all had the same background as my

father. From a little shtetl somewhere. My first husband's mother came from Liverpool. So it was the same kind of thing. Helen Suzman, who was part of that family, was a phenomenon. So there is another example of somebody produced out of this Jewish background but her concerns as a devout liberal have been as a South African.

This is really where you place yourself?

My feeling if you ask me what I am, I say I am a South African. And what else am I? I was born Jewish therefore I am a Jew. But I have no religion of any kind. Neither Jewish nor am I a convert to any other religion. I can't identify myself any other way.

BARNEY SIMON

'. . . a commitment to creativity'

Multi-talented Barney Simon was in many ways the creative driving force behind the Market Theatre, South Africa's best-known and most significant shaper of indigenous theatre. His association with the Market began with its first productions, *The Seagull* and *Marat/Sade*. It continued with *Cincinnati*, *The Dybbuk*, *Mother Courage*, *Play it Again Sam*, *Vroue van Troje*, *Black Dog*, *Born in the RSA*, *Brecht on Brecht*, *The Blood Knot*, and, a landmark of South African theatre, *Woza Albert!* As artistic director of the complex, he affected tens of other productions, his advice often making the difference between a flop and a commercial and artistic success.

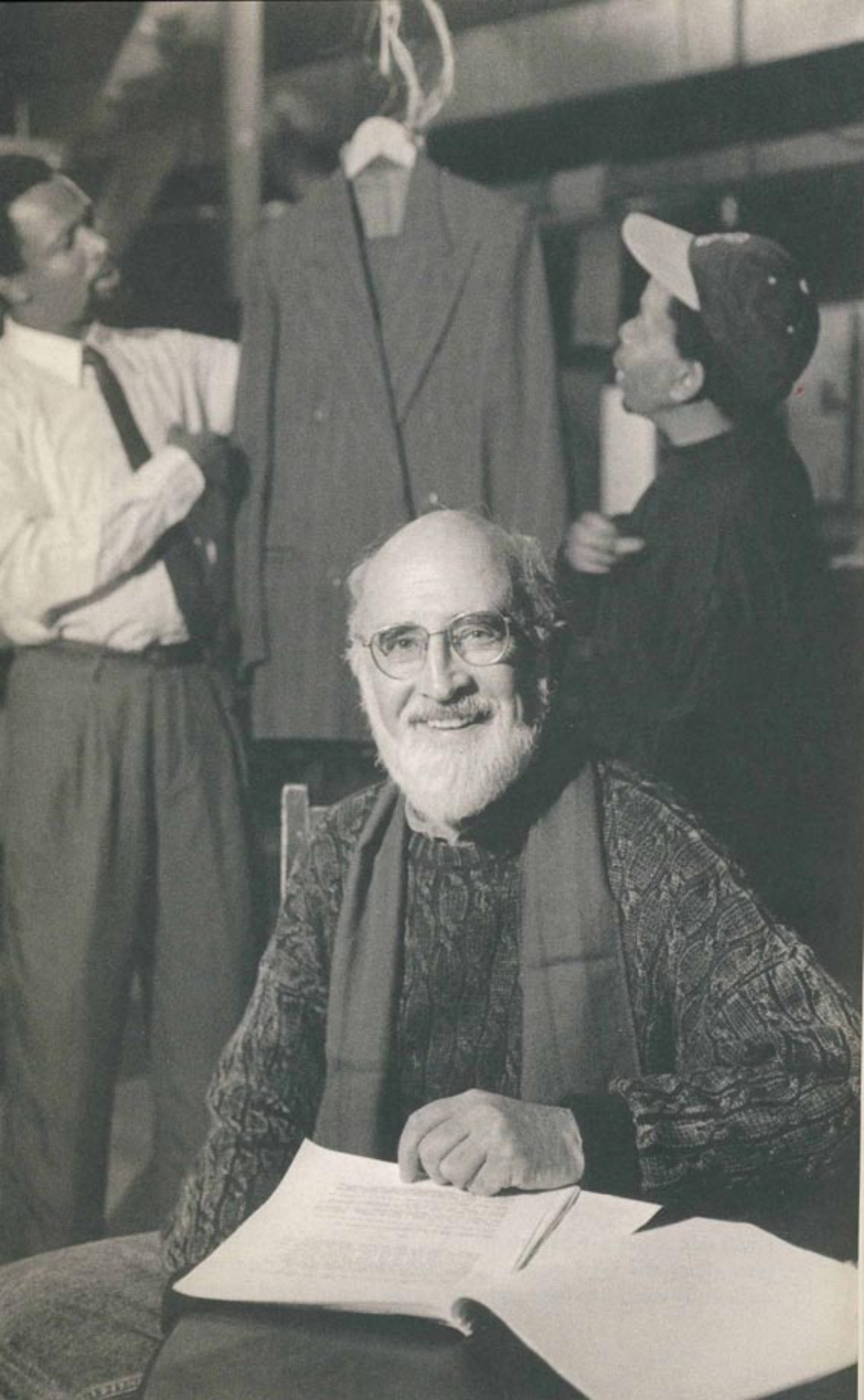
In the sixties Barney edited *The Classic* (South Africa's first non-racial literary magazine) and was associate editor of the *New American Review*. He also scripted for TV and the cinema, wrote lyrics for South African composers such as Victor Ntoni and Jennifer Ferguson, and published a collection of short stories, *Jo'burg, Sis!*

During the seventies and early eighties Barney devised and directed health education projects in KwaZulu, the Transkei and Winterveld, bringing life-preserving information to rural communities.

He nurtured hundreds of actors and writers, encouraging the people he worked with to embark upon voyages of self-discovery and to awaken the freedoms of 'heart and mind'. In recent years much of this work was done through the Market Theatre Laboratory, which Barney created in order to develop young talent. He received international recognition for the consistent quality, innovativeness and power of his work. Remembered by many as friend, mentor, father, mother and guru, Barney had a heart attack shortly after giving this interview. He was convalescing when he died — totally unexpectedly — on 30 June 1995.

Interviewed by Joseph Sherman
13 and 27 March 1995
Johannesburg

I will talk about my parents to begin with. They were Lithuanian-born Jews. They weren't particularly communicative at a time when I wasn't sufficiently curious to have gathered a great deal of detail about their lives. I



know of the names of two villages outside Vilna – one is Posvol and the other is Ponevezh. I think my mother came from Posvol and my father from Ponevezh. To my knowledge, my father came here in the early part of the century as a very young child. I think they were traders in trading posts – kaffireatniks.[1] I know that as a kid my father slept on a counter in the shop where he worked. I don't know a great deal about him. He was very proud and shy, and my parents were never proud of their humble beginnings.

My mother, who was about thirteen years younger than my father, was separated from her parents during the First World War. To my knowledge, at the age of about fifteen she had to exist on her own, and started her own little shop as subsistence. I know her parents died in Siberia. They were separated during the war. My mother's favourite sister, Becky, had gone to Baltimore when she was about fourteen or fifteen with another family, worked in sweatshops, and then come across to South Africa to join her brother. This was before the First World War. So my maternal grandfather was obviously someone who came as a migrant trader to make money to send back to Lithuania, and he brought his son Charles with him. Becky married a farmer in the Middelburg district, and my mother then came out in about 1922. She was told by her brother that within three months she had either to get married or have a trade. He wasn't prepared to support her longer than that. She began learning millinery. She was about twenty-two years old.

My father at that point ran a café with a partner. It was on the corner of Harrison and Market Streets. There was a Yiddish theatre there, and there was an Arcade. He also used to be friendly with a lot of boxers who used to box at the City Hall on Saturday evenings. So what I heard about the courtship was that my father, who was a rather plain man, fell in love with my mother, who was a beautiful woman, at first sight. When she went to the Yiddish theatre with other people he used to slip in from the café and put a box of chocolates on her seat when she went out at intermission. From what I understand, my father and mother married three months after my mother came, so she completed the deal and dropped the millinery.

We lived in Troyeville and we were part of the Jeppe Synagogue congregation. We had quite an extended family. My mother's brother and

1 A Yiddish neologism to describe those who worked in what were pejoratively described as 'kaffir eating-houses': shops which provided food for mine workers. They were often leased by concession from the mines to Jewish entrepreneurs.

Left:
Barney Simon (with Can Themba's suit) (Photograph: Gisèle Wulfsohn)

her sister were very close, and there were lots of cousins. So it was a very active and warm family life.

Was the home language Yiddish?

My parents spoke Yiddish to each other. I would talk some Yiddish. In fact as my relationship with them developed, I would either talk Yiddish, or English with a Yiddish accent, and if I was in a bad mood I spoke in pure English. I felt very close to the Yiddishists, much more than to the Zionists. I had a very warm feeling for Yiddish but not necessarily for Zionism [ed: which wanted Hebrew to replace Yiddish as the lingua franca of Jewry].

Were your parents of a socialist-Bundist persuasion, or not political at all?

They were not political at all. They were pragmatists. They were the kind of ghetto Jews who just wanted to be left in peace. First of all, my mother was, I suppose, the matriarch of the extended family. She was the one collecting the shillings to bring out nieces and nephews from Lithuania, and in fact one was being negotiated — a beautiful young girl — when the Holocaust enveloped Europe. I still have a picture of her. They [the South African government] closed immigration in 1939 while my mother was still negotiating, and she died, my cousin Leah, with the rest of her family, in the gas chambers. [But my mom had] brought out a number of nephews and nieces. Some of them prospered.

There was always a strong sense of Hitler in my childhood. In fact, I knew that bush in the garden where I would hide when Hitler came. You know Camus, the French writer, once said about an artist that 'A man's work is little more than his journey through his life in order to rediscover the two or three great and simple images that first found access to his heart.'

I have one very special memory that to me somehow relates to my life, my family, and theatre. That is when I was about four or five years old and being in Jeppe shul during the war years, downstairs with my father, my mother across the way — the most beautiful woman on that side of the balcony — and very proud that this woman was flirting with me, asking me if I was thirsty on Yom Kippur, trying to convince me to eat and showing me great attention. I would sometimes sit upstairs with her or come down to my father. And there was one woman on the same side as my mother in the poorest seat in the synagogue — she had only one leg and a heavy boot on her remaining leg — she was dressed in black, more like a Greek widow than Jewish. When she came up the concrete stairs outside, you could hear the bang of her crutches and her boot, and when she got to the top of the women's balcony and had to walk down, she banged so loud that the service would have to pause. When she prayed, she used to beat herself and wail. To me she represented a witch, particularly as there she was in a seat from which she

couldn't even see the Ark, on the same side where my mother was so resplendent — my mother was a Lithuanian peasant woman, but she had a really natural chic.

One day a little rebbe[2] came to the shul. I didn't know who he was. I remember him being very small and he had a reddish beard. He got on the podium and started to talk, and I didn't know what he was talking about. He was talking in a fast Yiddish and the whole synagogue, which was this synagogue of *landslayt*, began to rock and wail, and he was describing the slaughter of the Lithuanian Jews by the Lithuanian goyim, not even by the Nazis. From what I understood afterwards and in years later, he was describing the slaughter of the Jews in the Vilna ghetto. He was describing bayoneting and rapes and beheadings and God knows what and I will never forget looking up in the middle of all this chaos in the synagogue — that terrible wail — and seeing my mother beating herself like that old woman in black. That is something that has always remained with me. When I did *Marat/Sade* I used that wail at the moment when Marat fears that he is going blind and is comforted by the fact that he can't see because of the smoke of bodies burning.

I know that experience somehow made me a Jew. It's something that has always stayed with me and was obviously very important to me in terms of understanding my mother, my family, the destiny of my people.

Do you still feel closely connected to Jews and Jewish things?

You know, for me *cheyder* was hell. When I lived in Troyeville, until the age of eleven, I used to walk to Jeppe *cheyder* in my cap, and be waylaid by Afrikaner kids. Later, in Kensington, my friends were largely Christian. They went to movies on Saturday mornings. Once I started going to *cheyder* my father used to drop me off at the synagogue at eight o'clock on Saturday morning on his way to work. As a child I would have to wait for the *shammes*, who was a dwarf, to open the doors. My father would then get the old men at the service to tell him how often I left during the service. So it became a place of persecution for me. My *cheyder* teacher was an old man with a nicotine-stained beard and dirty fingernails who *shtupped*[3] knowledge into you. I am still dyslexic when it comes to reading Hebrew. There was no romance of the language, of the history, of anything we did. And so I never had a joyous time. It only came later on, much later in my adulthood. I would read Shalom Aleichem — stories that my mother and her nephews

2 A rebbe in this sense is the Yiddish word which Lithuanian Jews use to refer to any rabbi.

3 *Shtupped* here is a Yiddish pejorative which literally means 'pushed'; the teachers force-fed their pupils.

used to read and collapse on the floor laughing over. When I did *The Dybbuk*, I looked into Hasidism and what I needed to know of Kabbalah.[4] I was totally fascinated, and it's a pity that my education hadn't led me into such treasures, but it didn't.

Who would you think of as your most formative teachers or mentors?

In many ways I had to do it on my own. I was a rather precocious child. I used to read a lot. I remember at the swimming baths I used to talk to adults about books. When you reach a certain age — when you are fourteen or so — you start to look for sex in books, and I was fortunate to find good books with sex in them. A clear influence on me was being a member of Habonim, which I was from about ten to about seventeen, and I used to go to camps. You had reading lists, and you listened to classical music, sometimes throughout the night on a Saturday. You were taken to see good films, were made to think, you entered debates. So in that respect it had a greater influence on me than *cheyder* or school. But certainly there was no final mentor.

What brought you to the theatre?

I suppose it was my early years of going to the movies. I was fascinated by movies. I would go every Saturday afternoon after shul to the movies, and break my neck and ruin my eyesight in the front row. I was going to marry Shirley Temple, I was a member of the Popeye Club, and I was passionate about movies. My mother claims that when she was pregnant with me she went compulsively to the movies or to the Yiddish theatre. I was also much younger than the rest of my family. My brother was six or seven years older than me.

My sister was eleven years older than me. So I was relatively isolated. My temple was the Regal Cinema in Bez Valley [a suburb of Johannesburg]. My temple of images and stories, which really got me interested.

Did you ever think of going into the movies rather than into the theatre?

Yes. In fact that was a much greater interest at the time. But there was no real movie industry here. When I was twenty, in the latter half of the fifties, I went to London but the British film industry was in chaos. I managed to start to work in theatre. I worked with Joan Littlewood at the Theatre Royal, East Fifteen. She was one of the greatest geniuses of British theatre.

4 Hasidism is a revivalist religious and social movement founded by Israel Baal Shem Tov (1699-1761). Jews who follow this tradition are led by a rabbi who is believed to have particular attributes of holiness. Originally revolutionary, the Hasidic movement has become staid, conservative and often repressive. The Kabbalah is the entire corpus of mystical explorations of Jewish theology.

She made theatre from nothing. It was a workers' theatre. I sent her some of my short stories. When I was writing essays at school, I was always writing short stories not discussion essays. I would always connive stories. One teacher marked me down brutally for being off the subject, but I persisted.

My sister was crippled and retarded — she had polio as a child — and she was a kind of saint of sorts in her passion for people. She used to sit on the veranda and burn like a hobo, waiting for neighbours to appear... and call them over for a chat. She used to have the most extraordinary gossip sessions on our front veranda with children, with anybody who would come to speak to her. Once there was a child up the road whose domestic servant was a beautiful young black girl who was pregnant. I used to watch her walk up and down the steep street. Then one day the little girl came and said that the baby was imminent and that she was going to take care of the baby like Elizabeth [the maid] took care of her. I was studying for my matric next door during these dialogues. Then I saw an ambulance take the young black woman away, and the child came in later and said that Elizabeth's baby died. I was very moved by this, and I sat down and wrote my very first short story which I sent to *Spotlight* magazine. They sent me a very nice rejection letter — not a standard slip — and suggested I send it to *Trek* which was edited by Bernard Sachs. I sent it to him and I was his discovery. He published it in *Trek*, in the literary magazine.

Then I became friendly with Lionel Abrahams[5] — who remains a dear friend — and that was exciting. So in my teens I was writing short stories and then running the few blocks to Lionel's house in Kensington and going to his backyard and calling at his window and he would let me in and I would read him my latest short story. That was a shared experience, and very nutritive to my work.

My parents, as I told you, were not politically active. They were politically timid. When that short story about Elizabeth's baby got published, they were worried because it was about a black — as many people were. When I first met Lionel, he thought it was a political story, so those were the perceptions in those days.

How did your own personal attitudes to race relationships in South Africa develop?

I will tell you an interesting story, again about the Regal Cinema. We had a domestic servant and she had a son of about twelve who loved to sing and dance. This also made a deep impression on me. One day I went to see a Shirley Temple movie. It was called *The Little Colonel*. She tap-danced with a black man — Bill Robinson, Bo Jangles. I came out of the movie house and

5 Lionel Abrahams is one of the doyens of South African literature. He has encouraged fresh literary talent over three decades, published the first volumes of Mtshali and Serote, edited literary magazines like *The Marabi Dance*, *The Purple Renoster* and *Sesame*, and published a novel, *The Celibacy of Felix Greenspan*.

discovered that I could tap-dance. And I came home and I showed my black friend tap-dancing. He was very excited by this (the possibilities of tap-dancing, not my performance). The following Saturday, when the movie was playing again, I had some money that my aunt had given me, and decided to take him with me to see it. He carried me on the handlebars of his bicycle. When we got there they wouldn't let him in because he was black. We went back home and examined each other, and we found that the soles of our feet and the palms of our hands and the insides of our mouths were the same colour. We went back to the cinema to tell the manager about this but he wouldn't see us. I was very disturbed by this.

I was always curious. I was never concerned with race as a division. I mean, if I resented a black nanny it would be because she was there and my mother wasn't — I wanted my mother. That would be it. It wasn't a question of being black. So as I say, my very first short story, written at the age of seventeen, was something that had great empathy for a black woman's predicament. I distinctly remember this episode with the cinema. So the commitment didn't come as a sudden shock or revelation.

Did you think of making a career of writing before you went into the theatre?

You know there is a Hasidic saying, 'God created man because He loves to listen to stories'. I think if I have a commitment it's to that. I have a commitment to creativity. I am fascinated by the creativity in most people waiting to be unearthed. I'm interested in story-telling, definitely, particularly in theatre. In the fifties, as I said, I worked with Joan Littlewood, and she made a lot of human sense. When I came back, I met with Athol Fugard in about 1960 and again there was an instant electricity. There was no question of the quality of our communication and our excitement in our mutual vision. So we started to do theatre that was free of the restrictions of apartheid and it made sense. It was a living fact.

What especially interested you about the theatre?

In the sixties I worked at Dorkay House,[6] I worked in Soweto, I wouldn't work anywhere where I had to play to segregated audiences. I did the first production of *Hello and Goodbye* in an old house in Parktown. I went to live in America in 1968. I worked in theatre there. I directed. I worked for a man called Ted Solataroff. I was the associate editor of *New American Review*. I

6 Dorkay House was a rudimentary theatre, music and cultural workshop established for black artists in the 1950s by people like Father Trevor Huddleston, Ian Bernhardt and the Union of South African Artists. Its aim was to foster talent among blacks. It was situated on the top floor of an industrial building fronted on one side by Eloff Street, Johannesburg city's main thoroughfare, and on the other by a recreational area for workers from a nearby mining compound.

wrote for the *Village Voice*. In fact I did very well. My father died in 1970. I came back, and I saw that the people I had been working with at Dorkay House had done nothing more, so I started a group called Mirror One which is a reflecting surface in which we might find an image of ourselves. We did *The Death of Bessie Smith* and a play by Obaldia called *Cayenne Pepper* about two convicts on Devil's Island who decide not to escape because it's worse on the outside than on Devil's Island. I played this all over. I played it in backyards where people . . . under house arrest, could watch over the fence. I was very interested in the pragmatic adventure of things. I was interested in the living communication that is, I believe, essential to the value of theatre. The danger of theatre. Every night there is a different creature sitting in the audience, and a different creature on the stage, and you can never be sure of what that chemistry will be. It's a very specific adventure. That's what excited me about theatre.

How did you feel about living and working creatively in South Africa during the sixties, the decade of Sharpeville?

I did a lot of things in the sixties. I had friends who were political and in danger, and in those years I helped people like Harold Wolpe and Arthur Goldreich escape.

A very, very dear friend of mine was Ruth First. I became friendly with her here in the sixties when Joe [Slovo, her husband] was in exile, and subsequently when they were both in exile I became friendly with both of them.

Would you talk a bit about that friendship?

I came to know Ruth First just before Rivonia[7] when a lot of people had gone underground. Joe Slovo, for instance, was out of the country on a mission for the ANC; while he was away the resistance [movement] collapsed after the Rivonia arrests, and he couldn't come back and Ruth was banned. She was, as you know, a brilliant editor and journalist and writer and she wasn't permitted to function as such under her ban. She was also not permitted to communicate with anybody else who was banned and that was the majority of her friends. On Sunday nights there used to be a

7 In 1961 the banned South African Communist Party acquired Liliesleaf Farm in Rivonia, some thirty kilometres north of Johannesburg. This farm became the operational headquarters of the high command of the armed wing of the African National Congress, Umkhonto we Sizwe (Spear of the Nation). On 11 July 1963, acting on information received from paid informers who had infiltrated the movement, the South African Police raided the farm where they found and arrested virtually the whole leadership of Umkhonto, including Denis Goldberg, Arthur Goldreich (who lived on the farm) and Harold Wolpe. The defendants, among whom was Nelson Mandela, were brought to trial in October 1963 in a court hearing that became known as the 'Rivonia Trial'.

film club in Johannesburg and she used to come and sit alone. She wasn't allowed to sit with friends who were banned, and other people were scared to be associated with her. I knew her from one or two dinner parties. Also I used to work very extensively at the rehearsal room at Dorkay House and Ruth used to come and see the shows there. I didn't know her well, but I began to sit with her at the film club and in time we became very close friends. I was deeply concerned about her. Round about this time came Rivonia and a lot of people were arrested and sent to jail — subsequently some of them like Arthur Goldreich and Harold Wolpe escaped. There was something about Ruth that was terribly vulnerable. She was banned from being a journalist but permitted to study librarianship at Wits. She was being followed all the time by members of the special branch. I used to beg her to disappear, to go underground. There was something about her that moved me very much. As brilliant as she was, she also had an innocence, with me anyway. If the soul has a thousand virginities, she had many intact. It was as if somewhere along the line she was waiting for another challenge, or maybe she was marking the end of a chapter. And indeed in time she was arrested and put in solitary confinement for 117 days and she was interrogated constantly. At the end of 90 days they released her, with a coin to pay for a telephone call to her children. As she went into the telephone booth they arrested her again and put her in jail and she suffered cruelly from that experience.

Why did she not take your advice and go underground?

I couldn't tell you. Maybe she was working on some political directive [from the Communist Party], but to me it seemed more like the way an animal has an instinct to hibernate. It was almost as though she understood that this was a turning point in her destiny that she had to endure, and it was. It changed her radically, delicately, movingly.

You mentioned that you had helped Wolpe and Goldreich. Could you tell us something about that?

That was part of what offended me about Ruth's behaviour. I gave her the key to my apartment to do what she liked. She just had to warn me not to come when there were very important meetings happening there. So there were people coming like Bram Fischer, maybe Mandela, I don't know. I never asked because it was better not to know. The apartment was being used by Wolpe too. I never asked questions. Ruth had my total faith and I was certainly supportive of the struggle against apartheid.

One night a friend of mine had been in a motor car accident. She lived in an

apartment not far from mine and she had concussion, so she went to stay with her family in Houghton. She phoned me on a Saturday night to come and visit her. I lay beside her and we spoke quietly and at a certain point I had to go. It was after midnight, but her teenage cousins were having a big party and I desperately needed to relieve myself. When I went to the bathroom, the door was locked. There was a teenage couple inside doing all sorts of things, and when I went downstairs I tried to go into a bush but there was another couple in the bush, so then I went out into the street and just as I was about to finally relieve myself, a car hit me with its headlights. So I got into my own car and drove home towards my apartment which was in Highlands [a Johannesburg suburb on the Yeoville/Observatory ridge] in a place called Westminster Mansions which was next to the Water Tower. I stopped off in Hillbrow to buy some newspapers, and then on my way home I couldn't stand it any more, I had to urinate. I drove into a dark little street that leads to where Ponte [a huge circular block of apartments near Doornfontein] now stands, and I decided I would have a pee there. About six months before I'd been mugged, my nose had been broken. So I was a bit shaky. As I was relieving myself, I heard a sound and I couldn't see anything. There was something hiding in the bushes, so I jumped into the car, splashing myself, and as I drove off I heard my name being called and I stopped. It was Harold Wolpe and Arthur Goldreich calling my name. What had happened was that they had escaped from Marshall Square [the central Johannesburg police headquarters] by bribing a guard, but the getaway car they expected wasn't there. They had been wandering on the outskirts of Johannesburg unsure where to go. So they chose me. They chose my apartment because it was a place that Harold knew. They were en route there when they encountered me on this dark corner. I took them to my apartment, and they were exhilarated and scared. I gave them blades to shave with and they wanted cigarettes. I didn't smoke at the time, so I drove out into the night, looking for a place to buy cigarettes. It was now about two o'clock in the morning. There were no late-night stores and no cigarette machines. I saw a man walking and he was smoking so I stopped and asked if he would sell me some cigarettes. He said he wouldn't sell me cigarettes, but if I gave him a lift to Mayfair [a Johannesburg suburb ten-odd kilometres to the west] he would give me some cigarettes for nothing. So I ended up having a casual chat with this man as I drove him to Mayfair and that's how I got them cigarettes. I made contacts for them and I kept them in my apartment until they were moved out.

How long was that?

It was only about two days. It was also very strange because then I went to my parents' house and it was all over the radio and my family were all talking about it. I hadn't slept all night and it was a very tense experience.

Did you feel afraid yourself?

No, I don't think there was a question of choice. There was no question. I'm not sure what I would do if an AWB fugitive came to my door, but in that case there was no question of choice. I wasn't afraid.

To what extent, if any, were you personally threatened or menaced as a result of your friendship with political activists?

Again in the sixties, I was once questioned by the special branch about my association with the magazine *Classic*. More recently — about eighteen months to a year ago — I was getting phone calls every now and then. Anonymous phone calls telling me that the hitmen aren't dead yet and insulting me as a Jew.

Could you speak a little about that?

It happened periodically . . . phone calls from pretty rough-sounding voices. They were calling me a *Jood* [Jew in Afrikaans], *bleskop*, bald head, and various insults that weren't insults to me but they tried to make them sound like insults. They were telling me that the hitmen weren't dead yet. That was the gist of the message.

Why do you think they were getting at you?

I don't know. I think it has to do with my status at the Market Theatre. It might have had to do with my friendship with people like Joe Slovo. I don't know.

Could you tell me something about your experiences doing workshop plays in backyards for people under house arrest?

That was happening when I was working in the Transkei and Zululand — it was in the Transkei, I think — it was long, long ago now. We discovered a man who was under house arrest and we performed our play in the backyard so he could watch over the fence and in fact, inspired by that, I had started Mirror One. I decided that I would try to do the same thing for Ivan Schermbrucker who was also under house arrest at that time. That never materialised. But it happened quite a lot in the rural areas, where it was much more possible. You had to get a neighbour to consent.

When you started to make plays yourself, was your interest in the creative act for its own sake, or was it for the sake of something beyond?

I had already started working with actors. I did a book with a black con-man and thief called Dugmore Boetie, *Familiarity is the Kingdom of the Lost*. He died of cancer in a mission hospital where I took him to die. He didn't know that he was dying, and while I was there I spent time at the hospital and became aware of the need for health education in those places. I started doing workshops, awareness-raising workshops with black nurses who were not nurses by vocation but rather because there were so few jobs of prestige or challenge available to black women at that time. These women were trained by white doctors to be white nurses in a white situation, but there in the bush, dealing with indigenous people without transport, without a sense of time, without money, without hope, they couldn't keep to schedules, they couldn't keep to routine. So there was conflict between the nurses and the doctors, and the nurses would then be hard on the patients because they had to fulfil impossible tasks. I became aware of this and started running workshops for them, getting them to gossip as black women; to talk about what they felt would be helpful to a patient as opposed to what should be helpful. And bit by bit I began to develop a whole process for which I got funding from the Ford Foundation. I would get them to write songs from traditional melodies on any subject they chose, from diarrhoea to TB. They used some of the songs for study notes for nurses. Then I also got them to do plays for people in open fields wherever we could, and these plays were punctuated by the songs and the people joined in. That experience gave me a great sense of how theatre could serve a community, and give joy while it serves.

After I started doing that, I spent time with Bruce Davidson in New York. He was photographing people in East Harlem. I began to go with him, and I helped him with the text. At that time there were people there – they were called the Young Lords, the equivalent of the Black Panthers. They were highly creative young men who had been drug addicts. They went from house to house asking people if there were drug addicts there, organising soup kitchens, helping rehabilitate the drug addicts. All their work had to do with their own community. They also did theatre there, which dealt with the problems of their community. There was something quite extraordinary about that energy. It was something that I had already initiated in a way here in South Africa.

How did you move from this community theatre to more structured, more professional theatre?

I worked with Athol [Fugard] on the very first production of *The Blood Knot*. So a political commitment came very early. When we started the

Market [Theatre], we started in all innocence in June 1976. That took six months of planning and building. We opened the Market with a play by Chekhov [*The Seagull*]. I can still remember being up in a tree with Peter Piccolo, an actor, chopping off branches to use for the stage within the stage in that play, and watching these helicopters flying to and from Soweto and not knowing what they were about because there was a news blockade. But within me there was something terrible, something close to an anguish, and the thought of doing Chekhov at a time like that [the time of the Soweto revolt of June 1976] made me want to throw myself off the tree.

Did you feel that Chekhov had nothing to say to us at that time — that it was, so to speak, 'irrelevant', a waste of time?

When I worked at the Old Arena [in Doornfontein] I began to create texts with actors, and I was really fascinated by that. I suppose if you said to me, would it be more relevant to be doing *Born in the RSA* than Chekhov, I would say *Born in the RSA* at that particular moment. In those times, doing Chekhov seemed like having psychoanalysis. Getting into what a psychoanalyst must feel like when God knows there's mass cosmic movement in this place and you sit down with one person who can afford it, lying on a couch talking about their childhood. It's a value, but somehow it's not relevant to that particular moment. Well, I said that in starting Mirror One I tried to create a reflecting surface in which we find an image of ourselves. I would say that when apartheid was reflected in that mirror, what else could you write about? That's the answer about Chekhov. In other words, as Brecht says, sometimes it's a crime to write a poem about a tree. That was the feeling.

Did you believe from the beginning that a commitment to the theatre was a commitment to making a better, juster world?

Obviously one was feeling deeply about the country, but essentially I suppose that in a place where there seemed to be such a powerful conspiracy against life, my commitment has been to make living things happen. Had apartheid not been reflected in our mirror, we would have done something else. I wanted us to find an image of ourselves and of each other.

I've always seen — and this is a quote from Lionel Abrahams — that 'cultural differences could be jewels on the face of the earth if only people would permit it'. So it's always been a matter of personal curiosity to me, too. I've never written for a black. I've written with a black. I've facilitated, I've exorcised, I've inspired, I haven't ever sat down and decided this is what a black man would say. Somewhere along the line it's been very important to me to share, to make the community as much one as possible.

In the context of the debate that's going on about whether we must have 'Afrocentric' as opposed to 'Eurocentric' art, what do you think productions like* Titus Andronicus[8] *have to tell us in contemporary South Africa?

This is a very specific thing, almost an accident. We've always had a connection with the [British] National [Theatre]. I have a following abroad. I've got people there doing theses about my work, a book is being commissioned about it there — it's very different from here, where one can't even get an announcement in *The Star Tonight* that a new show is opening.

What happened basically is that the Market is held in high regard, and it was decided by the National Theatre Studio to bring a group of actors to run workshops with actors here. They'd already done that in Lithuania — post-communist Lithuania — and that had been successful. They came, and among the people teaching was Tony Sher, and his group got very excited by the vitality of the South African accent. A decision was taken to do *Titus* using South African accents. It's getting into the life of the language, in the same way as getting into the life of a Fugard play years ago. Before the Market Theatre existed, a South African accent was a joke on the stage, in the same way as a Cockney accent was a joke on the English stage. It was boulevard theatre. Now with *Titus* there's a real experiment of great vitality happening, and obviously we're going to invite the best and most relevant of experiments to this place. That intercourse is important. We can't really afford it. Our biggest problem is that we are not subsidised.

Do you think there's any possibility of getting a State subsidy for the Market Theatre?

I think there has to be, and we're trying for that. Part of the constitutional negotiations agreed to leave a certain status quo and one of the things left was the decision to keep PACT subsidised, at least till 1996, and the Civic [Theatre in Johannesburg] subsidised — the white elephant of the previous regime. It was renovated over many years for many millions. It's absurd. So we've got to wait till the beginning of 1996. It might come any moment, but obviously this is a government with other priorities than theatre.

Since the start of majority rule, has your audience response at the Market fluctuated or has it remained constant?

Audience at present has fluctuated because of the crime — many people are afraid to come downtown. That doesn't really stop them coming to see

8 In April 1995 the Royal Shakespeare Company, in co-operation with the British National Theatre, staged a controversial production — spoken in South African accents — of *Titus Andronicus* at the Market Theatre.

something they really want to see. We're going through traumatic times. People are exhausted. I don't think they are interested in thinking and feeling at present. I think that people stay in places of comfort like their local malls. You've got ghettos happening all over — the white affluent ghettos with a sprinkling of blacks.

The thing that's exciting is that we have a laboratory, which is something that has always been a dream of mine. It's a school of basic theatre skills for people who can't get into universities or don't have the money to go. We send out field workers to work with groups in the townships, we develop new projects initiated there, and several of them have toured abroad. *Starbrites*, a piece with actors and puppets, was workshopped there. Quite a few things have been workshopped there: shows like *Take the Floor*, *Woyzek in the Highveld*, *The Daughter of Neb* (co-produced with Brooklyn Acuda). It's exciting — you send in a project proposal. If it is accepted you have two months to do what you like in the space provided, and you get paid basic rehearsal salaries.

Every Sunday there are showcases [in the Market Theatre Laboratory] — that means there are young blacks in townships as far afield as Lebowa and Maritzburg who get together to make work. It's like an instinct, a composition of nature. God knows how they do it with the shootings that are happening, the violence, with economic recessions, and yet they're making theatre. And sometimes that theatre is as close to absurd as just miming to a record of *Sarafina*, and sometimes it's something in the vernacular that blows your mind.

There's no question to me that theatre is very alive in South Africa. On Monday nights when tickets [at the Market] are R11 we are full. So that's a measure of the fact that there is interest in theatre. Maybe it's because Monday is a bargain night and it's R11 and not R22 that makes the difference.

What's the composition of the audience of the R11 nights? Black, white, young, old?

A mixture. You can't ever be sure what will attract blacks. There is always a surprise somewhere. Obviously *Woza Albert!* had a great mix of people — the mix of people was almost equal. *Sophiatown* drew more blacks than *Hysteria*. *Hysteria* drew very few blacks.

You wouldn't be able to identify what would specifically appeal to a predominantly black audience?

I would say from my own experience plays like *Woza Albert!* or *The Suit*. It depends. One of the biggest problems that we have is poor marketing. We can't afford to get highly skilled marketing people, and there's also a great

fall in interest in the media for theatre in general. I've no idea why that is. It's a world-wide thing, apparently.

Could we speak now about what the world will think of as perhaps your most famous and most successful play,* Woza Albert!. *Could you talk a bit about* Woza Albert! *— about its conception from workshop to publication?

About 1980 I was doing a season of three plays at the Baxter Theatre [in Cape Town] — *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Ted Hughes's *Oedipus* and *Cold Stone Jug*, [the adaptation of] Herman Charles Bosman's autobiographical prison novel. When I first arrived in Cape Town there was a Gibson Kente play called *Mama and the Load* that was going to perform its last night. The actors hadn't been paid for some time so they went on strike. They refused to perform. I am a great admirer of Gibson Kente's work and I wanted to see that play, so I convinced the management of the Baxter to somehow negotiate for that last performance to happen, which it did. Many of the actors were discontented with their lot and came to ask me if I had any work for them.

Just before that time I had done a show in Johannesburg called *Call Me Woman* which was a series of testimonies by black women, and some of the people from Gibson Kente's cast had seen it and been impressed by it. Among them were Mbongeni Ngema and Percy Mtwa, and they were among the people who came to me in Cape Town asking me to work with them.

When I was back in Johannesburg, they again approached me and explained that they were asking me to work with them on a concept that they had, to tell the story of the Second Coming of Christ to South Africa — to Johannesburg — on a Jumbo Jet from Jerusalem. They then showed me what they had got together and it was evidence of enormous talent; it wasn't a very well co-ordinated or structured performance, but there was no question of their talent.

When I lived in New York, I spent some time with Joe Chaikin and the Open Theatre. I am very interested in a physical theatre and I'm interested in theatre of transformation, of metaphor. I could read with them that they also had a feeling for transformation. They had also been reading Grotowski[9] and the Bible. They had a lot of clothing changes and things that they wanted to do. What they basically said was that they wanted to work with me on that piece.

I was concerned. At the time there was quite a strong assertion of black consciousness, of black power, so I felt that maybe they would be better associated with a black director. I introduced them to people who could

9 Jerzy Grotowski created the Theatre Laboratory in 1959 in Opole in south-west Poland. His work since then, with a small permanent company, has become among the most influential sources of inspiration for modern theatre directors. The book referred to here is Grotowski's collection of essays, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, London, 1969.

possibly work with them. They knew some of them.

I let them do some test periods with these people, but they kept on coming back to me. I remember having a discussion with Nadine Gordimer about being worried about what the implications could be for them working with a white at a time like that. I was also concerned with the fact that Adam Small had done a show called *Hey Smile With Me* which also had to do with a Jumbo Jet carrying Jesus. They were totally unconcerned with that. I put all those things to them, but I just relished the thought of working with these marvellous vital talents. I went for it.

That process was not a simple one. First of all, I worked without any salary. I had already done *Cincinnati* and I had found a way of sending actors to the streets, to the law courts, and to other places to bear witness to the lives around them and draw inspiration from that. It's quite important to me not to impose, not to go and look at those same sources of inspiration. There is something about a flight that becomes metaphoric if I am imagining what they saw. It facilitates the creation. For instance, if I sent them out to Albert Street [in Johannesburg] they would say, but we've been to Albert Street, we've looked for work there. But I would say, you haven't been there to observe. Sometimes we were not even rehearsing at the Market. We never had the space to rehearse in. I was rehearsing with them elsewhere. They had got some money from a black businessman who was helping them but not helping me — I didn't get a salary. So I risked it. Sometimes I would sit there in the rehearsal space almost terrified to go and do anything else because I had to, so to speak, will them to be doing the right thing, and I would come out after one and a half hours and find them flirting in the foyer of the theatre. I said, Didn't you go? and they said, Well we don't have to go, or a lift didn't come, or whatever.

At some point, although they had studied the Bible, there was not a clear analogy between the Gospels and the story line of *Woza*. It wasn't called *Woza Albert!* at the time either. I'm not sure what we would have called it. We called Jesus 'Morena' because the word 'Jesus' would have got us banned immediately. I remember asking them what 'rise up' means because I thought of Albert Luthuli. A friend of mine had done a book on the ANC and I'd read it not long before and she had a great love for Albert Luthuli. I remember asking them what *Woza* meant, and saying I thought we should call it *Woza Albert!*. There are so many anecdotes. We began improvising, and they had long speeches about no amenities in the townships: it started with a court scene. I had a friend, a Jewish artist called Harold Rubin[10] — the painter who was once charged with blasphemy — and he was also a clarinettist.

When we were kids together, he could play a whole jazz piece, creating the

10 Harold Rubin is a controversial artist and a superb jazz clarinettist. Born and educated in South Africa, he was brought to trial on a charge of blasphemy for a drawing he produced after Sharpeville entitled 'My Jesus'. Its epigraph was 'My God, I forgive you for not knowing what you do'. After his acquittal he emigrated to Israel.

sound of the instruments just with his mouth. I've always remembered that, and I suggested to them that rather than say that musicians are persecuted, let's create people of great talent who are persecuted. I remember asking them to do an a cappella sound of the band. They came back the next day and they said, Mbongeni's a talented guitarist and Percy's a talented singer, why don't we do what we do best? I remember taking them in front of a mirror and placing them in a totem position and suggesting they try. They came back with something that was quite miraculous in the end.

Once I remember I had heavy flu and this illness was central to the work process. I was furious with them for not going to Albert Street, for deciding they didn't need to. I said to them, today you stay in the township, you don't come near Johannesburg and I'm going to stay in bed. I had a friend, Bill Ainslie — he was killed in a motor accident — who was a practising Christian, and he came to visit me and we worked through the Gospels, the story of the Passion of Christ.

Then a lot of things fell into place. I realised that there were scenes we would have to create, but that there were also scenes we could begin to manipulate into — in other words, the Chasing of the Moneylenders out of the Temple would be the scene in Sun City. More important was what happened to them, the actors. They stayed in the township patiently and what they came back with was absolutely miraculous. It was the scene with all the television interviews. They had seen an old woman looking in garbage. They didn't get the answer that we eventually played, but we developed it: the barber, the meat seller. It was quite wonderful. The one argument I had with them, a bad argument, was the idea for the final upraising of the dead. We hadn't yet established that the man in the brickyard who helped Morena would also be the man that dances the final dance with him. Then we devised the idea of him being in disguise as a grave-digger. We improvised that, and what hair I have stood on end — it was so moving for me — Woza Albert and the raising of those dead. The next day they came to me and said they didn't want to do that scene because Jesus wouldn't dance with such a disreputable person. I remember being totally furious and saying, do you think that Jesus didn't shit, didn't piss, maybe you think he didn't even fuck? What sort of a man was Jesus if he couldn't respect this other man who had such a fine spirit? Anyway, we had a strong debate and then once things were understood, it was paradise. The only sort of problem we might have had was when things were not understood.

What do you think made* Woza Albert! *such a triumphant success?

When we started playing here, I thought we would be lucky to play in the sixty-seat Laager [the smallest of the three theatres in the Market Theatre Complex] for six weeks, but Percy and Mbongeni were confident that it would be a major hit. It opened in 1981 at the time of an election, and Percy

and Mbongeni were performing and somebody came one night from *News Night*, a British news and discussion magazine programme, and they used *Woza* as a link between their news on the elections and then we were inundated with offers. The major offers came from a man called David Thompson of a BBC religious programme, 'Every Man', and then a man who had done a piece on cabaret in Eastern Europe who wanted to do a documentary about all of us.

It was, as I said, a time of black consciousness, a time of political delicacy here, and David Thompson said one thing which offended me slightly — it's par for the course — they didn't want to show white involvement. There's no question that the text is a very sophisticated one — its structure is very sophisticated, and those guys were not capable of doing it on their own. In a sense I think the British TV people were interested in making it seem to be this thing that had risen miraculously from the streets of Soweto, which it wasn't. It was a lot of hard work. Then it seemed that I would be associate producer and I would have strong control. I didn't want us to get into any political problems. I mean, it was a great risk at the time to end a play by asserting Woza Steve, Woza Albert, Woza Steve Biko. We only used the first names here in South Africa because we were worried at the time. When we went to Europe, we finally used the full names because the people named wouldn't have been known otherwise.

How did the play get to be such a success overseas?

What happened was that we went to London to film scenes for the BBC. About forty per cent of the play was in that documentary. Then we did a showcase at the Riverside Studio on a Saturday morning without any lighting changes to invited guests and we had a large audience. It was an exhilarating performance. The audience went wild. I don't think they had ever seen anything like it. What made it special, I think, is that combination of what was really township, and that which had a sophisticated theatrical structure. It was that combination. You know the township style, the style of a man like Gibson Kente, is born of our circumstances here.

There are no theatres — there are halls or cavernous concrete movie houses like huge hangars. People here are traditionally not particularly well behaved — the energy [of an audience in the townships] is almost Elizabethan.

I went on a tour with Janet Suzman once through the townships. We had to do something distinctive in order to be heard in a township hall where mothers were breast-feeding, where people were walking with high-heeled shoes on uncarpeted floors, where people were shouting for repeats of scenes that amused them, where people were drunk, people were shouting at people who were drunk, they would greet their friends and shove other people aside to make space for the chair of a friend. There would be arguments. So in order

to play in those places, what we did basically was to be broad — it's performance without a destination, it's less personal, it's exhibitionistic, and it's loud. What we did with *Woza* was to combine that experience — when we first started, I worked with them a lot on destination because they spoke very generally and I made them pinpoint members of the audience to tell things to. So that combination was rare. It's almost like Kabuki in its breadth and its energy. I don't think Europe had seen anything like it before.

We were inundated again with offers. The Royal Court wanted us, the Riverside Studio wanted us. We were invited to the Edinburgh Festival, the Traverse Theatre. We had a choice of anything we wanted, really. I had a particular feeling for the Royal Court, but when we examined the theatre the sight lines were not good, and I knew that this was a play that depended as much on body language as on the spoken language. So we went instead to the Riverside which had a beautiful open space where everything was very clear. I didn't want people not to be seeing and to be looking at the lights when they can't understand the accents well.

What interests me is your relationship between workshopping* Woza Albert!, *and finally establishing its published text. How did you do that?

First of all, for a long time, if you wanted to play in a township hall here — there were no theatres, there still aren't — you had to submit the text to the supervisor of the township or the hall or whatever. Well, with *Woza* it was excellent because we never had a text to show. It was improvised. Sometimes I would dictate a whole section out of which we would then improvise. We improvised largely in Zulu and dropped in enough English and body language to make it clear.

Overseas, the first place we went to work, to perform publicly, was the Mark Taper Forum/the Centre Theatre Group in Los Angeles. When we came to the theatre we were given a run-through in front of existing staff — in other words, typists, people who were part of the theatre's administrative staff, and their comprehension was only forty per cent. I told Percy and Mbongeni this, and they argued that if these people can't understand it's their problem, not ours. We left the theatre for the car park where we had to meet Mannie [Manim], and he wasn't there. I spoke to the car park attendant and I asked him something. He answered me back. He was an old white man. Percy and Mbongeni looked at me in wonderment because they didn't understand a word he said. So fortunately for me I was able to say, right, so if we did a play that was totally authentic about a car park attendant in Los Angeles, would you come to it? and they said no. So we worked on diction. Out of that, there had to come a text, and that text had to be honed. Over here in South Africa, the play could get into any extravagance — once the actors had to repeat a scene over and over because the audience enjoyed it so much.

But overseas you couldn't stay as informal as you were — you had to create structures for survival. There was no question that there had to be a survival structure, because it seemed that as we played, so we grew in demand.

What do you feel about a workshop play that is finally set in print? Now that Woza is in the public domain, what do you feel might be gained or lost when other people do it?

Well, I have been involved in another production. Peter Brook decided to do it in French and I went to work with him for three weeks at the Bouffes du Nord, his theatre in Paris. That was interesting because, although there have since been other productions, that was my first experience of a production other than my own, and that happened in his theatre which used to be in the Gare du Nord, a suburb round a station in Paris. It's a working-class neighbourhood. Now his theatre used to be a vaudeville house, with three tiers of seats and things like that. It had been ruined by fire when he found it and they maintained some of that texture, and his production of *Woza* followed *Mahabarata.*

Imagine the stage area being three storeys high, and it's this huge ravaged wall painted ochre that rendered anything that appeared on it epic, particularly to me. In this case, Peter came with a man whom I admire as much as I admire any human being, a man called Jean-Claude Carriere who was a playwright and adapter. He had done a lot of work with Peter. He did the script of *The Return of Martin Guerre.* A quite remarkable kind of writer, philosopher, poet . . . He is the man who did the text for *Mahabarata.* The point was that together they had done this adaptation, and we sent Dixon Malele, who was our stage manager for nearly five years, to go and teach the Zulu songs and dances to these two actors from Mali and Senegal. They were incapable of learning them, much to Dixon's contempt. What they did was much more static. It was very delicate, a kind of *Waiting for Godot* of these two men.

Did they use their own traditional music and dance?

Yes, and quite a nice incident happened there. They were very sensitive performers. I had great respect for them. They had done one preview which was good. The next night came this international audience from all over. Waiting downstairs was a man called Michael from the BBC's Channel 4. There was Harvey Lichtenstein from the Brooklyn Academy of Music, there were journalists from all over the world, and they also invited a section of the audience from the local populace and unfortunately this included a group of teenagers who I didn't think cared a damn about South Africa or theatre. They were making kind of exhibitionistic and disturbing noises which was really offensive.

I cared very much for these actors and I was very upset. What happened

was that it wasn't as good a performance as the night before and I felt terribly fragile. At the end of the performance I sat at the back with Peter Brook and Carriere and Peter's assistant, and there was a great deal of applause and Peter and Carriere moved among their friends. I didn't really know anybody and I sat alone at the back downstairs. Suddenly, about two metres away from me, a man leapt up. I got a fright. He had black hair, sort of peppered grey, he was unshaven, burning eyes, shabby black suit with a white open-necked shirt. He shouted, *Je suis Danton!*, I am Danton, it's my theatre, my performance! He started shouting. He was obviously deranged or drunk, and that finally shattered me totally. Brook's assistants came and they gently turned him into a little island and wafted him out of the theatre, but I was shattered. When we had supper together afterwards, Jean-Claude asked me what I felt about the performance and I told him how it had finally affected me. He said it was extraordinary — it concurred totally with a third century Chinese text (which is up hanging at the Laboratory) on what a good performance means. I can't remember it — I used to carry it around with me — but it's something to the effect that a good show must give a man answers about his everyday business and family affairs. A good show must give a man answers about his immortal soul in the order of the universe.

The final point was that a good show must bring comfort to the drunkard who walks in by mistake. So that's something I've kept with me always.

***Of recent years, you've moved a little out of the African context to plays with Jewish themes — to the traditional Yiddish folk play, for example. Why did you choose to do* The Dybbuk?**

Largely because it always fascinated me. It was something that I had read early in my life. I hadn't seen the film when I did the production. I was fascinated by the mysticism and the sensuality of it, and that was to me the beginning of looking into Hasidism and Kabbalah and a sense of being part of a great mystic tradition. I obviously didn't read enough to be a scholar in any aspect, but I read enough to consider the play very carefully. What moved me about the play was that the girl [Leye] became a victim. She gave a resting-place to her lover's soul in her own body and I was intrigued by that.[11] Her choice was really to be a monster with him rather than a woman without him. I actually wrote in little extra things to make this clear. I was fascinated by the fact that what happens to the lovers was part of destiny. I gave the boy [Khonnon] some extra text. When Leye visited her mother's grave and danced with the beggars, I placed Khonnon's spirit

11 *The Dybbuk* by S Ansky dramatises the consequences of the unwitting refusal of a young woman's materialistic father to honour a sacred vow he made as a young man. He had promised a close friend, whose wife was expecting a child at the same time as his own, that their respective children would be married. This vow makes the two children lovers destined for each other. One father dies young; the second prospers. The latter's daughter,

among the beggars, because he had transgressed the Kabbalah and was therefore a soul without a resting-place.

His body had been dissolved by mentioning the name of God and Satan in one when he was ill prepared. I created a little monologue for Leye about her fascination with Khonnon — she went into his room and wondered about the mirror that had perhaps just reflected him as he passed.

To me the most important element of the production was the fact that when Leye was about to be married to this man [Menashe] chosen by her father, she ran away and hid under the *chuppah*. As she stood under the *chuppah* she tore off her veil, and Khonnon appeared behind her bare-chested, only in breeches, and it was a very sort of sexual thing. Khonnon raised her up and entered into her and then they became one creature. He and she became melded as one and so the voice you heard was always his. The actress and the actor [Megan Kruskal and Dawid Minnaar] moved as one creature throughout the performance and he spoke through her. So when finally they were trying to exorcise him from her body and the *shofar* was sounding, you saw their struggle together, their mutual struggle to stay together. In fact he submitted only when he saw she had fainted from the torture of the exorcism, and he saw how she was suffering. When finally he submitted, they were blasted apart, they flew across the stage like an atomic explosion.

How did you interpret the role of the Rebbe?

I suppose I was chiefly fascinated by the lovers. The oath which bound them together became destiny because it was made in a holy place, and I think that the holy place was not simply a shul. It was a shul which was associated with a particularly great Rebbe. I don't know if all oaths made in a shul become part of destiny, but I did understand that this was a very special place, the place where the fathers made their oath that the son of one would marry the daughter of the other. I suppose I saw him as such a Rebbe. Obviously what the boy had done was against nature and law, and what was happening subsequently was even more against nature and law. So the Rebbe took it upon himself to correct this. The exorcism had to happen. After they were blasted apart in my production, what I did was . . . there was beautiful flute music, and you saw the two souls come together as one, and the Rebbe was a witness to this understanding that what is destiny cannot be changed. I think

Leye, falls in love with her destined husband Khonnon when he starts taking weekly meals at her home. Since he is a poor Talmud student, Leye's father, who knows nothing of his family background, refuses to consider him for a son-in-law, choosing instead a wealthy young man. Khonnon, mad with love for Leye, uses the secrets of the Kabbalah illicitly, and dies for his presumption. His spirit then enters and takes possession of the body of Leye in the form of a *dybbuk*, an unquiet spirit of the dead. Only the ritual of exorcism performed by a Hasidic rebbe, or holy leader, can force the *dybbuk* out of Leye's body and into its proper eternal rest.

he was all-accepting of the whole, although committed to his own role in what had to happen. I had him as a very wise and empathetic witness, finally.

What do you see as the future of theatre, and your part in it, in post-apartheid South Africa?

We got an award recently from America. A substantial award [the Jujamcyn Theatre Award]. It's been given to only ten other theatres, all of them in America. They chose us this year [1995] for proving that theatre can change society. I made a speech when we received it in which I adjusted the definition of our commitment. I said that we nurtured a change in society as best we could.

You can't change society. You can change a member of the audience who is creative. If you've got an audience of ten, that creative person might be turned on and go out and do something that's going to affect another ten people. So I have a strong feeling for the life of this place.

I see theatre as being something that moves human beings into empathy in a way that nothing else can, because you know our deepest revelations come from watching and understanding. So now, in this time, it's clear that the mission isn't over. The fact is that a change in legislation has done nothing to the human heart.

IRWIN MANOIM

Irwin Manoim was born in 1954 in Johannesburg and was schooled at King Edward VII School and the University of Wiwatersrand, where he wrote a Master's dissertation on journalism in South Africa. He edited *Wits Student* during the turbulent 1976 uprising, and then became something of a godfather to the 'alternative press' of the late 1970s and 1980s, helping to set up the technology for a number of grass roots publications in the mass democratic movement (*SASPU National*, *South*, *New Nation*, *Learn and Teach*). As a professional journalist, he worked at the *Sunday Times* from 1976 to 1983, rising to the position of assistant production editor, and then moved to the position of assistant editor at the *Sunday Express*. When that newspaper was closed by SAAN in 1985, he brought out the first edition of *Business Day* before quitting the company and launching *The Weekly Mail* with Anton Harber. He co-edited the *Mail* until 1995, taking primary responsibility for production. He is now setting up an electronic publishing division for the *Mail & Guardian*, and has become a pioneer in putting newspaper publishing on-line in South Africa.

Interviewed by Mark Gevisser
7 April 1995
Johannesburg

How much do you know about your family history?

Immediately after Melinda and I got married, we went off for Tay-Sachs tests,[1] and to our horror we discovered we were both carriers. It was a huge surprise because there's no known history in either of our families. When you go for genetic counselling they tell you to make a family tree. So I had to go to my mother and say, 'OK, where do we come from?' My mother was a refugee from Germany just before the war, and the family history was so painful that this was the first time we had been able to discuss it properly. What is interesting is how remarkably little we know; that these families constantly in turmoil and fleeing from one country to the other actually had

1 Tay-Sachs is a progressive neuro-degenerative disorder which, in the classic infantile form, is usually fatal by age two or three years. The frequency of the condition is much higher in Ashkenazi Jews (Jews of Eastern European origin) than in any other population group.

no sense of their history. My mother had brought very little out of Germany. But when I was making the family tree, she hauled out this photograph of what appeared to be an enormous family gathering, eighty or ninety people. She could pick out maybe seven or eight who survived the Holocaust. After that, we didn't go any further on the subject.

Was that the first time you realised what had happened to your family?

I always knew about it, but never had any detail. To this day I don't know fully what happened. My mother must have been a young teenager when they started cracking down on Jews. She must, I imagine, have gone through the business of being removed from school, having to wear a yellow star. She left with her mother late in the 1930s. Her father came out separately. My grandmother was part of a huge family; only two or three who went through the camps survived. But even that I don't really know about.

Did you have a sense of being different from other Jews because you were German rather than Lithuanian?

German Jews are always being accused by other Jews of being snobbish and cliquish, and maybe it's even true. They have their own separate institutions, and my grandfather was a key figure in setting these up. The German Jews had their own cultural centre, B'nai Brith in Houghton; and there's a German-Jewish old age home, where my grandmother eventually landed up.

In primary school I was constantly accused by little Jewish boys of being a German and having a German name. War memories were still raw, even in the early 1960s, and it filtered down to the children. I didn't know anything about the war other than that I could tell from comic books that Germans were baddies. And I suspect my mother had a lot of that when she came here. She was in Germany where she was unacceptable because she was a Jew; she arrives in South Africa when the war's about to start, and she's again unacceptable because she's German!

What sort of Jewish home did you grow up in?

My parents had been members of Hashomeyr Hatzair, the most left-wing Zionist organisation. It only existed in this country until the early fifties. It was a secular, socialist organisation, so I had little conventional religious upbringing until my bar mitzvah. There was a huge gap between the values of my parents and the values of my peers, and because children don't really understand what their parents are about, gradually the attitudes of my peers took hold. In about standard three, I started getting nervous I wouldn't have

a bar mitzvah. In fact, I was nervous that my parents didn't even know that there was a thing called a bar mitzvah. And I had reason to be worried. On one Jewish holiday, instead of going to shul we went to the game reserve. And my peers at school were absolutely horrified. I was terribly humiliated by this.

When I discussed religion with my mother, she made exactly the points that I would make now, that 'this is a very complex issue and there's this to think about and this...' That isn't what I wanted as a little kid. I wanted answers.

What does it mean to you to have come from a family that started off as Zionist Marxists?

What was most striking as a kid was the contradiction between my own upbringing and what I saw going on around me. My parents were significantly more open-minded and tolerant of other ideas than the kids in the street where I lived. Although only half the people on my street were Jewish, for some reason the only people I seemed to play with were Jews, politically fairly conservative. Just one example: it became very fashionable for kids to run around with stickers saying 'Good old Smithy' after Unilateral Declaration of Independence. I brought one home for my parents to stick on their car and they refused, and I was very hurt. Kids don't understand those issues.

But it should also be said that by the time I was old enough to have a coherent conversation with my parents, their radicalism had faded away. The 1960s were apolitical. During Sharpeville, they made a bonfire in their garden and burnt their books, just like everyone else, and I suspect that was symbolic in a lot of ways because after that they became increasingly apolitical.

But in the 1950s, was there a sense of Zionist Socialism in the home?

It was a little more complicated than that. The problem with Hashomeyr Hatzair is that there is a fundamental contradiction between being a Marxist and being a Zionist, which meant that the organisation kept on spilling people out into the left-wing South African movement. So my parents left Hashomeyr Hatzair a year or two before all their cohorts went off to Israel, and they joined the Fourth International — they were in the same group as Baruch Hirson, who later ended up in jail for his underground activities.

What exactly the Fourth International did I don't know. It was far too dangerous a topic to discuss in the apartheid years, and father died twenty years before the new South Africa. I suspect it was a bit like JODAC [The Johannesburg Democratic Action Committee]. They used to go and do some kind of mysterious good works in Alexandra township. The majority of the Jewish left were communists. My mom was in the same class as Ruth First.

But she didn't mix with them because they were Stalinists. Now I think my mother sees it as a phase she went through. By the late sixties, she had already put it behind her.

Do you think your mother's experience in Germany had anything to do with the political line she took?

Yes, absolutely. That applied to that whole generation of Jewish lefties. My father would occasionally talk about how they'd have streetfights with the Greyshirts, so Judaism and politics were very intermingled.

And how was your consciousness of apartheid linked to the experiences of being a Jew?

There was no reason to link being Jewish with South African politics in those days. There was no sense from local Jewry that they had different attitudes to any other whites. When I started going to shul in preparation for my bar mitzvah, I cannot remember the rabbi having ever made a point that would have shown in any way that he was conscious of which country he was living in. A net result of that was that there was no Jewish leader you could look to as a moral icon. But there were a number of secular Jewish leaders you could look to, like Suzman. I don't think anyone looked to Slovo, though; he was Satan incarnate.

How was the concept of Israel taught to you?

That was the peculiar irony. The family were still, despite everything, pro-Israel. We had one of those perennial blue boxes[2] and we had relatives in Israel and my mother was constantly going off to see the relatives and to see her compatriots at Shuval, which was the kibbutz we would have gone to had my parents not decided to stay in South Africa. I went with her to Shuval once, just after I'd finished the army. I stayed in her best friend's house, in the study, a room lined with the complete works of Lenin, Marx and Trotsky. We were in the middle of an Israeli kibbutz, and there was nothing else in the room — it was an extraordinary contradiction. To think that the first time I ever saw those books was on a kibbutz!

What else I remember is being struck by how militarist the society was. I'd just come out of the army in South Africa, but even still, I was shocked at how many people were running around with guns. Fifteen years later, South Africa became just the same.

2 The blue box was a blue-coloured 'piggy-bank' in which coins for the Keren Kayemet Le Yisrael (the Jewish National Fund) were inserted. It was found in many Jewish homes. The Jewish National Fund raised, and raises, money for afforestation, swamp drainage and desert reclamation in Israel.

Did you go with a blank slate, or was there a way that your parents or your education had inscribed some image of Israel into your consciousness?

There was a whole set of implied images about Israel. We'd gone through the whole Six Day War episode, when my young Israeli cousins were sent out to stay with us. Israelis were still the good guys. I never met a Jew in South Africa in that period who did not see Israel in that light.

It was years before I read the first account written from the point of view of the Palestinians. I don't think even in the late sixties that I understood there was a Palestinian cause; that there was more to it than an Israel versus Egypt and Syria thing.

So when was it that you first read about the situation from a Palestinian point of view?

It was a few years after I left university, in the mid-1970s, and it was a piece published by my brother, Norman, when he was editor of *Wits Student*. In fact it was written by a South African Jew, a dissenting Jew who'd spent some time in Israel and had come back to South Africa saying, 'This is the other point of view'. It caused major ructions. My brother got into a lot of trouble from the Jewish community. It was certainly the first time I'd ever heard of the Palestinian issue, and I'd venture to guess that it was the first time anything like that had been published in South Africa. In retrospect, the piece said nothing you don't read in *Time* magazine these days.

What was your response?

On the one hand I was very startled and even outraged by it; there were a whole lot of things I'd never heard. But on the other hand I was quite uncomfortable about it; about Israel being criticised in this way. I suppose that's the terrible ambivalence, in that I really don't know which mental category to put Israel into. It comes down to the fact that the fundamental representation of Israel to my mother is that the other members of the family who escaped all ended up in Israel. She doesn't go there to see Masada; she goes to see her family. Israel represents some kind of haven — in the last instance this is where you'll always be able to go if you're a Jew. So the reason for the ambivalence is that I know what Israel represents to her generation, and there's a lot of validity to that, and yet there are plenty of reasons to be deeply troubled by it.

Did you have any formal Jewish education before you demanded a bar mitzvah?

My parents' attitude was not 'There will be no religious education'; it was rather 'You must have a religious education to decide whether you don't want to have it'. I went to Houghton School, a secular school in all but

name. If you went to Houghton School, the real world comes as a shock because you come to think the world is 95 per cent Jewish. Anyway, every morning at Houghton at 7 am we had *cheyder*. I went there from grade two to standard five.

By the end of standard five I knew nothing, and none of my compatriots knew anything either. Because Hebrew education consisted of a whole lot of elderly religious men who would walk around and make you drone through various prayers and hit you on the head with a ruler if you got a word wrong. That was it. You'd say '*Mah Nishtana Halaylah Hazeh?*' and someone would klap you on the head for saying it wrong. For seven years.

I was at no stage instilled with a sense of this being the spiritual core of Judaism. The fact is that at the end of a seven-year religious education, I knew nothing more than to say a whole lot of prayers that I could not understand. It was completely mechanical.

Relatively recently I've started regretting that I didn't have a better spiritual education. But at the time it was like any other unpleasant experience one had to go through, like maths lessons and Latin lessons. You just kept an eye on the clock.

What did you and your family have to do to prepare you for the bar mitzvah?

I had to move from the Houghton *cheyder* to the Waverley Shul *cheyder*. And that involved going every afternoon to bar mitzvah classes which were run in exactly the same way. The only difference was that there was a relatively pleasant woman as opposed to dreadful old men.

At my first meeting with the rabbi, I had to bring my tape recorder and he was going to sing my portion into the tape. The tape consists of this man droning away, very bored, and then in the middle of his singing, the phone rings, and he picks it up and goes, 'Halloy, Louis!' and has a long conversation recorded for posterity. After that it was very difficult to take him seriously.

The rabbi had a huge garden, and there were eighteen or twenty of us all aged twelve, and we played soccer in the garden. The bar mitzvah lessons consisted entirely of soccer. We had constructed goals at each end of the garden and we'd play around, and every now and then somebody's foot would get cut open because the rabbi would bury his silverware in the garden — or at least that's how I remember it.

We had to go to shul every Friday night and Saturday. The rumour amongst twelve-year-old boys was that the men sat and talked about share-prices all through the service; certainly they paid scant attention to the service. And what we would do is we'd play this game where you surfed along the polished floor underneath the seats. So religion consisted of playing soccer at the rabbi's house and then going to shul and surfing around the floor . . .

But there is a sort of fondness of community that you are remembering this with, and it's the sort of community of twelve-year-old Jewish boys that you had to claim; that you had to go to your parents and say, 'I want to be part of that'. Does the way you were brought up with regard to Jewishness make you think about how you'll bring up your daughters?

It interests me that my own peers with left sympathies are bringing up their children now the way I was brought up, exposing them to a wide variety of interests and ideas. I'll probably do the same. You do have to know your own cultural history, though — you can then decide what to do with it. I don't think it was a fault of my parents that I failed to absorb that. It was a failure of the system, of the way they taught kids in the fifties and sixties. I suspect that not a single one of my classmates at the time knew any more about Judaism than I did — the Judaism that entails more than mouthing prayers by rote.

What happened after your bar mitzvah?

Once I got to high school, which was King Edward School, I was no longer in a Jews-only environment. I suspect that most of my contemporaries who had a bar mitzvah gradually stopped going to shul because the pressure was off you. As far as I remember they didn't really care whether you came or not, that was it. All of a sudden you were an expert in Judaism. Unless you wanted to go to a yeshiva, you'd never find out anything more.

As it turns out, actually, I know far more about Christianity than Judaism, because I studied art at Wits, which is more or less by default a history of Christianity. I know as much about Christianity as anyone else at the *Weekly Mail*, but I don't know much at all about my own religion.

But there was never any feeling in my family that we were not Jewish. On the contrary, my mom's very clear line on it was that you're born a Jew and no matter what you believe, what you do, you are always a Jew. That had clearly had to do with her experiences in Germany. And despite my perceptions that my parents didn't know what a bar mitzvah was, I must say that there was a fair level of Jewish ritual in our house. We did the Friday night thing, for example, so as to preserve a sense of community with the family. My mother's point was underlined by the Tay-Sachs tests. No matter how assimilated you become, you still remain Jewish.

So much of white left political consciousness is a rebellion against parents. But you are a second-generation lefty . . .

There was no stage during my university career, which is where I got involved with left-wing politics, when my mother ever said 'This is unacceptable behaviour'. In fact my mother used to make remarks like, 'That fellow can't possibly be intelligent, he's right wing'. It was a very

different message to the one I got from the broader family; they always said, 'Keep your nose out of this kind of stuff, you shouldn't be getting involved'.

In your parents' generation, the white left was a very Jewish institution. When you became involved in the white left in the 1970s, was there a similar sort of Jewish core in your generation?

It was never an issue in Nusas and the majority weren't Jewish; but there was a substantial Jewish core. They were always a minority, but disproportionate to the number of Jews in the country.

What was your work in the student movement? How did you put together being a journalist and being on the left?

I started off at *Wits Student*, then became its editor, and then began the first journalism training workshops for the student press. These workshops continued for years after I had become a professional journalist. I started travelling the country giving workshops to the first generation of 'alternative' newspapers which were run by activists rather than journalists. I got very interested in the technology of how to create a newspaper out of nothing using simple, available equipment, like photocopiers. There were plenty of people around then who wanted to write politics; I was more interested in what it took to start a newspaper if you didn't have money. There were a whole group of people who were backroom production staff: myself, Melinda [Silverman, now his wife], Lisa Seftel.[3] We weren't high profile, but we helped make the thing happen; producing an astonishing number of publications, usually in the middle of the night, all around the country.

Going back to that article about Palestine your brother published in* Wits Student. *You were also an editor of* Wits Student. *Did you agree with his decision to publish it? Have you been faced with similar decisions as editor of the* Weekly Mail*?

Norman was right to publish; Jews need to know these things.

It hasn't really come up at the *Mail*. Firstly, we don't have our own correspondents there; we lift stuff from the *Guardian* or the *Washington Post*. Secondly, the kind of Jews who read the *Mail* have accepted the Janus-headed view of Israel. So I can't recall ever having had any irate calls from our readers complaining that we are pro-Palestine or anti-Israel.

3 Lisa Seftel worked with *SASPU National* (see Coleman interview, p188), with Cosatu, and is now in government as a director of labour relations in the Department of Labour.

The first thing I ever wrote for you at the* Mail *was a first-hand account of a brutal Israeli attack on a West Bank village in 1990. You were happy to publish it, but you insisted that I counterbalance it with an account of the Israeli Jewish peace movement that was opposed to the occupation of the West Bank.

Yes, I remember that. My motive at the time would have been fear of stereotyping: that we would be guilty of saying, 'Jews all think the same; they are all bloody violent.' It was important to indicate that Israel was a riven society and there are equivalents of JODAC there.

Sure, on another kind of issue we may not have had that sensitivity. That's a fundamental problem of journalism. There are issues we are sensitive about for some reason or other, and we treat those issues carefully because we're close to them, while we maybe are helluva cavalier about other issues, because we're not close to them.

Have you ever encountered anti-Semitism at the paper?

The only time it reared its head was during the Salman Rushdie affair [when the *Weekly Mail* came under fire from Muslim communities for inviting the author to South Africa]. There were a lot of anti-*Weekly Mail* pamphlets doing the rounds, some of which were quite pointed about the *Weekly Mail* being a Jewish-run paper, deliberately hostile to Muslims. But the leaders of the Muslim community were careful not to make any remarks that could be construed as anti-Semitic.

There has often been a perception, among black staffers at the paper over the years and among many black readers, that the* Weekly Mail *is a 'Jewish paper'. Do you think that's accurate?

On the left, whether someone was Jewish or not was irrelevant. The first time it occurred to me that the people making up the paper were all Jewish was when my mother said to me, 'Who is this guy Harper?' And I said, 'No, his name is Harber.' And she said, 'Oh you mean he's Jewish?'

I don't think we've got a very sizeable Jewish readership. I think it's high in proportion to the number of Jews in the country; but the Jewish community as a whole is conservative and this is not their newspaper. I consistently go to family events with my own relatives and they say 'How's life in the *Sowetan*?' All they know is that it's some shvartze newspaper I work for.

But it is true that almost all the founders of the paper were Jewish. The majority of the early shareholders were Jewish too, perhaps because they were the first people we were likely to approach. We only attracted significant non-Jewish money when we were joined by Shaun Johnson [subsequently editor of the *Saturday Star* and *The Argus*] who could go to dinner at the Rand Club and know which fork to pick up.

Do you think the Weekly Mail *has attracted a disproportionate number of Jewish staffers over the years because it provided an ethos in which they could feel comfortable?*

You may well be right, because it is true, there were often situations at SAAN where I was uncomfortable, because there's an extraordinary WASPness about the mainstream media and perhaps a subtle anti-Semitism. In his recent obituary of Joel Mervis, Stanley Uys made the interesting point that Mervis would have been the editor of the *Rand Daily Mail* were he not Jewish. That had been an office rumour for thirty years, and it was interesting to see it confirmed.

I remember, when I announced that I wanted to be a journalist in matric, there was a clear Jewish geography to how my father went about it. He phoned up Benjamin Pogrund. He didn't know Pogrund from a bar of soap, but he phoned him anyway, just because he was the Top Jew in the media.

And then when I decided to look for a job, I didn't even try the Argus Company, because there was the perception that it was more WASP than SAAN. It might have been unfounded, but among Jews the suspicion was always there, that the *Sunday Times* and the *Mail* were better places for Jews.

Was media in this country never a Jewish preserve?

The interesting thing is that the media in this town was originally Jewish. The Argus Company was started by a Jew called Saul Solomon and the *Rand Daily Mail* by a Jew called Freeman Cohen. I know all this because I did my Master's degree on the history of journalism in South Africa. A key period during the 1930s was when Isidore Schlesinger started a rival company to take on Argus. Schlesinger ran the media in South Africa — cinema, music; he was our local approximation of those three Jews who have just taken over America — Spielberg, Katzenberg and Geffen.[4] Anyway, Schlesinger ran into a lot of flak in the Jewish community. In the 1930s the line on being Jewish was keep your nose clean, keep a low profile, don't make any trouble. And here was a Jew running a highly contentious newspaper — the *Daily Express* and *Sunday Express*, which was completely outgunning *The Star* and was pushing an aggressively anti-Hitler line which was embarrassing the local Jewish Board of Deputies. Schlesinger came under intense pressure to sell out, not least from the Jewish community. So he did sell out: he sold the *Daily Express* to Argus who promptly closed it down, and he sold the *Sunday Express* to SAAN, who kept it going as a token newspaper.

But Schlesinger's legacy is very important. The reason why there were

4 At the time of the interview, Spielberg & Co. had just founded a new media conglomerate.

people like Mervis and Doreen Levine in the media is because they were originally hired by him. Johnny Johnson [the conservative editor of *The Citizen*] also started off under Schlesinger. You'd never think he was a Jew; his real name is Meyer Johnson.

Do you see Schlesinger as some sort of role-model for yourself — the outspoken Jewish upstart who started his own paper and challenged the mainstream?

No. Schlesinger was no upstart; he was a media magnate. If I've got a Jewish upstart role-model, it's much more my father. He decided to become an electrician instead of going to university — as he was expected to — because as a Zionist-Socialist, you wanted to be a productive blue-collar worker in Israel. So my dad started an electrician's shop which, quite by chance, turned into an extremely large company . . .

ANTON HARBER

Anton Harber was born in Durban in 1958, and educated at Carmel College and the University of the Witwatersrand, where he obtained a bachelor of arts in political science. His journalistic career started at the *Springs Advertiser*; he also worked at the *Sunday Post* and the *Sowetan* before becoming a political reporter at the *Rand Daily Mail*. When that newspaper was closed down in 1985, he launched the *Weekly Mail* with Irwin Manoim, and the two co-edited this flagship of the alternative press until 1995. Harber has always been the public face of this, South Africa's most respected and critical anti-apartheid newspaper, and is perhaps best known for his excoriation of Adriaan Vlok on television in 1992, following the Inkathagate story, which the paper broke. In the PW Botha era, the *Mail* was perpetually the victim of censorship and banning orders, and Harber won a Pringle Award for press freedom in 1987. In 1992, the paper began carrying the *Guardian Weekly*, and, under Harber in 1995, the two products merged to become the new-look *Mail & Guardian*. Harber has also guided the paper into the broadcasting world, as executive producer of *Weekly Mail* Television's award-winning 'Ordinary People' and as director of the New Radio Consortium, which is planning to apply for a commercial radio licence.

In 1995 the *Mail & Guardian* won the 'best international newspaper' award in the English language section of an international contest run by the International Press Directory in London.

Interviewed by Mark Gevisser
9 April 1995
Johannesburg

What sort of Jewish home did you come from?

The striking thing about my family is that it was very Jewish but not very religious. I think my sense of being Jewish grows very strongly out of my parents' particular experiences, and what they emphasised as important as a result of these experiences.

My father came from a poor background and left school to work in standard six. It was not a very Jewish background, and there was no Jewish consciousness at all. His father was a railway worker, and they were always on the move, usually living in small Afrikaans towns where there were no Jewish


THE WEEKLY MAIL
JUNE 14, 1985
DETAINEES LINK SAP MEN TO RENAMO
THE WEEKLY MAIL
6th JUNE 1986
MANDELA: THE FIRST LEGAL PICTU
THE WEEKLY MA
30th April 19
THE SKOP, SKIET EN DONNER ELECTION
WEEKLY MAIL&GUARDIAN
What the generals didn't tell Modise
PC Report
Well met by Beltel

communities. In fact, my father never even had a bar mitzvah. I think his sole experience of being Jewish was the experience of anti-Semitism, as the only Jewish kid in a small-town *platteland* environment. It meant that he had a very complex relationship to Jewishness, because he was terribly conscious all his life of not having had a bar mitzvah; it was one of his greatest traumas, and he felt very uncomfortable with Jewish rituals, because he didn't know them. So being Jewish for him was about education above all else — because he didn't have the opportunity himself. That coloured his sense of what was important for himself and for his children, and developed his identity as a Jew.

My mother, on the other hand, came from a deeply religious background, observant and kosher, but she wasn't religious herself. So we never had a kosher home, but she would always be queasy about non-kosher things. Again, as with my father, there was an education element. She finished school in Scotland and got a bursary to go to Cambridge to study physics, but she couldn't take it up because her parents died, and she had to go out to work to see her brother through school. For her too, the need for education was at the centre of her identity. So I think what one grew up with was two kinds of conflicting senses of Jewish identity.

The Jewishness I understood was one that valued study and education; the intellectual life, reading and scholastic endeavour. Those things were important to my parents because of their own histories. The other kind of Jewishness was brought to us by Israel: the Jew as Warrior, the Moshe Dayan image, which is what was dominant when I was a kid.

One of the things that fuels the Jewish warrior image is a busting out of the ghetto. That's the emotional rationale of Israel: we won't be victims any more; we're not pale-skinned yeshiva bochas. We are warriors, pioneers. Given your father's experience of anti-Semitism, did you ever have a sense of being beleaguered?

Not at all. In my own life anti-Semitism has been incidental; no more than a comment made when we were playing the Dirkie Uys rugby team. It was different for my father, though. He often told us this anecdote: When he left school in standard six, he went off to become an apprentice fridge mechanic, because the prevailing ethos was 'go get a skill'. He tells the story of how he once got beaten up at school by the under-12 Transvaal boxing champion because he challenged this guy after being called a 'bloody Jew'. Four years later my dad's a fridge mechanic and a guy comes into the shop to buy a fridge. My dad recognises him, and very deliberately organises this guy a fridge that will last one day longer than his guarantee. The revenge of the Jewish fridge mechanic!

Central to my dad's consciousness was not having a bar mitzvah. He was

Left:
Irwin Manoim (left) and Anton Harber (Photograph: Gisèle Wulfsohn)

absolutely firm that we, his children, had to have those things in order that one could be confident in dealing with it as an adult, that one could make those choices. He was never given that choice.

That's coloured my thinking very much. I'm not religious, but I'll make absolutely certain that when my son Jesse is old enough to make his choices, he will not be prejudiced by the fact that he didn't have a proper bris or bar mitzvah or any of the rituals. So the way I see it, it's a question of free choice. My father never had the choice, so he was stuck with this half-identity.

What about your bar mitzvah?

Well, the whole thing with my dad made my bar mitzvah a bit of a trauma too, because he had to go off and say to the rabbi, 'You're calling me up to the *bima* at my son's bar mitzvah, but I am not bar mitzvah myself.' There was a great deal of theological research done quickly, and the rabbi declared that it would be a dual bar mitzvah for me and my father. There was great relief, but I remember battling with my father, practising his *brocha* every night for hours on end — he didn't speak Hebrew, but he was determined to get it right. He was more nervous than I was. But of course, given his background, they went to town on my bar mitzvah, they did the whole huge number.

Did you grow up in a Jewish community?

Durban was a tight-knit Jewish community, where sport was played at the Jewish Club because there was a strong consciousness that we weren't allowed into the country club down the road. We were never mainstream — my father was an eccentric musician and my mother worked. But she was Durban's kosher caterer. She did all the Jewish Club catering for years, and if you wanted a Jewish wedding, you went to Clan caterers. She had grown up in a kosher house, so she knew the ropes. And I went to a Jewish school from nursery to matric. When I was in standard four or five, my mom realised that I only knew Jewish kids, and that I wasn't really aware that there were non-Jewish kids. So she sent me off to cubs, which is not exactly your standard Jewish activity! Off I went to the 37th Durban Scouts Brigade, and came home with my first friend. And I said, 'Mom, isn't it wonderful! Here's my first friend whom I met at cubs and guess what — we've got the same Hebrew teacher!' He was the only other Jewish kid there, and we found each other! My mother gave up after that...

How did your family deal with Zionism?

I come from quite an open-minded liberal family. Neither of my parents were ever strong Zionists. They were Israel supporters — they gave money every year, as everyone did, until the invasion of Lebanon in 1982. That was the

kind of breaking point for my father. He quite publicly stopped. All the Jewish agencies came to visit him, but he was firm — that was it.

My sister volunteered in 1968. She came home on Day One of the Six Day War and said, 'I'm leaving in two days for Israel.' Obviously when an eighteen-year-old comes home and says 'I'm going off to war' there's trauma. In my consciousness the Six Day War is marked very much by my sister leaving home.

Of course at that time there was no ambivalence about supporting Israel. It was only in the early 1970s with the rise of the PLO that you saw those things being tested. We had a few very hardline teachers at Carmel, and I would clash with them. Even though Carmel was reasonably open-minded and probably less doctrinaire than other Jewish day-schools, it was very firm about Zionism and very doctrinaire about Israel, ultra-sensitive to criticism.

Jewish education in South Africa is about both those definitions of Jewishness you spoke about earlier — the warrior-nationalist and the scholar. How, during your time at Carmel, did you begin to develop a political consciousness about the sort of education you were getting?

What struck me very much about our education was that they taught us to think, to question, to be open-minded. It was a very liberal education. You could even question Judaism. But Zionism was the limit. That was when people said, 'You're crossing the line, and that's not acceptable.' There was one conflict, famous in our family, between me and the head of the Hebrew department. I asked a question of a guest speaker, about the Palestinians, and he cut me off, very angrily. He made a big scene afterwards, and said that if that was the kind of question I was going to ask, the school had taught me nothing. It was considered an outrageous thing to say, by both my family and elements of the school.

When you were a teenager, did you make any links between Israel and South Africa?

Those kids who were questioning Zionism at Carmel were also questioning apartheid. I've no doubt that my interest in and concern about what was happening in this country stemmed from the notions of oppression and freedom that one got in one's Jewish education. But it was very striking that the minute you applied those same issues and questions to Israel you were blocked off.

The bad thing about that area was the way they moulded together a sense of Jewishness and Zionism so that you couldn't separate the two. I've never pursued a Jewish religiosity. I didn't belong to Jewish organisations until Jews for Social Justice. Why? Because it was very hard to have a Jewish identity in that period that wasn't Zionist; because if you said 'I'm Jewish and feel

strongly about being Jewish but I don't like what Israel's done' it was looked upon with horror.

So Jews for Social Justice was the first opportunity you saw to be able to claim some kind of public Jewish identity . . .

Yes, to be publicly proud. I thought it was important and wanted to be a part of it. I had always argued that the Jewish community — that organised Jewry — was sinfully silent about apartheid, and that was both a strategic and a moral error. There was a hypocrisy about what we had been taught about oppression, and our silence as a community. One was always conscious there were individuals, like Slovo and Suzman, who stood out, but one was always conscious that the community never honoured those people. I was very critical of the Jewish Board of Deputies for its silence.

It will never be forgotten that it took them until 1983 to criticise apartheid. And they now say, proudly, 'We did it back in 1983' when it's a complete and utter disgrace. It just shows the kind of moral emptiness of Jewish leadership in this country.

So suddenly there's Jews for Social Justice; an organisation that says Jews must stand up as Jews and criticise apartheid. And one of the great things about JSJ is that they forced the Board of Deputies to take them on board and give them representation.

But, interestingly, JSJ steered away from Israel, despite the contradictions in shouting out about human rights abuse in South Africa but keeping quiet about it in Israel. If they had addressed Israel they would have splintered. They wouldn't have survived. So the decision they took was not to deal with Israel. I think it was the right decision. I accepted it as necessary.

Is it easier, now, to be a proud Jew without having to be a Zionist than it was then?

Three factors have helped change things. Firstly, JSJ played a critical role in giving people a place to dissent from the hypocrisy of the mainstream Jewish community.

Secondly, many Jewish activists who had left the country in the 1960s came back — Slovo, Kasrils, etc. That they were noticeably Jewish and activists made a difference. The third factor is that Israel and Zionism itself has changed, and now there's an accepted Jewishness and Zionism that is critical of the policies of the Israeli government. I think there's always been a stronger strain of criticism of Israel among Jews in America and within Israel too; in this country, it wasn't there. It was much more rigid here than in US and Israel. There was no dissenting Jewish voice.

Did you ever have aspirations for the Weekly Mail *to be that kind of Jewish voice?*

No! One shied away from those issues in the early eighties, because they were no-win issues. We'd dissent from mainstream Jewish opinion when it came to criticising apartheid, but not when it came to criticising Israel. One welcomed Jews speaking out about this country's injustice. On a purely pragmatic level one realised that if you then said to those people, 'But what about Israel?' it would all crack up; those people would run for cover, and one didn't want that. In retrospect, perhaps we could have — and should have — done more, but we didn't.

But you did make a point of standing up, as a Jew, against apartheid . . .

I once commissioned a piece, 'Where were all the rabbis?', at a time when the church leaders were making a noise. Years before, as a junior reporter, I found myself covering church stories — because there was inevitably quite a lot of church stuff in the early eighties, given the stand the church leaders took. I remember, I was assigned to cover the Eloff Commission into the South African Council of Churches, and so, every day for months, I was there. One day I was in the lift with Bishop Tutu, and he told me how much he was enjoying my coverage, and he suggested that I apply for an SACC scholarship to study church issues around the world. He said he would recommend me and get back to me. I was a bit taken aback and I just said, 'That's interesting.' Nothing was ever said after that, and I know it's because someone said to Tutu, 'Hang on, he's Jewish!' I was very lightly amused. I think it's a very telling situation where, as a politically conscious Jewish journalist, one became interested in church politics but one had no involvement in Jewish politics because Jewish politics had nothing whatsoever to do with what was going on in this country.

So once I became a public figure as editor of the *Mail*, I wanted to take that on. I was only too happy to speak at the launch of JSJ. The role I found for myself was to show that Jews could be responsible in this country. I wanted people to know that I was a Jewish person taking a stand against apartheid. Organised Jewry had done the Jewish community a disservice. What was important about being Jewish in South Africa was engaging in South Africa. That was more important than Israel. The criticism we always voiced was that the Jewish community was quick to speak about injustice towards Jews but deliberately shied away from taking a stand against any other injustice. And my argument was that there would be a backlash against that. As I think there was. So the solution to all that was, as a Jewish person, to say, 'I'm involved in South Africa and Israel is of secondary importance to me.'

Was that also, for you, a personal way of avoiding an ambivalence that all people concerned with human rights carry about Israel?

Yes, I think it was. I've always had clear, firm views about Israel but yes, there is an ambivalence; a recognition that Israel is important to our security and identity as Jewish people, but a disgust with a lot of what was happening in Israel in the name of the Jewish people.

But that was not a view one could articulate in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s without triggering an enormous storm in the whole Jewish community.

There is another element to all this, and that was the constant embarrassment of Israel's relationship with South Africa. That was one way of articulating a criticism of Israel, without having to deal with Zionism or what Israel was all about. It was a source of real embarrassment to Jewish lefties. But they found themselves nervous, within left activist circles, to articulate criticism of Israel for fear of the way it might be used. The predominant position amongst Jews in South Africa was that if you criticised Israel in any way you were an enemy of Israel and thus of Jews. I think that's why I stayed away from these issues.

More recently, you did put yourself on the line. I'm thinking of the Jud Süss *controversy [where the Jewish Board of Deputies managed to force the* Weekly Mail *Film Festival to withdraw a screening of a Nazi propaganda movie as part of a programme looking into hate speech and censorship]. There we really did have to go head-to-head with organised SA Jewry.*

It wasn't a fight I was looking for. People tried to stop it being shown, and I had to make a decision, to take the stand that we had to show it. I thought the reaction to *Jud Süss* typified the kind of crude, knee-jerk response of organised Jewry to criticism, a response that says, 'Stop this! Block it off! Go for these people as much as you can!' Whereas in fact I thought there was a more intelligent, considered, constructive response. And some of the people arguing the other side were really the most narrow-minded; to me, the ugly face of Jewish identity. It spoke of Jewish chauvinism, seeking out anti-Semitism where it didn't exist, and creating a sense of Jews being always under threat and under attack.

What we argued was that we were showing the film within the context of a film festival to discuss censorship, at a critical time in South African history when one subject under debate was hate speech. Everyone knew it had to be dealt with, and the question we were asking was, 'Is censorship the way to do it?' The opponents to the screening of the movie were pre-empting a vital discussion. I had never seen *Jud Süss*, and critical for me was that the people opposing it and describing it had never seen it either. And so the Jewish Board of Deputies was denying us the opportunity to ask and explore those very

questions! If you're not even prepared to look at the film and ask these questions then you're just being narrow-minded and destructive.

There's an interesting sequel to all this. Last year, I was asked to speak at a gathering of the Transvaal Jewish Board of Deputies, because they knew there would be a keynote speech arguing for Jews to push for race hate legislation. I stood up and said that, as a Jewish person, [I felt] it would be utterly wrong for Jews to take up this position, and the argument was won. My argument was that we were emerging from a period of heavy restriction into a period of freedom, and although that freedom might go overboard, one didn't want to be seen, as the Jewish community, to be trying to limit that freedom and reintroduce censorship. It was just out of step with the political mood of the time. [It must be said that the Board itself was deeply divided about *Jud Süss*. And many members of the Yad Vashem Holocaust Foundation had booked seats for the screening, hoping to learn more about combating hate speech.]

Has there ever been any other time, apart from the* Jud Süss *event, where the* Weekly Mail *has been involved in a public controversy where the fact that you were Jewish has played a role?

Yes, during the Salman Rushdie affair, when we got it in the neck for inviting him to South Africa to participate in our Book Week. Although I don't ever remember it being articulated, in our meetings with the Muslim community there was a very strong consciousness that here were two Jewish editors doing this, and there was the Muslim community up in arms.

Do you think of the* Mail & Guardian *as a 'Jewish' newspaper?

No, not at all. Despite the fact that its co-editors for the first ten years were Jewish. I suppose, if you define 'Jewish' in its widest, loosest sense, then yes, that has been reflected, through Irwin [Manoim] and myself and how the position we always put for ourselves was a questioning and critical one, for that is the core value I associate with a Jewish identity. But I think those are values that all thinking, independent-minded South Africans espouse.

None the less, there has always been a high proportion of Jewish staffers at the* Mail. *Do you think it is because Jews feel more comfortable here? Is it perhaps because the mainstream media has a reputation for being anti-Semitic?

When I think about it, the only time I personally experienced what I interpreted to be anti-Semitism was when I met Jim Bailey [the founder and publisher of *Drum*] to ask him to invest in the *Weekly Mail*. I phoned him, and he said, 'Meet me at The Club', which I worked out to be the Rand Club. This was 1985, and The Club did not yet welcome Jews. So when myself, Irwin and Steven Goldblatt met Bailey at the doors of the club, and began to

fill in our names in the register, Bailey looked at us and our names and said, 'Let's not go have lunch. Let's just sit down here in the lobby.' He listened to us for no more than ten minutes and then dismissed us. It was very striking to us that we never got upstairs. There was never any anti-Semitism expressed, but we were offended by the way he treated us, and we wondered whether it was because he was embarrassed at the sudden realisation that he would be playing host, at The Club, to three clearly Jewish boys, or whether it was just because he didn't want to deal with three lefties with a wild idea. One way or the other, he chose not to invest.

Let's go back to your comment about how the return of people like Slovo and Kasrils to South Africa has given us models for Jews in the anti-apartheid struggle. What do you think of Jewry claiming someone like Slovo? Is it opportunistic?

Yes, one did often have the feeling, 'What a chutzpah!' I mean, where were you all these years, and suddenly Joe Slovo is a hero! But I must say, I don't feel that way about Chief Rabbi [Cyril] Harris, who has been consistently to the left of the Jewish community here. He gave what I think was the best and most considered speech at Slovo's funeral. I felt good and proud.

And proud too that Joe Slovo could have a rabbi at his funeral, whereas my sense is that if a Slovo had died and been buried in Johannesburg ten years ago, the whole Jewish aspect would have been more sensitive and uncomfortable. The Jewish community wouldn't have wanted to claim a 'terrorist', and even if they had, you would have found black activists saying, 'What about Israel and the Palestinians', and it would have been very awkward.

Now, though, we can have a dialogue with organised Jewry. At the moment, for example, I'm speaking to every member of the Jewish Board of Deputies to bend their ears on why I think the King David admissions policy is wrong.[1] And the amazing thing is, they all agree with me!

Why do you think the King David admissions policy is wrong?

I had always said, because of my experiences at Carmel, that I'd rather Jesse didn't go to a Jewish school, that while my kid would have a Jewish education in the home and understand Jewish ritual and ceremony, I didn't think he should go to a Jewish school because my experience of them is of a narrow-mindedness and a wrong attitude to engaging in this country.

But when Jesse was ready to go to school I was struggling to find an appropriate one, and a lot of people recommended King David. I went to see it, and it seemed excellent, just right for my kid. I also had a sense that organised Jewry's attitudes had changed, and I expected to see that reflected in

1 The King David Schools are five private Jewish day-schools in Johannesburg, centrally administered by the South African Jewish Board of Education.

changes to the nature of Jewish education.

But that's exactly what I didn't see. It all started when I phoned King David and said I had a four-year-old ready to start school. When I gave my name, the first question she asked was, 'Look, excuse me for asking, but there is no point in pursuing this if I don't ask it. Is the child Jewish?'

I was taken aback and said, 'He is. But why do you ask?' Her response was that they didn't have space for non-Jewish kids. I told her I thought that was offensive, and she gave me 101 practical reasons: 'We can't cater for everyone; our priority has to be Jewish kids; there's such a demand, we're full up and only if we've got space can we consider non-Jews . . .'

And I said, 'Well, if you're full up then I'm wasting my time.' She responded, 'No, no, no, we've got sixteen places.' I was outraged. My impression was she was giving me a whole lot of bullshit reasons when the fact was that they had chosen to keep the school purely Jewish.

That attitude represents the same kind of ethnocentric overly defensive Judaism I disliked so much at school. And the tragic consequence is that the kids who go to King David will always miss out on going to school with black kids. Is that possible in this day and age? We all suffered because we grew up isolated from black kids. Even if I do want to bring Jesse up as a proud Jew, I don't want to reproduce that isolation in him.

Another element is that it's politically so foolish, because there's bound to be a backlash against an all-white school in South Africa. You've got a damn good school with all these fantastic resources, and you're not making them available!

How does your son express his Jewishness?

It all came about because his first babysitter was a Christian with some strange religious ideas, and so when Jesse started to talk about Christ, we had to say to him 'We're Jewish', and put a perspective on it. He was confused about why he should be Jewish and why he was different from Adelaide, so we had to give him some education.

More recently, he had a trauma about death, about not wanting to die, and wanting to know where his grandfather was, and what would happen if his parents died. We were grappling with what explanation to give him.

My instinct was to say, 'When you die, you die. But you live on in people's memory.' But my wife's instinct was that the easiest thing to do with a child is give them the theology, because they can understand that now and sort the rest out later.

His uncle said to him, 'When you go to heaven you can eat as much ice-cream as you want.' And Jesse burst into tears and said: 'I don't want to eat only ice-cream, I want a balanced diet!' Which is, I suppose, a very Jewish response to heaven.

Let's go back to your own childhood. Apart from being at a Jewish school and coming from a Jewish family, what was your involvement with the Jewish community?

A critical element in my social and political consciousness came through Habonim. As a kid, it was initially entirely a social thing. We met on Sunday evenings, and it was a jol. It coincided with the beginnings of one's interest in the other sex, and Habonim was where it was happening! You went to *machaneh* because it was a jol, because you might hit it off with a girl on the train. The fact that it was Jewish and Zionist was important only in the sense that one felt relaxed and welcome.

But the ethics one learned at Habonim, which was then kibbutz collectivism, was very formative in my political consciousness as a kid. It was the first place where one heard about socialism and what it meant. It was all a glorification of the type of collectivism where you toil in the fields and teach and help each other and share all your children; it was that kind of radical collectivism.

What I find amazing about Habonim in South Africa is that it is a mainstay of precisely that narrow-minded bourgeois Jewish mentality you have attacked, and yet there it was teaching socialism! Was any connection made to the South African situation?

I think there was a level whereby the public face of Habonim was a Zionist one, whereas there were key people within the movement for whom socialism was much more important; kibbutzniks, socialist-Zionists expressing the two simultaneously. And so yes, there were elements who made the connection. There were strong socialists who talked about SA, and so it was the first place where one had those ideas and engaged in debates of that kind.

But the overriding message of youth movements like Habonim is that all Jews should make* aliya *to Israel. Did you ever consider it?

Well, I went on Ulpan. In standard eight, certain kids were allowed to go, and my parents were nervously willing to send me, because they wanted me to experience Israel. It was a complete trauma, because our group was there when the October 1973 War broke out, and we found ourselves caught in the middle of a war. And so my first and only experience of Israel is of a wartime Israel, even though the only immediate danger was on Yom Kippur, when the sirens went off and we didn't know where the bomb shelter was, and we had to find it and sit in it for a few hours. Then there was always a consciousness about being ready to go. There were blackouts, and I have a scar on my forehead from hitting it during a blackout when bending down to pick up a torch I had dropped. So I've got a war wound . . .

Was it fun? Was it scary?

It was scary. They rallied us around by saying we were going to play our part, and in fact later in the war they sent us off to a kibbutz where men had gone off to fight. So we were doing our bit. We were very much feeling the onslaught. Remember, that was the war Israel nearly lost, so there was this terrible fear that the tanks were going to come rolling over the hillside!

Having been in Israel at that time must have done something to your political consciousness about the country.

Well yes, I have a love for Israel, and a love for Jerusalem, a city where I spent three or four very traumatic months. It's a wonderful, wonderful city. The beauty! Very clear in my memory is a walk we used to do, before the war began and after it was over, around the walls of the old city on a Friday afternoon when the whole place was quiet.

I've never been back, but I have always wanted to. I remember very clearly driving in a car with one of the organisers, when they announced the death figures a few weeks into the war, and it was a real shock, because they were far higher casualties than Israel had ever suffered before. I remember a sense of complete shock and this woman just bursting into tears. So yes, those times mark themselves very clearly on my consciousness. I think it's reflected in my ambivalence to Israel all the way through.

They also sent us off for two weeks for a youth military camp. So despite my love for Israel that came from being there when it was under siege, I think that it was on that trip that I really saw and understood that militaristic definition of Jewishness I spoke about earlier, as opposed to the intellectual definition of Jewishness I grew up with in my home.

But there was no doubt which was dominant in my consciousness, and it's not unrelated to the fact that I myself never went to the army. It was very clear to me before leaving school that I would avoid the army at all costs, and for a long time I structured my life around that, moving addresses as the army caught up with me, keeping open options for leaving the country.

When I look back on the history of my Jewish identity, what I said at the very beginning of this conversation comes back most strongly: that I am the product of two competing definitions of Jewishness — the Warrior-Jew and the Scholar-Jew. I suspect that over the few years following my time in Israel, I grappled with that dichotomy and landed up rejecting a militant Zionism and a Jewishness that put a high value on the warrior.

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

Law never made men a whit more just; and, by means of their respect for it, even the well-disposed are daily made the agents of injustice. A common and natural result of an undue respect for law is, that you may see a file of soldiers all marching in admirable order . . . to the wars, against their wills, ay, against their common sense and consciences, which make it very steep marching indeed . . .

Henry David Thoreau, Civil Disobedience, *1849*

Be careful of governments, they only befriend you when they want something from you . . .

Ethics of the Fathers, Chapter 2, Teaching 3

היו זהירין ברשות, שאין מקרבין לו לאדם
אלא לצורך עצמן

פרקי אבות, פרק ב, משנה ג.