



My father was an electrical engineer and my mother was a dentist, and my father's only sister was married to an architect who had emigrated to what was then Palestine in September 1933. We were planning to go there as well, but we didn't have the money for what was called a 'capitalist certificate'. To get this you needed to deposit one thousand pounds in cash. But at that particular stage Jews could get into Palestine more easily if they went in as farmers. Now my parents and other academics weren't farmers, so some people set up a farmer training school in Luxemburg, in a place called Mondorf, where they had architects, doctors and engineers and wanted to make farmers out of them so that they could go to Palestine and farm. I'm not sure if any of those particular people ever went to farm but my parents certainly didn't. My father would never have made a good farmer, my mother possibly.

I wasn't able to stay with them because they were in this little village in a single house near the fields where they did their training. So I had to be shunted off to Luxemburg City which was perhaps 20 kilometres away, and stayed with a Jewish family. Since I was only a little over ten years old, I remember crying myself to sleep because I was homesick the first night. What subsequently happened is that I stayed there for nearly three years and every Sunday I went by train to visit my parents in Mondorf.

Anyway, my parents didn't go to Palestine because they were a long way down the waiting list. I don't really know all the details. But then there was the opportunity for my father to become one of the 537 passengers of the *Stuttgart*. How he got to know about this I do not know, but he went to South Africa on the *Stuttgart*, and my mother and I followed nine months later. We arrived in Johannesburg in June 1937.

Did you really have to leave Luxemburg? Wasn't Luxemburg neutral during the war?

First of all, we're talking about pre-war years. When war broke out I was at school in Johannesburg. Luxemburg was only an interim place where you weren't allowed to work as a foreigner. My parents weren't working, they were training. They couldn't have earned a living, so they couldn't stay there. When Palestine became an improbable option, they had to find some other place. Incidentally, Luxemburg, like Belgium and the Netherlands, was occupied by the Germans during the war. I discovered during a visit in 1969 that they destroyed the synagogue in which I had my bar mitzvah in 1936.

Left:

Franz Auerbach (Photograph: Gisèle Wulfsohn)

When you came to Johannesburg your home language was German, wasn't it? Did you know English?

Well, that's a bit complicated. Yes, of course my home language was German, but let me describe two steps beyond that. One concerns French. Luxemburg is a bilingual country, but after the war it was in fact drawn more towards the French because its people were upset at having been occupied by the Germans. Actually the German spoken by the people in Luxemburg is a dialect somewhat like Schwitzerdeutsch which no German can understand. Of course at that time the official languages were German and French. I mention this because having gone to school there for three years I learned a certain amount of French and have still a bit of it. Not a tremendous amount, but I can read French and pronounce it and it's useful. I didn't know any English except that through a quirk of history I have a grandmother who was born in Camden, South Carolina, USA and who came to Germany when her father went back there at the age of sixty — she was then eleven and she knew English, and her parents came with her and they knew English. My great-grandmother was born in Charleston, South Carolina.

The relevance of this is that my grandmother taught me, as grandmothers do, nursery rhymes, but she taught me English nursery rhymes like 'Hickory, Dickory, Dock' and 'See-Saw, Marjorie Daw'. These are a few that I remember. Because of this somewhat odd connection, my mother also knew some English and she tried to teach me a little bit of English in Luxemburg before we came here. So yes, I knew a bit of English, but very little.

How did you find adapting to school life in Johannesburg?

I was fourteen when we came to Johannesburg. I had been in school in Germany from 1929 to 1934, and then in Luxemburg from 1934 to 1937 where I had to make language adaptations, so it wasn't simple. I felt a little uncomfortable at the beginning, but there were other German-Jewish youngsters here — not a huge number, but some. You know that I ultimately became a language teacher and I've done a fair amount of writing. So presumably language isn't the biggest headache in my skills. I can't sing and I can't draw, but I can talk and I can write. So I didn't find it as difficult as I might have done. But another problem was that I had to learn Afrikaans. I do remember my teacher being particularly irritated that I didn't even know that when you start a sentence in Afrikaans, although you normally start with a capital letter, if it's the indefinite article 'n you don't start it with the capital letter.

I didn't really have much trouble, though. In the second year I was here I came first in class, partly because I think I'd had maybe one year more of schooling than fitted in here. On the whole I didn't have any scholastic problems.

Can we look now at when you went to university? Was that the start of your sense of the injustice and the increasing racialism in South Africa?

I didn't ever go to university. I left school at the end of standard eight, at the end of 1939, and went to work. I had to work to help my parents who weren't earning a great deal of money. My father couldn't get a job in electrical engineering, so he went around Johannesburg on a bicycle with a basket selling German polony to German Jewish refugees who lived in various flats in the Hillbrow/Berea area and other places like that. My mother would have had to study for three years to get her dental qualifications recognised here, even though she had practised for twenty years. So she spent eleven years in a factory sewing dresses. I mention that to show why I had to help, but many other refugees did similar jobs in the beginning; many weren't earning much money. As soon as I could, I started to go into commerce to earn money.

While I was working in commerce, I did my matric at the Technical College and subsequently a BA degree through Unisa. So except for ten months at the Teachers' Training College, I haven't done any full-time studying since standard eight.

What brought you to teaching as a profession?

Two things. First of all, in 1938 when I was in standard seven, I had a teacher whom I greatly admired and I think that from that moment on I wanted to be a teacher. Secondly, after Easter 1946, while I was working for what was then the Waygood Otis Lift Company, a German-Jewish friend who also worked there one day invited me to come with him because he was teaching in an African night school. I didn't know what African night schools were then. He took me to the Mayibuye African Night School in the Ferreira Indian School at 28 Market Street, two blocks from the Johannesburg Public Library. That began my twenty-one-year-long association with African night schools which in fact predated my doing teaching as a full-time profession. What happened was that when I got my degree I went on working for the Waygood Otis Lift Company for another two years, but I wanted to switch to teaching.

I finished my BA in 1944, and I remember on Kruger Day 1946 I finally sat down and wrote a letter of application to the College of Education for a one-year postgraduate diploma. That's what I did in 1947, and I started teaching in 1948. But in fact I'd started teaching in the night school in 1946. And I had earlier experience: during 1938 and 1939 I spent my afternoons after school giving English lessons to German-Jewish refugees — many three times my age — for a shilling an hour!

When you started teaching in the night school, to what extent were you aware of

discrimination in education?

Obviously one became aware of the fact that there were adults who hadn't been to school. But I can't say I was consumed with anger at the injustices of the system at the age of twenty-two. But on the wavelength which other people and I have kept on all our lives, if you become aware of racial discrimination and you are a Jewish person who has lived at the time of the Holocaust, I don't know how you can be indifferent to it. I've never been able to understand that — then or now. So, yes, I was aware of it, but not terribly politically involved.

Looking back, can you remember any distinct contrast between South Africa as it was in 1946 and what it became after 1948?

No. I taught at the night school in 1946 and 1947. I took a one-year break during my first year of teaching, and then I went back to the night schools for another nineteen years until they shut them all down. I can't remember particular differences from my private knowledge. I think that the difference between South Africa before the National Party government and after is not one of good and evil. It isn't like that. Before 1948 it was a more tolerant system of racial discrimination, from which there were escapes, but differential treatment by race was well extended before 1948.

Attempts at change were made. For example, after the war the United Party government appointed the Fagan Commission — under the chairmanship of Mr Justice Fagan — to look into the question of urban Africans and what should be done about them. The Fagan Report came out and recommended that the 1923 system, that regarded the urban Africans as temporary residents, should be scrapped. I have no doubt that the United Party would have adopted that recommendation as policy, but they were kicked out of office and the new government then went in the opposite direction with fervour. Legislation was introduced which gradually worsened the conditions of African people in the country. So it was a gradual thing, but from 1948 there was a very determined policy of race classification, the Group Areas Act and Bantu Education. If you go no further than those three, you can see that those radically altered not only the living conditions but also the expectations of African people.

Then you got to the stage when they actually tried to make black people foreigners in their own country. Perhaps I could give an example here that I remember from the late seventies. The Institute of Race Relations, in which I was by that time heavily involved, had an African clergyman as President — the Reverend E E Mahabane. He was in his seventies, I think, and I remember him saying one day that he remembered that as a young boy he had played on the southern slope of the mountains south of Johannesburg . . . And I said to myself, how can you thrust alienation on a person by suddenly saying that

you no longer belong here, that you must have the citizenship of a homeland 'somewhere else'?

Now I have always identified with that, especially because it happened to my family as well. I can trace my family back in Germany to the fifteenth century, and then suddenly my father gets told he is no longer a German citizen, even though he loved his country, fought in the First World War . . . his brother Franz, aged twenty-one, was killed fighting on the German side in the First World War.

But these new laws, of course, took time. It didn't happen immediately in 1948. Now you were teaching in a state school. To what extent during the years you were in the service of state schools did you find — if I can put it this way — the noose tightening on teachers? Around what they could teach? In respect of restrictions within the system?

First of all, I taught in schools for whites — three years in a primary school and nineteen in high schools — and quite soon I got involved in teacher association affairs and eventually became president of the Transvaal Teachers Association [TTA] so I knew about rules and regulations and salaries and all the rest of it. At a later stage, I started an investigation into history textbooks and it's perhaps interesting to say what made me do that.

In 1957, the University of the Witwatersrand started a postgraduate school of education. One day — I was teaching at Athlone Boys' High at the time — I saw a notice on the staff notice-board for a two-year part-time course and I enrolled for it and attended lectures two afternoons a week. In the second year, Professor Lloyd, who was in charge of the school of education, brought a visiting lecturer here. His name was Professor Joseph Lauwerys. I didn't know anything about this man. He was a professor from London and I sat in his seminar and I heard him say, 'South Africa is the only country in the world that uses its education system to keep the people divided.' I had the typical white South African reaction — he comes from London, how does he know? I was ignorant, I didn't know he was one of the world's leading authorities on comparative education. I asked myself, 'How can you test that?' and since my subjects were English and history, I did an investigation into South African history textbooks and syllabuses and I think it's fair to say that I was never the same again after doing that piece of research, which was carried out during the second term of 1960, when I took long leave.

That research led to the work you did for your PhD?

The PhD was a very much later thing. I did it in the seventies and it really doesn't have anything to do with the history research. The PhD arose from the fact that, having by then spent many years on the executive of the TTA, I had done a lot of comparing of the quality of black/white education. I've

always tried to keep in touch with black and white and 'coloured' and Indian education. I've never focused on one to the exclusion of the others. By then I had written a lot, and I had served on the Sprocas Education Commission. In August 1971 we brought out our report, *Education Beyond Apartheid*. After that I started thinking about a particular question. How does an education system actually perform when part of it has compulsory school attendance and the other part has not? What's the result of that? If you want to dig into statistics a bit deeply, particularly over a period of fifty years or so, you don't easily get access to all the records you want unless you are linked to a university. I enrolled for a PhD with the University of Natal and I was told, 'You can't just look at the statistics, you must also look at the reasons.' So that second thesis was separate.

You published a good deal about your research into the bias in history textbooks. Could you say what effect it had not only nationally, but on your own career, your personal life?

At one point I was vilified by the Transvaal Education Department. What happened was that I did the research in April, May and June 1960. Because I discovered what I thought was a disturbing trend of increasing ethnic prejudice in certain textbooks and of decreasing emphasis on world history in Transvaal syllabuses, I felt it was important for people to know about that — so I leaked the story to the *Sunday Times*. I knew I wasn't allowed to criticise my employers, the Transvaal Education Department, but — perhaps through careless proofreading, which because of pressure of time I did on a Saturday afternoon over the telephone — the piece contained a sentence that criticised the Department by implication, and I was found guilty of misconduct and warned on that occasion. There was an actual disciplinary hearing.

The offending sentence was, 'Recent trends in education in the Transvaal are designed to inculcate strong prejudices against non-Afrikaans groups in South Africa.' I should have changed the word 'designed'! So there was a disciplinary hearing, and I was officially 'warned', but it wasn't so very serious a matter because my 'criticism of the Department' was a very minor part of everything I said about the teaching of history and prejudice and alienation and so on. What irritated the other side — those right-wing history people and authorities particularly — was that the time was 1960, and that what I said was published in the *Sunday Times*.

It took some time for this work to become a thesis. In fact, although I originally presented it as a BEd thesis, which is supposed to be a short one, it grew and grew, and in the end I was told to do something else in a hurry for the BEd and to leave this one for an MEd, which is what happened. When it finally became an MEd thesis, it again hit the press, and there was again a fuss in the English newspapers. Then the Afrikaans newspapers got very angry and

went to their supporters and on one occasion went to an inspector, Dr JJ van Tonder, who was an expert in history and interpreted history from the right-wing Afrikaner perspective . . . He then said to the *Transvaler*, 'Die man staan goed bekend by die Departement — die by suig heuning en die spinnekop gif.' In other words, 'We know the man well in the Department — the bee sucks honey and the spider poison.' Ever since then, one of my sons ironically called me 'the poisonous spider'. I mention that because there was some antagonism from that side. But there was also a great deal of support from people who knew more about the problems of history teaching than I did. I came into this suddenly wanting to investigate. I hadn't been teaching history for thirteen years because by and large I taught more English than history.

The MEd thesis was published by Balkema in 1965 in a slightly abridged version as *The Power of Prejudice in South African Education*. Interestingly enough, by the time this book actually came from the printer, in the Christmas holidays 1965-66, the author of the book was in fact President of the Transvaal Teachers' Association. So, much to the anger of the establishment, when it was published it hit the press again, but I was by then somewhat immune from more crude attacks. But then I couldn't get promotion. That did happen.

How was this made clear to you? Only in the fact that you would apply for jobs and were continually refused?

Exactly. I was Senior Assistant in English at Hyde Park. First at Athlone, and then at Hyde Park. I couldn't get to a vice-principalship, and I did hear on one occasion that there was someone blocking me in the Department. I don't think it's worth going into that in detail.

But it was never said to you in any kind of official way?

No, it wasn't. And the blockage didn't upset me for too long because I had the good fortune of having married the right person and having the right children. I finished my term as President of the TTA — it's a one-year presidency — in September 1966, and I tried for one or two other promotions and couldn't get one. I had at that time an MEd cum laude, a thesis published as a book, and was President of the TTA and had been teaching for 15 years, so you would have thought something was possible. But I could not get promotion to a vice-principalship. So that's the context. In 1969 my family — my wife and my two eldest children — said to me, 'Dad, why do you hit your head against a brick wall? You know it's because of what you write. Get out of the Department and do other things.' Now at the age of forty-six most families would give you the opposite advice if you planned to do that. They would say it's not safe, you've got to earn money. I'm eternally grateful to my family for having pushed me into leaving the Department at

the end of 1969, for I then had twenty fruitful years in Teacher-in-Service Education.

Could you talk about this Teacher-in-Service Education? I remember well meeting you often at the house in Honey Street [Berea, Johannesburg] where the TTA had its offices. What work did you do then?

In 1970 the TTA had a conference on in-service training and by then I had read something about the rise of teachers' centres in Britain from 1967 onwards. So the movement was quite new. After reading a bit about it, I put a proposal to the TTA that we should work towards starting such an institution, which didn't exist in South Africa yet. They accepted the idea that I should be a part-time study group organiser for them. It was a bit risky, because I didn't earn enough from part-time work to make a living, and I did another part-time job to balance the books for a while. But what came out of this experiment, which lasted three and half years, was that there was great interest and a lot of support from English-speaking white teachers for in-service activities organised by a teachers' association rather than by the state. Of course, that had to some extent to do with what I might call a stand-off between English-medium education and the Transvaal Education Department, which in those days was heavily Afrikaans-dominated and didn't have any senior people above the level of inspector who were English-speaking.

My own personal dealings with the TTA and the THSTA [Transvaal High School Teachers' Association], as it was known then, gave me the sense that the profession as a whole was an extremely conservative body.

First of all, there were at that stage three teachers' associations for teachers who worked for the Transvaal Education Department. They were the Transvaalse Onderwysersvereniging [TO], which was largely Afrikaans-speaking and conservative, to the extent that as recently as the eighties it was perceived that some of their leadership leaned more to the Conservative than to the National Party. So it had a long history of conservative views on teaching, on history, and so on. Then there was the Transvaal Teachers' Association, started in 1904, which was English-speaking and by and large quite liberal, as I shall show. The Transvaal High School Teachers' Association was a body started in the twenties by high school teachers who had two reasons for being separate. The one was that, on the whole, high school teachers are somewhat snobbish: they consider that they are academically and professionally superior to primary school teachers, let alone pre-school teachers, so they have separate associations to address what they consider separate — and presumably more important — concerns. But, in fairness, the THSTA also tried very hard and very valiantly for many years to cater for both English- and Afrikaans-

speaking high school teachers. One of the ways in which they made this manifest was that one year they had a president from an English-medium school, and the next from an Afrikaans-medium school.

Now it needs to be said that the THSTA was squeezed out by the increasing pressure put on Afrikaans-speaking high school teachers to join the dominant TO, and it was a pressure which they ultimately found impossible to resist. The remnant of the THSTA was later absorbed into the TTA. I am going into this detail because, given its membership, the THSTA had to be a lot more conservative than the TTA. Let me give you an example of the TTA position. The TTA was for many years the only association which pleaded for the permanent employment of married women when no other association in the country — including black ones, I may add — was interested in that. Maybe I should permit myself two stories about that because they are nicely anecdotal. The one is that there was a Transvaal Married Women Teachers' Association for some years who pushed for this and who weren't recognised by the state and so they worked through the TTA. I well remember an occasion when I was on the executive of the TTA (which I was for many years) when the President of the Married Women Teachers' Association thanked me particularly for taking up their concerns. I wasn't the only one, but she chose to thank me, and the way she said it was, 'We thank Mr Auerbach, who has made married women his special concern.' So of course I got a lot of ragging in the executive committee over that one. The other story is a rather more substantial one. When I was President of the TTA, we passed resolutions in conference. All three associations were called to Head Office to present their conference resolutions. The TTA regularly included the request for the permanent employment of married women irrespective of whether the Department said yes or no. We felt we needed to make the point because we believed it was a matter of principle. The then Deputy Director of Education, Dr Koos Mulder, looking over his spectacles when he came to that resolution said, 'Mr Auerbach, why does your association keep asking for this when you know it's against Department policy?' You know how you can feel things in a room. Around me were five other males, also representing THSTA and TO who had their resolutions, and they were getting ready to giggle about how I'd answer. I replied, 'We do it, Mr Chairman, because we hope one day to persuade you to our point of view.' There was no smirk after that. And three years later the Department accepted married women in permanent posts.

Why do you think they did? I know, as you know, many stories of the incredible hardship of married women who gave their whole lives to the profession and when they retired had no pension, nothing. Why do you think the Department changed its policy?

Well, in the end they had to do it because the pressure was too strong, both from the public and from teachers. Perhaps one of the most tragic cases is that

of the late Dr Irene Jackson who was Vice-Rector of the Johannesburg College of Education and rather late in life chose to get married, so they kicked her out because married women couldn't hold permanent posts, let alone promotion posts. She was one of the most eminent biology teachers in this country. But even though she was Vice-Rector, she had to go. What that shows, incidentally, is not only what the regulations were, but also how they were applied. At that level they could have used their discretion to make an exception, but they didn't.

Why do you think the black teachers' associations also supported this discrimination against married women?

That's like asking why are women discriminated against in society. It's a male-dominated society. On the whole, men hold on to their privileges. In fairness, if we are going to discuss women in education, there is a memory — or there was, certainly among white teachers — of the Depression years [the early thirties] when there were men who couldn't get teaching posts and therefore had no money to support their families. They had the impression that in some families a man and a woman both worked in teaching and if she had a permanent job then the man might be out of work and the woman might have a permanent post. That memory kept men from agreeing to change the law for a long time.

The reality is that the Cape and Free State provinces didn't change this law. They hung on much longer than the Transvaal and Natal. In the end, the National Education Department had to make a law for the whole country as the only way to force the Cape and the Free State into line to make this gradual concession to the rights of women.

And yet even when I started teaching about thirty years ago there were more women than men in the classroom.

Yes, indeed — that was at a time when there were only two professions that women could enter: teaching and nursing. As a matter of interest, I think in white society teaching for young women on the whole had more status as a profession than nursing.

In black society it was the other way around. Interestingly enough, it was so because black teachers used to earn less than white teachers and obviously black women teachers even less than black males, or white women for that matter. But in nursing I believe there was equality of training and equality of certification. I'm not sure about equality of salaries. A black nurse and a white nurse obtained the same certificate, and because of this greater equality in the nursing profession, nursing had far higher status in black society than had teaching.

What efforts did the TTA and the Teachers' Centre make to involve black teachers in its work?

From 1971 to 1974 I ran part-time study groups, and in the middle of 1974 the executive of the TTA accepted a proposal I had made to them to turn this into a proper teachers' centre even though we didn't have premises and in a sense never did even later. At the meeting of the executive of the TTA at which they officially accepted turning it into a full-time teachers' centre with me as organiser, the general secretary of the TTA, the late Tubby Duncan, who was also a past president of the TTA, asked — out of the blue as far as I was concerned, I didn't know he was going to do it — 'Should we not accept teachers of all races in our Teachers' Centre?' My jaw dropped because I knew it would have immense implications in the end. The executive accepted it.

Easily or with difficulty?

I don't think with difficulty. You can be cynical and say that maybe some thought it would be so difficult to implement that it was only on paper. But that's really not fair because they were all able people and they accepted it. From that point on, I tried to run the TTA Teachers' Centre for teachers of all races. This isn't the history of teachers' centres but, yes, it had its difficulties in TED schools.

I said we didn't have a teachers' centre — I mean actual premises. The reality was that if I wanted to run a course I often had to visit a principal and say, may we run it at your school? Then in the following year — 1975 — Saheti School in Senderwood invited us to run our Teachers' Centre there. However, one had quite often to run lectures in other areas, and also outside Johannesburg, and if I wanted to run something that needed a science laboratory then you went to a school where that was available. And in TED schools we couldn't invite black teachers. We tried to run most things at Saheti. Even there I had difficulties because the principal of Saheti was a bit nervous when I asked, can we invite black teachers — he didn't want to upset the apple-cart. You're talking about 1975 and it's quite difficult in 1995 to think back that far. I wanted to carry out my mandate, so I went to see the Chairman of the Board of Governors of Saheti, who was then Advocate George Bizos. I presented my request to him and he said of course you can. From that time I was able to invite teachers 'other than white'.

However, the realities are quite different. You are talking about Senderwood. Now most of the clientele who weren't white lived in Soweto, maybe in Alexandra, in Lenasia, in Coronationville — they lived miles away, and to come that far for a one-hour lecture wasn't practicable.

So we ran a lot of things in other places, including some courses in Soweto. Obviously those were attended mostly by black teachers. Not many. I tried to give a balance. I was employed by the TTA so I tried to do most things of

interest and of access to the members of the TTA, most of whom were in the Johannesburg-Witwatersrand area. We also sometimes ran lectures in Pretoria.

But an interesting thing I discovered then, again of sociological interest, was that people from Vanderbijlpark and even Rustenburg were occasionally more willing to travel to Senderwood which is on the east side of Johannesburg, than people in the north-west of Johannesburg who said it was too far. But people in country towns, in small places, were more willing to make sacrifices of that nature to attend something they considered worth while.

I must say that the TTA Teachers' Centre was wonderfully supported by the teaching profession, particularly English-speaking members of the TTA. They were quite happy with it. We did a little bit of publishing of books on teaching methods, and it was a very fruitful experience.

What kind of participation did you have from teachers in the profession who were 'other than white'?

I don't think one must exaggerate the numbers. I think the importance is the fact that some of them came and were welcome. That's really the issue. That has had profound consequences over time. The TTA actually voted itself out of existence in January of this year and formed what is now the Association of Professional Teachers [APT] which includes the former Transvaal Association of Teachers [TAT], a professional body for teachers employed by the former 'coloured' education authority. I think the African association — not SADTU [South African Democratic Teachers' Union] but the other grouping, TUATA [Transvaal United African Teachers' Association], will probably come in as well. But that's been a development going on over twenty years. For example, the TTA invited the presidents of black teachers' associations to their conferences. That had nothing to do with me. I wasn't then the president, I just ran a teachers' centre. But the idea that we accepted these people as colleagues and invited them to conferences, asked them to bring messages from their associations and so on, sent a signal of equality which I think was important in showing the attitudes particularly of English-speaking members of the teaching profession. Later on this also drove the TTA in the direction of changing its membership clause so that it wasn't open only to white teachers. The TTA publicly called for equal access to education somewhat ahead of other bodies. So it was a gradual development, and those of us in the TTA who had that view obviously pushed it ahead of more conservative colleagues. But, in fairness, there was a long tradition there. The school to which a colleague at Waygood Otis took me in 1946, the Mayibuye Night School, was the one that had been started in 1941 by progressive members of the Central Rand Branch of the Transvaal Teachers' Association.

From 1984 onwards I ran what was then called the Independent Teachers' Centre [ITC] at the Funda¹ Centre in Soweto. The ITC was an outgrowth of the other one.

I then learned that although there was great keenness among many African teachers, their need to upgrade their qualifications in order to earn better salaries was paramount, and there was pressure on them from the DET [Department of Education and Training] to enrol. So they attended 'upgrading courses' and not many of them could spare extra time to attend Teachers' Centre courses at Funda. Some did, but not many. However, I mustn't give a wrong impression. While I worked for the TTA, we sometimes responded to requests from black teachers. In the first week of June 1976 we ran a course for junior primary teachers at Dumezweni Primary School in Diepkloof — there was no hint of what was to happen a week later, on June 16. And in 1978 we ran a very large course at the 'coloured' Rand College of Education just outside Soweto, in association with the Transvaal United African Teachers' Association [TUATA]. This ran over three weeks, and some 500 teachers attended. Two months later, in response to East Rand requests, we repeated the whole course at St Anthony's Adult Education Centre in Reiger Park, Boksburg — and another 500 teachers came from as far afield as Ratanda, Heidelberg. And in my years at Funda we also responded to teachers' pleas for lectures in support of their Vista correspondence studies for the Senior Education Certificate [SEC] and these lectures — for which we had to charge as we paid the many lecturers involved — became quite a big enterprise.

My time in teacher-in-service education was really rewarding: we did many exciting things, had visiting overseas lecturers, published booklets on educational methods, one of which has sold 10 000 copies, introduced teachers to many recent innovations and to alternative methods in education — like Breakthrough to Literacy when that was new, and Waldorf education which drew a small but dedicated group of teachers at Funda. I got to know many interesting teachers and lecturers who had creative ideas. We even ran courses on creativity at one stage — these were well supported.

Could we turn to your personal background again — the German-Jewish immigrants of whom you were part, and the way in which they organised their cultural life?

It's estimated that about 6 500 Jews from Germany came to South Africa. Let me say something about that which has interested me all my life. When Hitler came to power there were 500 000 Jews in Germany. No more. These made up about 0,8 per cent of the German population. Most people believe there

1 Funda is the Xhosa word for 'learning'. It was deliberately chosen as the obviously most appropriate name for this centre.

were three or four times that many Jews in Germany in 1933. However, of those, about 6 500 came to South Africa. Now all immigration from Nazi Germany was not exclusively Jewish. There were political people, there were people who had been ethnically Jewish but had perhaps converted to Christianity, or maybe even their parents had converted, and as people now know, as far as the Nazis were concerned these people remained Jews. In every other way they weren't Jews. They also had to flee, and some of them landed here. The overwhelming majority of those who came to South Africa — somewhere around 80 per cent — were Jewish and they ended up in Johannesburg which happens to every wave of immigration to South Africa. Most of them come here because Johannesburg is perceived to be the centre of economic opportunity in South Africa.

The German Jews set up a number of institutions. Among them was the Hebrew Congregation Etz Chayim, with which I was involved for many years. When I came I was fourteen. I was drawn into the Etz Chayim congregation from an early stage — 1937 — when they didn't even have a hall for prayer and when they met on Friday nights in the dining-room of the founder of the congregation. My parents also joined it, though they didn't necessarily attend often. I later became *shammes*, the verger, in the congregation. When I was fifteen or sixteen I used to show people to their seats during the High Festivals when we held services in the Coronation Hall, on the corner of Claim and Plein Streets.

I was quite involved in the congregation, perhaps more than my parents were, but then my father died in 1944 so that's quite early on. While I didn't regularly attend services, I certainly attended High Festival services and Passover ones. So I was involved in Etz Chayim from its start, and have remained involved in it.

Why didn't the group of German-Jewish immigrants, of whom you and your family were part, join the already established German-Jewish congregation of Adath Jeshurun?

Firstly, Adath Jeshurun was itself established at round about that same time. And then it was, and has remained, an ultra-Orthodox congregation. The majority of German-Jewish refugees to South Africa weren't ultra-Orthodox, and they wouldn't have felt at home in such a congregation. They wanted a less strict congregation, and they wanted to become part of the mainstream Johannesburg Jewish community. Etz Chayim in fact soon joined what is today known as the Union of Orthodox Synagogues, the umbrella body of traditional Jewish observance in Johannesburg.

What other cultural organisations were started in South Africa in the thirties by

the Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany?

Two others were B'nai Brith and the Jewish Immigrants' Help, but perhaps the most significant was what was then called the UKV, which translated into English was the Independent Cultural Association [ICA]. The dominant figure in that organisation was Dr H O Simon, a Gentile. He believed that it was important to demonstrate that good German culture was not Nazi culture and that it wasn't up to the Nazis to say that Goethe belonged only to them. So he and his friends set up an association that organised lectures, exhibitions and courses on German literature, and also some on getting people used to South Africa. South African university professors were invited to talk about South African problems. But there was a strong German element and even a journal on German culture. Now I must say here that this wasn't necessarily popular with all German Jewish refugees, because having had the treatment they did in Germany, some turned themselves for ever against everything German. Dr Simon held the opposite view, one to which I also felt attracted. For example the UKV [ICA] organised an exhibition on the 200th anniversary of the birth of Goethe in the foyer of the Johannesburg Public Library in 1949, and in 1956 one to commemorate the centenary of the death of Heinrich Heine, an archetypical German Jew who, even though he converted to Christianity, remained interested in Judaism all his life. Dr Simon felt that one ought to make people aware that Heine was an important cultural influence and that one shouldn't jettison it just because there were now Nazi thugs in control of Germany. So the ICA ran in Johannesburg for forty years. Interestingly enough, the last function we had for our 40th anniversary in 1976 was one where we brought up Dr Richard Rive² from Cape Town, which might be saying something about some directions we were pursuing. Rive spoke about Black Consciousness at a time when this movement seemed to be particularly threatening to many white South Africans. I think for many Jews from Germany with some cultural interests it was an important anchor where they could feel that some of the things they had been accustomed to all their lives they could continue to be accustomed to, without feeling that this alienated them from their new environment into which they also wanted to be integrated.

Did you ever have any black lecturers who came to speak to the ICA?

Yes we did. I remember the late Dr Vilakazi³ being invited to lecture on African literature, and neither Dr Simon nor I would have regarded this as anything particularly provocative. You had a lecturer on French literature

2 Richard Rive was a well-known South African writer and academic who taught at the University of the Western Cape. His writings have achieved considerable distinction. In his time, he was one of the foremost spokespersons for the South African 'Black Consciousness' Movement.

3 Dr Benedict Wallet Vilakazi (1906-1947) was attached to the African Languages Depart-

who came from Paris, and you had a lecturer who came from Natal. He happened to be black because Zulu is spoken largely by black people. But we wouldn't have decided not to have it because the government didn't like it.

From what you have been saying, one gets the impression that you became gradually enmeshed in politics because the status quo was interfering with the things that interested you, that you cared about. Would that be true?

Yes. I've written extensively on the inequalities of teachers' salaries, the inequalities of black and white education, and I've done research on it. I've written and lectured all my life about race prejudice. Now if you say that an interest in combating race prejudice is politics, well, yes, then I've been involved in politics all my life. If you say opposing racial discrimination is a political gesture then, yes, I've been involved all my life, and I believe I had to be involved because of where I came from.

But this is different from party politics. One of the insights which some of us gained sooner rather than later — and others gained later — is that the objection to apartheid was not an objection to a party political theory, but an objection ultimately to a morally evil system. Once you accept that, you have to be anti-apartheid, irrespective of whether you are a communist or an African nationalist or a Jew or — in British or American terms — a member of the Conservative or Labour or Democratic or Republican Party. If you believe, particularly after World War Two, that institutionalised racial discrimination is a great moral evil — and I've believed that all my life and I'm not claiming to be the only one — obviously then you've got to fight that wherever it is and, to some extent, whatever the consequences. If that's being enmeshed in politics then I've been enmeshed, maybe, since I started teaching in the Night School in 1946. But I've never joined a political party — I felt there was enough to do outside that sphere.

Would you say that the South African German-Jewish immigrant community was more conscious of this than the established South African Jewish community?

I do not believe one can make that claim at all. I could quote names of Jews of German origin who were involved in the Communist Party, but then other Jews were also. I think you have to accept the fact that there were Jews involved in anti-apartheid activities at various levels from Helen Suzman to Joe Slovo — and that's quite a jump in South African politics in terms of distance at one level, though not at another. But you also have to accept that while it is true that the percentage of Jews in anti-apartheid organisations was larger than the percentage of whites generally in those organisations, it is

ment at the University of the Witwatersrand. He published novels and poetry in Zulu, and co-authored a Zulu-English dictionary. He was amongst the first black South African academics to achieve an MA and a PhD.

equally true that the percentage of Jews involved in anti-apartheid activities has always been a small percentage of the South African Jewish community. For two reasons: the minor one that activists are always the minority; the major one that in South Africa, by an accident of history, all Jews are white. Not all Jews world-wide are white, and I am not necessarily talking of Ethiopia only. There are lots of Jews in the State of Israel who in South Africa would have been classified 'coloured'. But South African Jews by the accident of history were all white, and to be white in South Africa has been the source of great privilege, and most people with a white skin have liked their privileges.

They may not have supported the National Party actively, or parties to the right of it, but they may at the least have acquiesced in the status of whites.

Look, I'm exaggerating, but I don't think we should be surprised that a majority of Jewish people acted as whites first and as anything else second. The whole of South African society was organised to make that easy and comfortable and that's what they did.

There has been criticism — and it's intensified in the last decade — of the Board of Deputies as the elected representative of the South African Jewish community, as well as criticism of the rabbinate and the moral leadership it gave or failed to give in the worst days of apartheid. Could we start with what you think about the principle that the Board of Deputies adopted in the sixties and seventies, namely that 'Jews vote as individuals; the Board only looks after Jewish interests, it does not dictate to Jews how they should vote'.

The Board of Deputies needs in general terms to say it doesn't tell people how to vote, because otherwise it would become involved in party politics. The reality — and it's a difficult reality — that the South African Jewish Board of Deputies faces is its major claim that it represents the whole Jewish community. Now if, for argument's sake, half of them vote for party A, and the other half vote for party B, then you can't as a Board take the stance that you wholly support party A, because you thereby alienate half the Jewish community. Then you no longer represent them.

That's an extreme case, and things were never like that. I think the whole criticism of the Board of Deputies revolves essentially around an issue that I have already touched on. At what point do you see opposition to apartheid ceasing to be a party political issue, and becoming wholly a moral issue?

You mentioned the rabbinate. It's a matter of record that of three chief rabbis that we have had in Johannesburg in the last forty years, two have been very vocal against apartheid. The late Professor Louis Rabinowitz, who was a right-winger in Jewish terms, was certainly highly vocal in anti-apartheid terms, while Chief Rabbi Casper was not. Rabbi Casper didn't make such strong noises, although he did make moral noises on occasion. Certainly some of the leaders of the South African Union for Progressive Judaism have also

made those noises, and certainly no one could fault the present Chief Rabbi as to where he stands. And if we consider the whole rabbinate, there have been different people there as well. Some spoke out, some did not.

With regard to the lay leadership, I think particularly from the mid-seventies they did state publicly that they were opposed to racial discrimination. It wasn't until 1985 that they openly condemned apartheid. If you want to be cynical, you can say that by then it was no longer difficult to do so. Still, there were people even then who didn't do it. From the mid-seventies the Board of Deputies did officially say, we are opposed to racial discrimination. Even in the fifties and sixties they occasionally made a statement against particularly obnoxious practices as they occurred. But one mustn't forget that the Board's main task was the protection of a minority who weren't exactly popular with the government of the day. If you fight that government head-on, then you can do nothing for the Jewish community. It is easy in 1995 to sit down and say that, well, they should have been shining lights. Maybe they should have, but then, firstly, many Jews would have abandoned the Board and it would no longer have been representative, in which case its noises would have been even easier to brush off. And second, they couldn't then have done anything to protect the Jews against anti-Semitism, and one needs to remind oneself of the wave of this between 1930 and 1950.

In the thirties the party of Dr Malan opposed German Jewish immigration very vocally, and the Greyshirts even more so. Also from 1937 to 1951, the National Party in the Transvaal and I think in the Free State — but not in the Cape and Natal — barred Jews from membership of the Party. After 1948, when they came to power, the National Party buried its anti-Semitism and treated the Jewish community well.

If you want to be cynical, you can say they did so because they wished to have its electoral support. In the same cynical vein, you can say the National Party changed because after Auschwitz it wasn't that fashionable to be seen to be anti-Semitic. This doesn't alter the fact that there were times in the sixties when cabinet ministers publicly criticised the Jews for there being too many Jews in the anti-apartheid movement, and secondly put considerable pressure on the Board of Deputies to influence the Labour Government of Israel not to vote against apartheid at the United Nations, an effort in which the Jewish community in South Africa was totally unsuccessful. I don't know if they even tried, but the answer was, Israel follows its own political interests. But certainly those attempts to coerce the community were made. So the Jews were in that sense under some pressure from the government. I'm not saying that more people shouldn't have spoken out. But it's also true to say that some people, among them the distinguished member of the Board of Deputies who later became its President, the late Arthur Suzman, did speak out and did push the Jewish establishment in the direction of making more noises against racial discrimination, which eventually they did.

I think one needs to say, taking the long perspective, that the Jewish community was nudged in the direction of seeing apartheid as a moral evil so that gradually more people came to this point of view. You can always argue that there weren't enough. If there had been lots of white people who had that view, the National Party with its apartheid policy wouldn't have stayed in power as long as it did.

Could you talk about your close personal involvement with the Institute of Race Relations? When did this involvement start?

Quite late. I worked in night schools between 1946 and 1967 when the government closed down the last night schools in 'white' Johannesburg. I was invited to talk on race prejudice and education by the Institute of Race Relations in 1968, and my involvement with them started then. I was on their executive for something like twenty years and was President also, between 1981 and 1983. I got more and more involved in that work because of my interest in the whole subject of prejudice which of course was one of the key thrusts of the Institute. I can't from memory give a lot of detail, but one of the interesting things that did happen in the Institute was that one met there at a cultural level black people who were involved in the work of the Institute. They were never a majority, and in later years the Institute was criticised for not having enough of them. Of course, part of the reason for that was the fact that the Institute was and remained a liberal organisation, not a radical one in South African political terms. Under the very heavy pressures of apartheid, more and more blacks were drawn to more radical alternatives than the Institute, although they remained very appreciative of both the stance and the work of the Institute, particularly its research work. I'm sure that all the radicals in South Africa and abroad — those who worked for black liberation in South Africa — used the Institute's annual surveys extensively. I had the pleasure in 1983, during my first visit to Zimbabwe, to be briefly introduced to a member of the Mugabe cabinet and he immediately made appreciative noises about the work of the South African Institute of Race Relations.

But working with the Institute, one did get to know more about the life of black South Africans which wasn't all that easy to get close to in the apartheid years. Even teaching in night schools you have a very limited kind of contact. You might perhaps one day visit a black teacher, and I did get quite friendly with some of them. But even then there was little two-way social contact, for a very inhibiting reason: that if you want to invite someone to dinner and you know he first has to get a permit from the Non-European Affairs Department of the City Council, perhaps you hesitate to invite him, and then that again inhibits to some extent your inviting black people back. You do it, but you don't do it too often, because doing it one way too often is a bit patronising. There are no doubt people who overcame that, but those were considerable inhibitions.

What aspects of the work of the Institute were you most closely involved with?

I find that difficult to answer, because for seven years I chaired the Southern Transvaal region of the Institute, and there you had to be involved in all aspects of the work of the Institute. I later got involved, and still am involved, with Operation Hunger which in 1984 became an independent body. Then for many years the Institute ran literacy activities, not night-school teaching but training literacy teaching, largely by the late Maida Whyte. I wasn't involved in that, but it gradually developed into a body called the Bureau of Literacy and Literature, and in the mid-seventies the late Fred van Wyk, then Director of the Institute, persuaded me to get involved in that outside the Institute. I did that for about fifteen years. So there were a lot of activities that one got close to through the Institute.

When did you start getting involved with the Jewish Board of Deputies?

I was co-opted to the Board of Deputies in 1982 and then became an elected member until 1992. From 1991 I have been working for them part-time in an effort to develop outreach with other communities. But from 1982 I was a member of the Board, and then gradually got to know more about how it worked and what its policies were, and I must say in retrospect I would regard the eighties as a difficult time not only for the Board of Deputies but for many organisations and institutions. We were living in a climate in which, while to some extent the grosser forms of racial discrimination had softened a little, the major institutional framework had not softened at all. The alienation of black citizens, for example, and the increasing work of pushing people out of certain areas — those things were still going on. Increasingly one tended to get pushed in the direction of 'Do you or do you not identify with the liberation struggle?' For anybody with a white skin that was a difficult question. Obviously the Jewish community represented by the Board couldn't say we support the ANC, which was a banned organisation, even if they'd wanted to. But they didn't want to for reasons I've discussed. In fairness, at its Congress in 1985 the Board of Deputies specifically condemned apartheid. Ten years earlier that would have been quite unthinkable, not only for the Board to do that but for how the state might have retaliated if it had. In 1985 that was at least a possible stance, and the Board did take that stance and I think perhaps with some credit. But from 1986 we were living in a situation where it was considered that people should actively oppose apartheid from a moral and religious perspective and it was in those circumstances that at the end of 1985 there arose both in Johannesburg and Cape Town Jewish organisations founded specifically on an anti-apartheid platform.

This Jewish anti-apartheid 'ticket' was called Jews for Justice in Cape Town and Jews for Social Justice in Johannesburg — with which I got closely involved from the beginning, though I didn't lead it until four years later. I mention that because in a sense it showed that in the mid-eighties merely

saying that you opposed apartheid was perhaps no longer enough. It was considered that you should show that you had moral objections to the whole system. If the question was then asked, 'Do you identify with those who suffer under that system?', in the end you had to come out and say, 'Yes we do'.

You wanted to do this specifically as Jews?

Right.

What did you feel was the response to Jews for Social Justice from the greater majority of the organised community here?

As in previous decades, a limited response, but I believe it was an important response. It's quite easy to see this in retrospect, though you didn't see it at the time. At the time one felt perhaps disappointed and angry that more people didn't join. I sat on the Board of Deputies as a fairly new member in 1984 when they received a letter from a body called The World Conference on Religion and Peace: South African Chapter [WCRP] which had only just started and I didn't know a thing about it.

The letter suggested that the Conference on Religion and Peace had then as a unifying factor its moral opposition to apartheid. But obviously a more important dimension was that of bringing people of different faiths to work together while at the same time keeping their own faiths.

Now I remember vaguely hearing a debate in the Board and somebody said, this organisation is too political, we can't join it, and that was the end of that. On the other side it was, I later learned, an enormous disappointment because it meant that this was to be a joint effort of all faiths and the Jews were not willing to be part of it. However, that didn't last long because in late 1986 or early 1987 Jews for Social Justice [JSJ] joined the World Conference on Religion and Peace. We were warmly received, and it has been good that from 1986-87 there was a Jewish presence in the South African Chapter of WCRP. I've remained involved in WCRP even after the demise of JSJ and I'm at present serving on their national executive. Now today for Jewish people, as much as for those of other religions as well, interfaith co-operation is an accepted thing. But it is true that between 1987 and 1990 JSJ got involved and took the first step, and that later, wider Jewish involvement in WCRP became an accepted stance. By the way, JSJ was an affiliate of the Board of Deputies from the beginning. We felt in JSJ we couldn't influence the Jewish community if we isolated ourselves from them.

To what extent do you feel JSJ was effective? What did it accomplish?

JSJ in Johannesburg and JFJ in Cape Town both increased awareness of the evils of apartheid in the Jewish community. In this they achieved a fair measure of success, I would say. But its main contribution was to establish a

visible and committed Jewish presence in the anti-apartheid movement here, where there wasn't one before. And once the movement had that presence, it meant that Jews as Jews got involved in a number of very significant protests — for example, one against the imprisonment of children. And for Jews as Jews to be doing that was extremely important.

Given your high public profile as a strong opponent of apartheid, how do you think you have been regarded by the South African Jewish establishment?

I think you should ask the establishment that. It's not reasonable to expect me to answer that question. All I can say is that in 1982 I was invited to accept co-optation on to what was then the Transvaal Council of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies. After two years as a co-opted member, in 1984 I stood for election in my own right, and was elected on my own merits. I served as an elected member of the Board of Deputies until 1992. Today I work for the Board as a paid officer.

You've become very well known in Johannesburg for what many people see as your sustained letter-writing campaign in the press over many years. What was your motivation for this campaign?

Well, firstly, it was never a 'campaign' and it was never deliberately 'sustained'. In writing letters to the press, I've always believed that if there are misconceptions or prejudices that appear in print, they need to be countered in writing immediately, because people tend to believe what they see in print. If there is no counter to a particular position, many readers will accept it. But I haven't only written letters to the press — my responses were often printed as leaders in both *The Star*, and in the *Rand Daily Mail* before it was closed down. And then I was often invited to write on educational topics. After a time, if what you say sounds reasonable, you get known to the people in the press, and I've been writing regularly for about thirty-five years. I must also say that not everything I write gets accepted, of course.

You've spoken about the increasing radicalisation of black South Africans over the years, and this is inevitable and something that one recognises. How do you think black South Africans perceive the Jewish community now?

I think there are a number of answers to that. First of all, I believe that the Jewish community looked at over a forty-year period now gets an embarrassing amount of credit because relatively few — but significantly many, when you compare it to the other white constituencies — relatively few Jews identified with opposition to apartheid in the forties, fifties and sixties.

It just struck me that when I got involved in the night school movement I said it was from the Transvaal Teachers' Association. That was perfectly true,

but it was also true that most of the teachers in the TTA who ran the Mayibuye Night Schools were in fact Jewish. It has something to do with the perspective of getting involved in the anti-apartheid struggle. Now there weren't many, but they were enough to have an impact on the black community. Therefore the image of the community among blacks in general is, I think, a relatively favourable one. This is also of course helped by the fact that in the last three or four years the community, including and pre-eminently the Board of Deputies, has taken great pains to make, and to retain contact with black South Africa, with the ANC, with other organisations. In 1993 the President of the ANC, Mr Mandela, opened the South African Jewish Board of Deputies' Congress and he was received very warmly when three years earlier he wouldn't have been. So the community has moved, and I think that has been acknowledged.

This doesn't alter the fact that at a different level some people in the Trade Union Movement identified Jews with capitalism because it is true that in this generation — though not fifty or seventy years ago — most Jews are well off in South Africa. Not all, but a great majority, and to the extent to which well-off people are perceived as bosses, if you don't like your boss you will find something nasty to say about him and one of the nasty things you can say about him is that he is Jewish — if he is. So that there is an element that will criticise Jewish people for being among the employer class, which that element perceives as generally oppressive.

One mustn't ignore the third factor, which is of course the Palestinian issue. Now, thank God, the peace process in Israel has eased a lot of things and I would guess that it has also made it possible for the President of South Africa to say that he will in the near future visit the State of Israel and the Palestinian enclaves. I think it's going to happen in the not too distant future. For that we have to thank the peace process which has made these things more easy. We have also begun to have a little more contact with the Muslim community. One has to recognise two things about that. One is that, by an accident of history, not only are South African Jews white, but South African Muslims are not. In South Africa, not being white automatically places you on the side of the oppressed. Therefore you will most easily identify with other oppressed people of the Muslim faith, who happen to be the Palestinian people in the State of Israel and the Occupied Territories. It is also true that by dint of being deeply concerned about the troubles of the State of Israel, I suppose a large percentage of South African Jewry will identify more strongly with conservative political forces in the State of Israel — which generally have a more negative attitude to the problem of Palestinians and the Arab majority in the Middle East. That being so, there is in the Muslim community substantial support for the Palestinians, and there is a regret among them that voices in the Jewish community supporting Palestinian rights are percentage-wise far lower in the South African Jewish community than in the Jewish community in Israel. But on the other hand — and I have said this to people

in the Muslim community and in the ANC and I think they understand it, but they might not like it — the argument in the Jewish community that you shouldn't criticise the policy of the government of Israel if you don't live in Israel is one that is very difficult to refute. There are some people who have regretted some policies pursued by the government of Israel towards Palestinians, but there are not many who've said so in public for the above reason.

Those tensions have somewhat abated since the peace process began in September 1993. This will make Muslim-Jewish contacts in South Africa easier to develop, and that has begun to happen on a small scale.

How do you see your life in your seventieth year?

I wasn't a political radical, and so I wasn't jailed or exiled. I did have a few brushes with my employers when I worked for the Transvaal Education Department, but I also had encouraging support from many colleagues in the profession, who elected me their President in 1965. And I've often been invited to lecture on educational platforms under auspices that were sometimes white and sometimes black, sometimes Jewish and sometimes avowedly Christian. And during the last ten years I've had other rewards — a gold medal from the TTA in 1989, and one from my alma mater, the Johannesburg College of Education, in 1991. And through my JSJ involvement between 1985 and 1993, I've made many friends among people who are now, post-1994, in leading positions in the country.

It may be of interest to relate here that, after my election to the chair of JSJ in June 1989, I was also chosen to represent them as their delegate in the Five Freedoms group of white South Africans that visited Lusaka at the end of June 1989. There were 115 of us, and it was a significant and moving encounter with the ANC. JSJ had asked me to seek dialogue with the ANC on its views of relations with the Jewish community. I did so, and was asked to chair the meeting, which was also attended by then ANC President Oliver Tambo. Most of the — very positive — attitudes to the South African Jewish community, expressed there on 30 June 1989, have been consistently displayed by the ANC since. My report on this meeting appears as part of 'Four Days in Lusaka', the report on the entire visit published by Five Freedoms Forum. For me, the Lusaka visit was a memorable and enriching experience.

On balance, it's been very worth while, and I have few regrets. I remain convinced that, like most human beings, I have more than one identity — South African, Jewish, male, German-born, a teacher — and that recognising this multiple identity frees me, and others who see life that way, from the excessive demands of nationalism and cultural exclusivity that have disfigured our century.

You've always come across as eminently reasonable in your public addresses as much as in your writing. Is there anything you feel unreasonable or intolerant about?

[Laughs] Nobody thinks of himself as intolerant. I certainly don't. In that regard, I would say I share the view expressed by Anatole France. After World War One, when he was pleading for international understanding, he said, 'Hate nothing but hatred; be intolerant of nothing but intolerance.' That's my position.



BEN ISAACSON

'Is this the justice you have wrought?
Surely the God of justice is distraught.'

Criticised equally for his politics and his personal life, Ben Isaacson is the most controversial of South African rabbis. His attacks on apartheid — beginning in 1958 — often alienated his congregants, many of whom were economically or emotionally invested in the status quo. On several occasions he left — or was forced to leave — a congregation amidst a hail of recriminations and counter-recriminations. Born in 1936 in Brixton, Johannesburg, to first generation South African parents, he went to King Edward VII School and, after matriculation, to study in yeshivot in the United States. When he returned to South Africa he became assistant rabbi to Louis Rabinowitz at the Great Synagogue in Wolmarans Street, Johannesburg. Rabinowitz, then the Orthodox Chief Rabbi of South Africa, regarded Isaacson as his most talented disciple.

The young Isaacson was a fine, and fiery, preacher. After attacking Verwoerd and the Nats from the pulpit, he had a run-in with Dr Percy Yutar, then president of the congregation (and, as it so happens the prosecutor who sent Mandela to jail for twenty-seven years). As a result, he was transferred to Krugersdorp, where he continued his anti-apartheid sermonising. During this period he made contact with the Congress of Democrats (COD), and joined the Defence and Aid Fund established to help the defendants of the first treason trial. These activities embarrassed his congregants, and after having security police raid his home while sheltering Ben Turok's¹ children, he was forced to leave. His next post was as rabbi to the large Jewish community in Bloemfontein. This too ended in controversy, because Isaacson supposedly allowed a Reform rabbi to participate in a Yom HaShoah (Holocaust day) service, in contravention of an Orthodox ban on sharing platforms with Reform. In 1965 he made *aliya* to Israel, and worked as a teacher at the Agricultural School in Pardes Chana, a school famous for

1 Turok was a COD member who helped draft the Freedom Charter. He currently heads the RDP programme in Gauteng.

Left:

Ben Isaacson and Desmond Tutu, 1986

educating many of Israel's elite. He served briefly in the Israeli army: 'I was a lousy soldier. I made the Turkish coffee and the sandwiches.' During his time in Israel, Isaacson moved away from Orthodoxy and helped found a conservative congregation in Ashkelon.

After the Yom Kippur War, at the invitation of the United Progressive Congregation of Johannesburg, he returned to South Africa and became founding rabbi of Temple David. In 1980, and again in 1981, under the auspices of the World Union for Progressive Judaism, he went on an extensive anti-apartheid speaking tour in the United States. Once again his activities aroused the ire of his congregants, and Isaacson broke away, establishing an independent congregation, Har El (the 'Mountain of God'). The mid-eighties, a time of great crisis in South Africa, saw Isaacson involved with the Release Mandela Committee, the End Conscription Campaign, and forging close ties with Frank Chikane, Desmond Tutu and Beyers Naudé. In 1987 he undertook a third speaking tour to Europe and the States, accompanied by Pastor Zachariah Mokgoebo of the Black Reformed Church. His support of sanctions lost him many congregants, and on his return Har El collapsed, along with his third marriage, leaving Isaacson jobless, depressed, and isolated. Unable to find a congregation in South Africa which would employ him, he went to Zimbabwe, initially to Harare, and subsequently — after further intrigue against him — to Bulawayo, where he is today.

Isaacson, the first rabbi to join the ANC, is remarkable less because of the role he played in the Struggle, than that he played it as a rabbi. At fifty-nine, he is weary, resentful, pessimistic... but still with flashes of humour, unrepentant and as outspoken as ever. The Struggle might be over, but for Ben Isaacson it continues.

Interviewed by Immanuel Suttner
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Before I talk about the past, I want to say one sentence about the present. I believe that the story of Ben Isaacson, or say the murder of Ben Isaacson, is the greatest injustice to come out of the 'new' South Africa. I expected, and was prepared in many ways for the consequences of my stand in the old South Africa. But in the country I served and fought to help establish for thirty years and more... for those comrades of mine, colleagues and friends, to silently preside over my demise is far worse than what was done to me by my enemies. It has become part of the warp and woof of ANC culture to abandon friends. If you're not famous or well connected, they don't need you. They have abandoned the frontline states, Botswana, Zambia, Zimbabwe, who provided support and bases. It says in Kohelet [Ecclesiastes,

a book of the Bible], 'Don't be too righteous'. Mandela has gone too far with reconciliation. The wicked are rewarded and the righteous punished. Take, for example, Winnie. She might have made many mistakes, but she stood by him all those years. Shouldn't she be forgiven before having tea with Percy Yutar and Betsie Verwoerd?

Where did you get your predisposition for unpopular positions? From your parents? School?

Not at all. My parents were apolitical, Orthodox Jews. My father was *shomeyr shabat* [observed the Sabbath]. He was a grocer. Mom helped him. He was a fair man, but with no political leanings. He voted for the Labour Party. I went to King Edward Primary and High School, there were no Jewish day-schools. I hated rugby, the prefect system, getting cuts. I was ostracised by the other Jewish boys for staying away from rugby on Saturdays, on Shabat. Rugby was a compulsory event at a school that made sport its God. I didn't get it from my South African background at all. I got it from the Prophets of Israel. It's from me. It's in my guts. There was a hatred for injustice in me from early days. But it was greatly strengthened by the reading of the *Neviim* [the prophets]. They are the world's teachers. Desmond Tutu always used to say to me, 'If you gave something to the world, you gave the Struggle the justice of the prophets of Israel.'

How about youth movements? Were you involved? Did they influence you?

In 1945 my family moved from Brixton to Berea where my Jewish life took off. I sang in a choir in the Berea shul. When I was bar mitzvahed in 1949 I was one of the first kids in Johannesburg to read the entire sedrah [Torah portion]. Bnei Akiva was just starting up, and I got involved. It was kibbutz-orientated then, *hakibbutz hadati* [religious kibbutzim], and was on the left wing of the religious world. There were four of us, and the Rabbi of Berea, the late Morris Swift, and Rabbi Kossowsky taught us. They used to have classes in a place in Hillbrow called Corona Lodge. A bit of Mishna, a tiny bit of Gemmorah.² But when I came to yeshiva, I had no real background in Talmudic studies. I matriculated in 1952. I went straight to yeshiva at age sixteen. It was a big shock coming to an Agudat Yisrael yeshiva [ultra-Orthodox yeshiva with an anti-modernity outlook]. The first thing we learned was Nidah [a Talmudic tractate dealing with laws of ritual purity, including the laws regarding menstruating women]. You could be expelled for touching a woman. I wasn't happy in Cleveland, so I moved to New

2 Mishna — literally, repetition or learning. A codification of a vast body of oral law and folk wisdom first written down by Rabbi Judah HaNasi in about 100 CE (Common Era). Gemmorah — interpretation and commentary on the Mishna. The Mishna plus the Gemmarah form the Talmud.

York, to another yeshiva called Chaim Berlin. There we went to Brooklyn College at night. I studied political science. But I wasn't involved in any political activity there. It was just in my blood. When I returned to South Africa after seven years away, I couldn't stand the atmosphere, I couldn't stand it.

In those days for boys to go overseas to study was unheard of. I struggled. I got 10 pounds sterling a month, 27 dollars, from some Board of Deputies scholarship called the Cecil Lyons Fund. It was very difficult. My parents shouldn't have allowed it. I was sixteen years old in a dormitory 16 000 kilometres from home. I was angry with them. I hardly saw them when I came back from the States. How could they send me away?

But you chose to go.

They should have stopped me.

Maybe your rebelliousness comes from getting back at your parents?

Don't try to psychoanalyse me. Please. My commitment comes from the prophets of Israel. I got it from the inner spark of the Torah, it's Vayikra [Leviticus], the nineteenth chapter of Vayikra: you shall not stand idly by the blood of your neighbour . . .

But in some Orthodox rabbinic interpretations that refers only to your Jewish neighbour . . .

Look, in the Gemmorah, in tractate Sanhedrin, there is this whole dispute about what 'man' means, there are some that hold that *adam* [Hebrew for 'man'] denotes only Jews, '*atem knuyim adam*' ['you alone are called "man"'], but it is not a majority opinion. Most *rishonim* [early halachic authorities] hold that *adam* means man generically ie all men [and women]. There is no question to me that that is what it always meant. That is why there is an argument between Rabbi Akiva and Ben Azai in the Talmud, as to what is the most important verse in the Torah. Rabbi Akiva says *veahavta lereacha kamocho* [you will love your neighbour as you love yourself], Rabbi Azai says *betzelem elokim bara et haadam* [He created man in the image of God]. The essence of their argument is that Rabbi Akiva's verse could be narrowly defined (to exclude certain people as objects for the command 'love your neighbour') so Azai broadens it to say *adam* — all people. Dr Hertz was very clear on it. Rabbi Rabinowitz as well. Rav Soloveitchik, of saintly memory, the symbol of everything beautiful in Judaism, has clearly stated that the rights of all human beings are guaranteed by nature of their being created in the image of God. And this is where I took it all from. You see whatever I did, and have done up till now, was based on the fact that I believed this was Jewish teaching. Not

Marxism, not Leninism, and not any other 'ism', not liberalism. And not Zionism. But Torah. That is why I did what I did. Now there may be those who want to interpret it more narrowly. They're entitled to do that, but I think they're out of line. I know there are some who want to permit murdering an Arab, or murdering a fellow Jew. But even if that Jew is intolerant of his fellow Jews, or treats them with contempt, so that you may say 'I want to kill him', there is no *heter* [sanction] for murder, for the spilling of any kind of blood. So, I did it not for humanitarian, universal reasons, but as a Jew, because it is Jewish.

I came back here from yeshiva in 1958, and actually received *semicha* [rabbinical ordination] from Rabbi Hilewitz, head of the Teachers' Training Seminary, and Rabbi Kossowsky, then head of Mizrahi.³ But my real benefactor was the Chief Rabbi Louis Rabinowitz, who is conveniently neglected in the memoirs of this community, but played the most vital role in establishing the foundations for the Renaissance of Orthodox Judaism in this country. He did it as he did most things, with brute force, with immense power, like a Napoleon. For example, there was no public kashrut [ie observance of Jewish dietary laws at public functions] in this country when he came here. He used to say [falsetto voice]: 'If there are no kosher facilities, I will not appear at the function, I will not officiate at a wedding, and that's your pproblem!' And suddenly public kashrut became the done thing, the supervision of the Beth Din became important, it was never there before him. He had this wonderful speech impediment — he couldn't say 'r', he said a 'w', so he was 'Wabbi Wabinowitz'. I think the women found it sexy. He was also tall and striking.

Was he a good orator?

Louis Rabinowitz was probably among the five greatest preachers of this century. His books are testimony to it, but they are still books. He was a brilliant preacher, a brilliant analyst of a *pasuk* [biblical verse], of a *midrash* [rabbinic homily], he used to give a sermon on the basis of the use of a '*vav*', or a '*zayn*' [Hebrew letters, ie he would explain why a particular word had been spelt the way it was]. He also saw the grooming of South African rabbis for the future as his task.

He said, 'I am a foreigner, but it is my task, as it was in ancient days, for from Babylon they sent rabbis to North Africa, to train North African rabbis, and from there to Spain, to train Spaniards — Sepharadim. It is my task to bring about a circle of South African rabbis.'

He was loyal to his colleagues. Whoever was in trouble, Rabinowitz would stand by him. He always maintained a tough exterior. I was

3 Pre-state religious Zionist organisation, which eventually evolved into the National Religious Party in Israel. Bnei Akiva, the youth movement of the organisation, has as its motto 'The Nation of Israel in the Land of Israel living according to the Torah of Israel'.

privileged to be one of the few that he opened his heart to, and he loved me. It was his conviction that South African rabbis must man the pulpits. I don't think he realised to what extent the Jewish community of South Africa were going to persecute their own sons, and drive them all away. They have a mania about an American accent in this place, I think there is some sexual kink about them when they hear an American accent. It is not as if they import classy geniuses, mostly they are reactionary and racist. But they have done well here. They have been here years, and they have houses, pensions, cars, they travel overseas. A few of them have done a good job. If a man like Rabbi Goldfein establishes a yeshiva, and he has forty South African boys sitting and learning Torah, it's wonderful. Likewise Rabbi Tanzer and the Yeshiva College. But to staff the pulpits with foreigners is unheard of. And the Chief Rabbi should be a South African. I find it preposterous that a foreigner should decide my future, decide if I can get a job and return to SA. In Cape Town, there is only one South African rabbi. Desmond Maisels. All the rest are Americans, Belgians etc.

Anyway, Louis saw in me something and I became his blue-eyed baby. When I was twenty-two years old, he told people, publicly, 'This young man is pweaching too well, far too well for his age.' When he used to go on long leave, they used to share the pulpit among rabbis. In 1958, when I had just started as assistant rabbi and youth rabbi, he said 'We don't need anybody else, Ben Isaacson will take the pulpit.'

And one Friday night, Helen Suzman, who doesn't even know who I am, had just broken away from the United Party, formed the Progressive Party, and there were a lot of attacks on her in parliament, among them some anti-Semitic... people said 'Go back to Palestine', those were the exact words used. And there were comments about her being a *kaffir boetie*. That Friday night, I occupied the pulpit. In those days the Great Synagogue [ie the Wolmarans Street Synagogue] was the place, as Louis used to say on the High Holy Days, 'All the Daimlers and the Rolls Royces in Quartz Street, and suffering humanity outside.' And I stood up and castigated the outburst in parliament, I attacked the government's race policy, I attacked the Board of Deputies for remaining silent in the face of an attack on Helen Suzman.

This is in 1958. There are witnesses around who will remember the sermon. As service ended, people used to come up to the rabbi's seat to say Shabbat Shalom, and this time there was this screaming maniac with his top hat and tails, coming up the aisle of the prim and proper Anglicised Great Synagogue, where we wore robes and bibs and we bowed. The only thing we didn't do was wear a round collar, but Chief Rabbi Abrahams in Cape Town made up for that.

So this raving lunatic comes up the aisle screaming, 'You young whipper-snapper! How dare you! I hereby forbid you any further use of the pulpit. I suspend you.' He grabs my arm.

I said, 'Dr Yutar,' president of the congregation as he was, 'this is not the

place, let's go into the council chamber and discuss it.' Again, 'You young whipper-snapper, how dare you, you are suspended and dismissed!'

Me to Dr Yutar: 'Would you kindly remove your arm from my hand' (he tightens his grip). I said: 'Yutar, if you don't take your hand off me, I will hit you from here right into the Johannesburg Hospital.'

When I said this everybody jumped in, and I was dismissed on Shabbes. They sent a letter of dismissal on Shabbes morning to my flat. I was then newly married, so they couldn't invoke what was to become a standard excuse when they attacked me later — namely my personal life.

Well, I sat at home and waited for Louis to come back from leave. And inevitably he called me to the office. He said, 'You have a text of the sermon?' I said, 'Yes of course', because he insisted that a student rabbi have a full text of his preaching. He said that with time, you could use notes and be spontaneous, as long as you'd prepared. He used to write out every sermon.

'The greater the speaker,' he said, 'the more you prepare.' So I said 'Yes, I have a text. Here it is.' He said, 'Did you stick to this text?' I said, 'Yes, I was aware of the controversial nature of it, and I stuck to it.' He said, 'Let me read it.' He read the sermon.

'This sermon is fah too modewate for my liking. I have told you, do not sacrifice your principles on the altar of expediency.'

Two days later there was a meeting of the Council of the United Hebrew Congregation with Yutar in the chair. And in bursts this powerful Chief Rabbi. No invitation, no arrangement. Says Yutar, in this sycophantic voice: 'Hello Rabbi, we didn't know you were coming.'

Louis: 'Don't Rabbi me! You are not Percy Yutar, you're Percy Cutar [persecutor]. And if you don't reinstate my assistant rabbi within twenty-four hours, you will have my resignation.'

That was Louis Yitzhak Rabinowitz, *zichrono livracha* [of blessed memory]. Louis Rabinowitz in the fifties attacked Verwoerd, two, three years after he'd arrived in the country. He didn't just speak out from the pulpit. He was professor of Hebrew at Wits, and in the fifties, when they did what they usually did (you know, every time they deprived people of their rights, they passed a law calling it the extension of rights, like the extension of Bantu Education, which removed them from the universities), he went on the platform of Wits to denounce it. He marched in the streets. You're talking about Dr Verwoerd's days. You're not talking about 1994, when it is so easy to give a eulogy for Joe Slovo. We're talking about the days of the treason trial. That was Levi Yitzhak Rabinowitz.

He was also an ardent Jewish nationalist, believing in the return to Eretz Yisrael [the land of Israel] and the importance of Jewish sovereignty there. During the war he helped smuggle arms to the Irgun, to the Etzel.⁴

4 The Irgun and the Etzel were underground, right-wing militias which fought the British and Arabs in mandated Palestine. They frequently targeted civilians as a deliberate tactic.

Menachem Begin was a good friend of his. He attacked the British over Ernest Bevin's obnoxious policies forbidding Holocaust survivors entry into Eretz Yisrael. There was a famous incident at Balfour Park, around 1946. He addressed a protest meeting there, where several thousand Jewish ex-servicemen had gathered, and tore off all his medals and insignia, trampled them in the dust. 'This is what I think of His Majesty's medals,' he said. Remember, he was a colonel in the British Army. He had been the chief Jewish chaplain of Montgomery's Eighth Army in the desert. The Afrikaans papers praised him after this incident, the English papers attacked him.

I wonder what Hashomeyr Hatzair thought of him.

Hashomeyr Hatzair gradually ceased to exist here in the fifties. With the Nats in power, it was impossible for a movement like that to survive here. But his children were all in Habonim. He was very friendly with Habonim. The Mizrachi and Bnei Akiva didn't like him because he was a revisionist.⁵ And it was strange, I came from Bnei Akiva, and I landed up with him. He gave me life, and friendship.

The late Rabbi Kossowsky, head of the Mizrachi and founder of the Yeshiva College, was Rabinowitz's great opponent. There was personal rivalry, and when you saw the talent of the two men together, you could understand why. Untalented people have to do everything possible to get rid of talent. That is why if you are talented, you mustn't go live in Israel, they'll murder you. Rabbi Kossowsky was a big *lamdan* and *talmid chacham* [ie a great Torah scholar], but he had no oratorical abilities, couldn't communicate with the public at large, Jewish or non-Jewish. The Mizrachi concentrated on the return to observance, the *mitzvot*, and distanced itself from moral and ethical problems of a universal nature, such as apartheid. When Rabinowitz was attacking apartheid, Rabbi Kossowsky was defending it. He actually issued a statement to the Jewish press in which he claimed that apartheid was in accordance with Torah Law, if it were separate but equal, you know, articulating the doctrine of the southern states of the USA.

Did he make it conditional on 'separate but equal'? He didn't say the Bible had cursed blacks, as bnei Cham,⁶ to be slaves?

No, no. Many church leaders did that — it was the doctrinal position of the Ned Geref Kerk. Some rabbis also did, but I don't think Kossowsky said anything like that. He adopted the South African Jewish Board of Deputies

5 Revisionists were supporters of Vladimir Jabotinsky, a right-wing Zionist thinker and leader. Menachem Begin, who headed the Irgun, drew his inspiration from Jabotinsky.

6 The Bible says that Cham, one of the sons of Noah, was cursed by his father to be a slave to slaves. Some fundamentalist rabbis identify the progeny of Cham — the Canaanites — with negroid peoples.

(SAJBD) viewpoint, that there was no Jewish viewpoint, it was up to the individual's conscience. Really, that was a cop-out and sign of great ethical bankruptcy. There's a Casper Education Centre in Johannesburg.⁷ And Casper represents moral shame for the Jewish People.

But nothing about Louis. They don't even mention his name. And he built the foundations of the Orthodox revolution here, especially in terms of public observance. Along with Mizrahi and Bnei Akiva.

After the Yutar incident, Louis called me in. He said, 'Look, we have done what we have done, but the atmosphere is very polluted. Now I think it is time for you to take your young wife, and your baby girl, and take a post on your own. I recommend you start in Krugersdorp. It's twenty miles from Johannesburg. You come in once or twice a week, see me, spend time, study together.' So I got appointed on his recommendation to Krugersdorp, which had quite a sizeable community, I think three hundred Jewish families at the time, a shul, Hebrew school. I did my job. Louis Rabinowitz claimed that I was the finest orator to have been produced in South Africa. Maybe I am getting a bit older now, and find it [more] difficult. But I am still very good. I have dozens of letters praising my teaching and preaching from American congregations that I spoke at during my anti-apartheid tour. Anyway, I went to Krugersdorp, and Jewishly I initiated a revival of Torah, and of Orthodox Judaism. But at the same time, I started giving them hell. Krugersdorp was a total nationalist town, and the Jews cringed when I spoke. One of them, the Gabbai of the shul, the President, happened to be the owner of Adcock-Ingram, a pharmaceutical giant. Archie Tannenbaum. He was civil, but his brother, Hymie Tannenbaum, was openly hostile. He once stood up in the middle of a service and said 'Stop shouting at us'. So I said, in the middle of shul, 'Sit down and shut up, your money means nothing here.' I was twenty-three or twenty-four at the time. I also sent letters to the *Rand Daily Mail* attacking Verwoerd, attacking the government.

They published it?

Oh yes. Benjy Pogrand was there, and Laurence Gandar, journalists of courage and integrity. And then one day there was a knock on my door in Krugersdorp. A guy with glasses said to me, 'Are you Rabbi Isaacson?' I said 'Yes'; he said 'We are amazed at you.' I said, 'Who are you?' He said, 'My name is Benjamin Turok. Can I come in?'

Ben Turok was then secretary-general of what was called the Congress of Democrats, which was the white branch of the ANC. All the guys came from it. The Jewish communists, socialists, the Weinbergs, Helen Joseph, well, she wasn't Jewish. The Barsels . . . many who were in the treason trial were from

⁷ Named after Orthodox Chief Rabbi Bernard Casper, who advocated that Jews should not involve themselves with broader South African issues.

the Congress of Democrats. He said, 'We find it amazing that a rabbi is saying the things you are saying.' We became friends. So much so, that aside from not filling in a membership card, I was in the COD office three times a week. They had a little office in the arcade in Market Street. A miserable office which was raided by the cops three or four times a week, and I was there twice when they were raided. Ja, Ben Turok. He's now an MP. I don't think he remembers me, or wants to.

Did you know Turok was a Jew? Did you try and make him a better Jew? Or did he try and make you a better communist?

No, it didn't really enter our conversations. He thought Judaism was completely incompatible with universalism and non-racism, although he had an awareness of Yiddishism, of Eastern European Jewish culture, which was his own background.

You travelled to meet him from Krugersdorp?

I used to drive in, it's not far. Rica Hodgson, Jack Hodgson were involved. Duma Nokwe, a famous name in ANC history, became a friend of mine at the time. And Ben Turok became my 'handler'. We discussed religion, philosophy, history. For the first time I heard the leftist view of life, particularly as it could be applied in South Africa past and present. I learned the history of discrimination against the indigenous people of South Africa. It is a fallacy that Malan and Verwoerd invented apartheid; they merely perfected what was there from the beginning. Overrated politicians like Jan Smuts, at a speech in Cambridge in 1917, virtually enunciated word for word the policies of what became grand apartheid. Isn't it ironic that Smuts was one of the drafters of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, when he was so adept at violating human rights in his own country? The contact with Turok deepened my resolve to work towards the defeat of the racist system in South Africa.

The spate of my sermons increased, and then came the revolutionary event that changed our history — Sharpeville, which people seem to forget was initiated by the PAC and not the ANC. I'm not quibbling with my ex-comrades or whatever. My neglectful comrades. But that is history. It became quite clear that this was a massacre. And as it so happened, that dum-dum bullets were used to shoot them in the back; that is known.

Louis Rabinowitz denounced it from the pulpit. As did the then Anglican bishop of Johannesburg, Ambrose Reeves. Forgotten names. That courageous man was bludgeoned by the church into leaving the country. He and Louis were in constant communication over Sharpeville. Louis was still here. He was in his last year, about to leave for Israel.

Because I was running up and down to Jo'burg, I actually wasn't in

Krugersdorp as much as I should have been. I was also going to Pretoria because of the infamous Treason Trial. I wrote a letter to the paper saying 'Please refrain from referring to that building as The Old Synagogue'. That is where they held it. It was the Old Synagogue. I said 'It is really highly improper to use the name The Old Synagogue, for a trial in which justice is guaranteed not to prevail.' It so happens that after five or so years they were acquitted, but, five years! They all suffered. Their families suffered. A Defence and Aid Fund was established, and I joined it.

When Sharpeville broke, I denounced the shooting. I knew that Ben and his wife Mary must be on the run. So I drove into Jo'burg to see where their three little boys were. I drove to their home in Orange Grove, which I had visited before, and found these kids sitting by themselves with no one to take care of them. Their parents weren't around. I picked them up and brought them back to Krugersdorp, to my home. And within a day the curiosity of all was aroused by this, hmm, hmm. Who are these kids? And then a congregant came by and said, 'Hello, who are you?' and Fred — one of the children — says 'My father is in jail'. [Chuckles] After a few days, a delegation came from the congregation, instructing me to remove the children from the house. I took them into my study, said, 'Look, I am a rabbi giving shelter to some kids whose parents are not here, I don't know where they are. Could you tell me what you want me to do with them.' Said Tannenbaum: 'Put them in an orphanage.' At which stage, I threw them out of my house. Literally threw them out. And I made contact with their grandparents who were farming somewhere in the Cape. And they came to fetch the kids. But the day after I threw those people out, at midnight, there was a commotion outside and banging on my doors, and it was like a whole bloody army. There were those British armoured cars they used in those days. Saracens. There were about fifty soldiers, and the security branch came in and said, 'We have instructions to search the house.' My daughter was six months old. They took the mattress, and cut it open. They were there the whole night.

I didn't go to shul till eight in the morning. They demanded under interrogation to know where Ben Turok was. They took me in to the station. 'Where is Ben Turok?' I said, 'I don't know.' 'But you've got his children.' 'Yes, I have his children, I'm giving shelter to children, the whereabouts of whose parents is unknown.'

They said, 'You are friendly with them.' I said, 'Yes.' 'You are friendly with the Congress of Democrats?' 'Yes.' 'Where is Ben Turok?'

Six or eight hours. We even gave them sandwiches and coffee. But for a mother of twenty years old, with a baby, it was a shattering experience. They were there still in broad daylight. Everyone knew. The community boycotted us, we were the pariahs of Krugersdorp. No one came near the house. And Rabbi Rabinowitz was in constant touch with me. Plus a young Anglican priest who afterwards became a Bishop — Daryl White. He came to offer his sympathy, and sat with us. At that time there was a youth seminar on

in the Eastern Transvaal, run by my friend and colleague Rabbi Abner Weiss. The Chief Rabbi said, 'They're obviously gunning for you. Take your family and go to the seminar for a few days.' After which I resigned from Krugersdorp, with his blessing.

It's funny, a year ago I received a letter in Bulawayo, inviting me to attend Krugersdorp's hundredth anniversary, their centenary. Saying they would be delighted to have me. It was signed by Chairman David Jankalow, who was a bar mitzvah boy of mine. Of course Chief Rabbi Harris was their main speaker. And I wrote back a polite, but firm letter, saying that I appreciate the invitation, and I am proud to see that you have become a leader of the community. But I would find it very difficult to come to Krugersdorp without arousing the sad and poignant memories of the conduct of that community during the terrible period of Sharpeville. And I am sure you would not want me to be a source of controversy during my stay. So I must decline the invitation.

So Krugersdorp ended in a storm, as did the Great Synagogue. After Krugersdorp comes Louis Rabinowitz and says, 'You must move elsewhere.' I say 'Where?', he says 'Bloemfontein'. I said, 'Are you bloody mad? From *gehinom* to *gehinom!*' [From hell to hell.] What could be worse than Bloemfontein, the capital of the Free State, in 1962?

'No, I have spoken to them, they want you, and they are prepared to reach an understanding with you.' 'What is that?' 'That you will confine your statements to the pulpit and not make them outside, as you have been doing, and no Congress of Democrats.' He added, 'Bloem is an important position, it's a way up the ladder.'

It was then a community of 450 Jewish families, with a few hundred boarders. There were many boarding schools¹ in Bloemfontein: Grey College, St Andrews, Eunice Girls. I built up something there – synagogue attendance and commitment grew. Wherever I have been, they'll gossip about me, but they'll say, 'The shul was packed when he was there, Krugersdorp was packed, Bloemfontein was packed.' They resented me, but still came to hear me. Louis Rabinowitz, who was also accused of attacking his congregants and being too confrontational asked, 'Why are they here if all I do is attack them?' And he answered: 'Because every one of them thinks I'm talking to their neighbour.' When I went to Bloemfontein it was the beginning of the conscription period. So there were Jewish soldiers. I was made a chaplain to Tempe Base. Tempe First Para Battalion. So on a Friday night, on a Shabbes, there would be 550 people in shul in Bloemfontein. People, congregants, students from the boarding school, and the soldiers. It was an amazing thing. I did my Jewish work well, and I didn't stop my pulpit pronouncements. I also began working within Habonim, which was a strong movement then. I thought to start Bnei Akiva there, but I didn't want to cause disputes between youth movements. So I became Rosh Habonim [head of Habonim] in the OFS and Northern Cape, and a member of the Hanhaga

Haartzit [national executive]. So I put on a blue shirt,⁸ so what? And I did my educational work within the framework of Habonim seminars, teaching the kids that racism is not 'in' for Jews. Or for anybody. But certainly not for Jews. Many parents kept their children away because of what they called our 'brainwashing and political propaganda'. They didn't mind Afrikaner nationalist, racist propaganda, however. Be that as it may, I went through an intensely Zionist period, and I taught the theories of Rav Kook⁹ *zichron tsadik livracha* [may the memory of the righteous be a blessing] to Habonim kids.

I taught that you can't be a Jew freely and fully anywhere else except in your own country. And if you can't live as a Jew here, and we can't live as Jews here because we live under a system which is abhorrent, and to speak out we are frightened and cowardly, therefore — *aliya*. And Habonim slotted in nicely with that. I became very friendly with all the Habonim people... I went to *machaneh*. We actually introduced a more religious approach within Habonim. Not like Bnei Akiva. But a daily *minyán* for those who wanted it, kashrut, Shabat. No public smoking was permitted on the Sabbath, although individuals in their tents were not coerced into observance. They related to me well.

One day I had a phone call from Wolfy Mankowitz (also a Habonim member) from Jo'burg to say, 'I am coming for breakfast. It is important.' I said, 'Are you mad? Do you know where you are?' He said, 'Yes, I am coming for breakfast, it is important.' And he put the phone down. He came with instructions to tell us to burn all documents and records because the security police were raiding Zionist Youth offices. I had to destroy all our documents concerning the teaching of non-racialism at our seminars.

When were you in Bloemfontein?

I was there from 1962-1965. The raiding of the youth movements was in 1964. Then something happened which forced me to resign from Bloemfontein. Funnily enough, I was being watched down there, my phone was being tapped. But my resignation was not connected to South African politics, it was an internal Jewish incident. There was a lot of turmoil at the time with the Reform and Orthodox movements. Reform had become more 'radical', both in its non-observance and its attacks on Orthodoxy.

Rabbi Kossowsky, and the Jo'burg Beit Din [ecclesiastical court] which he

8 Habonim members wore heavy blue cotton shirts of the sort worn by industrial workers.

9 Rav Kook was perhaps the greatest Jewish mystic of this century. The Chief Rabbi of Eretz Yisrael [the Land of Israel] in the 1920s and 1930s, he embraced the work and vision of the young secular pioneers, despite their secularism. One of his famous maxims was 'The old will be renewed and the new will be sanctified'. The Mizrahi movement and Bnei Akiva were greatly influenced by his teachings. After his death his writings were distorted by some far right political groupings like Gush Emunim, who used them to justify the doctrine of a 'greater Israel' and a chauvinist nationalism.

led, decided to extend a prohibition on contact with Reform. Before, you couldn't share a religious platform with a Reform rabbi, because it implied recognition of Reform. Now this was extended to secular occasions, like a Zionist function, or a United Communal Fund (UCF) affair. Rabbi Kossowsky did not like me. I had been Louis Rabinowitz's protégé, but now Louis had left for Israel. He inducted me into Bloemfontein, and left me to the wolves. I was distraught when he made his decision to retire and make *aliya*. I knew unless I could cling to his apron strings they would eliminate me from public life. I was his blue-eyed baby, and it was easier to destroy me than him.

So they made this decision that no Orthodox rabbi should sit on any platform with a Reform representative. And they insisted that I sign a document saying that Bloemfontein would abide by it. I was an important young rabbi of the capital of a province, with a sizeable and influential community. I refused to sign. I said, I am not in favour of a boycott of the Reform movement. A, it is the best way to make them grow, and B, I am not in favour of boycotting them. We had a Reform community in Bloemfontein that was about to break up, because of my tolerant approach towards them. So, came the annual commemoration of Yom HaShoah [Holocaust memorial day], which was an Orthodox function. *Mincha* [afternoon prayers], *maariv* [evening prayers, literally 'west' because they are said at the time when the sun sinks in the west], plus my memorial address. I decided to allow the President of the Reform to read Psalm 23. He didn't take any part in the statutory service, he didn't *daven mincha*,¹⁰ he didn't *daven maariv*, he didn't even say *aleinu leshabeyach*.¹¹ Just Psalm 23.

It's no worse than a certain Johannesburg rabbi reading a psalm at the memorial service for Rabin, after he's been calling Rabin a traitor for the last year.

The thought of a rabbi who does not even pray for the welfare of the State of Israel dictating to the government of that state what territory to cede is preposterous. The thought of a religious community urging the government to not cede territory, when that community is not prepared to send its own children to fight and die for that territory is more than preposterous, it is hypocrisy of the worst kind. But when have hypocrisy and the SA Jewish community been strangers?

The Jewish community of South Africa has not produced many original thinkers. We tend to live on clichés. For example, Clinton's statement at Rabin's funeral, 'So shocking that a Jew should lift up a hand against a Jew.' It's repeated by the Chief Rabbi and rabbis all over South Africa. But anyone

¹⁰ *Daven* — pray or lead the prayers. *Mincha* — the afternoon service.

¹¹ *Aleinu leshabeyach* — a prayer which formally concludes the service. It is named after its opening words 'upon us is to praise . . .'

who knows anything about Jewish history knows the very root of our tragedy has been our own self-destructiveness, Jew lifting up hand against Jew. At the time of the first temple, there was the split between the two tribes and the ten tribes, the Northern kingdom of Israel and Judea. In the second temple there was terrible internecine conflict, even with the Romans at the gates. In the Middle Ages rabbis excommunicating each other, Maimonides' books burnt in bonfires, *mitnagdim*¹² opposing hasidim. And in modern times, 'the season', when Ben-Gurion handed over Irgun people to the British. The story of Jew not lifting up hand to Jew is a fallacy, an American superficiality, coined by *Time* and *Newsweek* and Clinton. Unfortunately the rabbis only study Talmud, and leave out Jewish history.

Anyway, I had this Yom HaShoah service. It was a great moment, the Reform movement was happy, while we had lost nothing. There was no mixed seating, and no organs . . . they (the Reform) were coming home. But the Beit Din sent me a telegram stating that I was a *poreitz geder*, and a *mechalel shem shamayim*. [I had broken 'fences' and desecrated the name of God.] My reply to them was that I hadn't, and thus began a scurrilous three-month letter writing campaign against me in the *Jewish Times*.

Which was controlled by who, then?

Leon Feldberg was the editor, a great man, and he wrote sympathetically about me, but he published these scurrilous letters, all from members of the Mizrachi. It's interesting that those who claim to be the disciples of Rav Kook, whose main teaching was *ahavat yisrael* [the love of all Jews for all Jews], let everything prohibited by the Torah fall away when they feel they are involved in a Jewish jihad. Slander, gossip, character assassination. It was me against the mob that questioned my integrity, my knowledge, my ability, my *smicha* [ordination]. This despite the fact that Rabbi Kossowsky, head of the Mizrachi, was one of the rabbis who ordained me. People from Bloemfontein, laymen in my congregation, replied in defence of me, saying there was no Judaism before this man came here. Come down from Jo'burg and see what this place is like now. This went on for months. It is all in the archives, the *Jewish Times*.

Not much has changed. The sole remaining so-called community newspaper, the SA Jewish Times, still prints trash. Last year it printed hate mail from right-wing Jews accusing the then Israeli Ambassador, Elazar Granot (who is pro compromise), of working for the PLO and suggesting he move to Gaza.

Wait till I tell you about my PLO connections. A pioneer there too. Anyway the end result was that it became so unpleasant, the Beit Din brought pressure

¹² *Mitnagdim* literally means 'opponents'. These were the rabbis and their followers who opposed the rise and spread of the populist hasidic movement.

to bear on Bloemfontein, which is part of the federation of synagogues, as it was then called. How do you control your rabbi? You have to get rid of him. Or you can't be a member of the federation of synagogues.

It's like that line concerning Thomas à Becket: 'Will none of you rid me of this turbulent knave?'

It happens. I remember it well because the vice-president of the congregation flew up from Bloemfontein, on Shabbes, to have an emergency meeting about their rebellious rabbi. On Shabbes.

And they gave me an ultimatum. I was under severe pressure. At that time, my good friend Rabbi Abner Weiss was starting up the Durban North congregation. And again I went off to be with him and his young wife Shifra, to recuperate. A word about Abner, who was destined to go on to great things. Abner, who'd also been a pupil of Rabinowitz, went from Durban North to Yeshiva University, where he studied under Rabbi Soloveitchik. When he came back he was appointed Chief Rabbi of Natal. Abner was a clear and consistent voice against apartheid, speaking from the press, the pulpit and public platforms. He appeared with people of the calibre of Archbishop Dennis Hurley and Professor Fatima Meer. He received his share of criticism and threatening phone calls but stuck by his principles.

He was rather taken aback during the Yom Kippur War, when Israel was fighting to survive, none of his colleagues in the Struggle expressed any sympathy for Israel, the Jewish community, or himself. It was a hurtful shock, and hastened his decision to leave the country. He believed that support for the Jewish cause, particularly regarding Israel, would be lacking in the future SA.

Anyway, I stayed in Durban a while. When I came back I said to my wife 'That's it'. And this was the one time in my life when I was ashamed. I agreed to sign a confession, and they printed it in the *Jewish Times*. I said that when I had the service, I did not intend to give offence to my colleagues or the Beit Din. Neither did I intend to give any form of recognition to Reform Judaism.

I apologised. So things cooled down. But not in the heart. I didn't feel good. At that time there were two congregations budding in Jo'burg — Oxford and Sydenham-Highlands North. They were still in houses, they didn't have their buildings yet. Just before they appointed Rabbi Bernard, a well-known attorney, Leslie Lawrence QC, was sent down to see me. He asked me, 'Would you be interested in coming to Oxford to build up what's happening?' I said, yes, very much. Came a man from Sydenham — a Mr Peck — to say, 'Would you be interested in coming, the youth are so wonderful, we want a good youth rabbi.' I said, 'What about the adults?' Once Louis Rabinowitz gave a sermon about this attitude. He said, 'The problem in SA is its *veshamnu bnei Yisrael* ['the children of Israel will keep it', a

phrase from a biblical verse], as if only the children of Israel have to keep Torah . . .’

Anyway, I said I was interested, but I never heard from them again. Subsequently Leslie Lawrence told me that the Oxford Committee clearly stated that my political activities would be an embarrassment. And at Sydenham-Highlands North there were a couple of *verbrente* Nationalists, including one called Mendel Levin, whose son subsequently became the surgeon-general of the SADF, who had said the same thing, so I didn’t get any offers. Long before my personal life took a turn for the worse, my future in the Jewish community of SA had been decided by the synagogue committees who didn’t want to offend the government.

Later on they would say, ‘Ah he was married a few times, his personal life’s no good. Let’s do a Martin Luther King on him.’ Of course, if I was a foreigner, they wouldn’t say anything. Then the attitude would be *der rebbe meg* [Yiddish: the rabbi may do it]. The head of the Cape Town Beth Din, Rabbi Duchinsky — *zichrono livracha* — was married five times. That they don’t talk about.

Were they all through divorce or through becoming a widower?

Divorce a couple, widowed a couple, *ich weiss* [Yiddish: I don’t know], he was a good man. My point is merely that their ‘morality’ is selective.

Ady Assabi has also been attacked about his personal life, regarding women in his congregation.

Oh I didn’t know that. I don’t think he has ever had to rape anyone.

Weren’t you intimidated by this stage? You were risking your career, you were risking your appointments, you were risking a whole lot of things. And many people would have said, that’s too big a price to pay.

I think Louis Rabinowitz’s point about the ‘altar of expediency’ stayed with me. Also I am an idiot, I am foolhardy, reckless. Nothing would deter me. Later on it got worse. When I went on a massive American tour calling for sanctions in 1987, they told me in my congregation that it would be over if I did that, and I knew I would be in the street. I still did it.

Do you think at some level that was an impulse to self-destruct?

I am not comparing myself to the prophets of old, but maybe they also had an impulse to ‘self-destruct’. They were all in trouble with the authorities, they were all banned from speaking. Jeremiah was put in a pit to die. Amos was

told, 'Don't preach here in this temple, go elsewhere, not in Beth El, go somewhere else.'

I think of the Nigerian, General Abusanjo, incarcerated in solitary by the brutal Nigerian gangsters. Abusanjo came to SA in 1986, as part of a Commonwealth 'eminent persons' delegation. He insisted, before anything else, that he be permitted to see Mandela. It makes his current neglect doubly shameful. Thabo was in Nigeria and he didn't even ask to see him, or any of the other detainees. The press said that Nelson led the fight for sanctions against Nigeria. Nonsense. On the morning of the Commonwealth conference in New Zealand Mandela opposed sanctions, said there should be quiet behind-the-scenes diplomacy instead. Six hours later, after Ken Saro Wiwa's murder, and after other Commonwealth leaders had called for sanctions, he jumped on the band wagon.

Anyway, self-destructiveness... I don't know. Call it that if you like. I do not think so. How can I be self-destructive if thirty years later they all say what I was saying then? Chief Rabbi Harris talks as if he has discovered these things. All I would ask from the man is a little humility. To say, 'I have followed in the footsteps of people who have paid the price of a difficult time, who spoke out when it was extremely dangerous.' I wasn't the only one. There was Chief Rabbi Rabinowitz, and Rabbi Selwyn Franklin, who has been in Sydney for four years. The Sea Point Congregation did not renew his contract.

I thought he was in Israel. In a 1988 interview¹³ he said if a Jew leaves here, he or she must go to Israel.

Well, we believed that, but for a rabbi with a family, it is difficult to find a job there. I have the highest regard for Selwyn. He is a brave man, he did brave things, dangerous things. At Crossroads he came under fire, under physical attack. His wife took photographs of what was happening, and the Reverend Zachariah Mokgoebo and I smuggled them out of the country to show at a photographic exhibition in London. Selwyn founded Jews For Justice, in Cape Town. The Sea Point committee stopped him from speaking. I flew down three or four times to speak for him. And Nelson, the first thing he does after the election, he goes to the Sea Point congregation and thanks them for their support! A place full of racists, a congregation that persecuted a rabbi who took a firm anti-apartheid stance. Selwyn worked his butt off with his religious duties, he was a great communal rabbi. But they claimed he wasn't doing his rabbinic duties. They got rid of him. And they can't deny it.

Then there was Ungar, who attacked the Group Areas Act in 1956. He was deported with a blessing, the *hechsher* [stamp of approval] of Rabbi Moses Cyrus Weiler [a leading Reform rabbi].

13 See Alan Fischer and Tzippi Hoffman, *The Jews of South Africa, What Future* (Southern Books Publishers, 1988).

The Board of Deputies issued a statement disassociating itself from Ungar, saying he spoke neither for his community nor for the congregation. Mervyn Smith (now President of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies) wants to say that they always fought apartheid, but they fought the people who fought apartheid. Read the minutes of the Board of Deputies conference and tell me that didn't happen. I've read them all.

So the Reform movement was not any better?

The Reform is not better at all. I spent seven years in that movement discovering it. Why did I go to Reform in the first place? The manner of my parting from Bloemfontein, the hatred in the name of God, left its mark on me, and I moved away from Orthodoxy. I was in Israel some eight years, I wasn't fulfilling myself. I missed spirituality. In Israel Judaism has been politicised, it is the subject of sordid coalition politics. There was the choice between this politicised, degraded Judaism, or secularism, which has led to spiritual bankruptcy. I thought, there must be somewhere in between so I chose Reform. The fact that Reform in America marched with Martin Luther King also swayed me. That is where I first met Ady [Assabi], we did a bit of work together in the Reform movement in Israel. And I met his late wife. She was one of the most beautiful women I have ever ever seen, a *yaalat chen*¹⁴ (graceful gazelle). Yael, *zichrona livracha*. She was an attorney, and died from cancer. And I think that was for him a terrible tragedy, he never recovered from it. People don't know what happens inside you. You're a public figure, you're not allowed to have a heart, or emotions.

Today there is not a South African rabbi left in the Reform movement. But then there was a whole group that opposed apartheid. Dr Saul Super, in his wheelchair, suffering from arteriosclerosis, marched at Wits, and in the street. Rabbi Dick Lampert, now in Sydney, was Rabbi of Temple Emmanuel in 1976. They pulled him off his pulpit on Yom Kippur, while he was attacking apartheid. Mr Benny Slome [whose mother was the first woman dentist in South Africa] from Tedelex, and some of the other industrialists of the Reform Movement. Lampert went to Australia, because three days after being pulled off the pulpit he was raided by the security police, by 'coincidence'. His wife said, 'I am not staying here.'

By the way, the Reform kicked Walter Blumenthal out after twenty-seven years. He was the rabbi at Temple Shalom, and he was the laziest rabbi to ever walk the earth, but he didn't deserve to be fired with forty-eight hours notice. He died of a heart attack in the States, and I had to bury him because his wife wouldn't let the Reform bury him after what they had done. I was angry with Ady for taking up a pulpit that was vacated in such a dastardly manner. I

¹⁴ See the Gemara in Tractate Ketuvot. *Yaalat chen* literally means 'a graceful she goat or gazelle', but metaphorically means a beautiful woman.

also have a problem with Ady's megalomania, but I suppose I've been accused of the same thing.

Anyway, I returned to SA from Israel, and was the founding rabbi of the Reform Temple David. After the '76 Soweto uprising I became very active. I was involved in demonstrations, I entered into close co-operation with what was called the Alexandra Liaison Committee. I started educational projects, I used to bring kids from Alexandra to interact socially with kids from Maginim [the Reform youth movement]. In 1980, I went on my first speaking tour for the World Union of Progressive Judaism. I received an excellent reception at the headquarters of the Reform movement in the States. There are files from American congregations, blessing people for sending me to them. But I returned to a lot of controversy. Not only around my politics, but also around my personal life. I was divorced and there were women making all sorts of claims. I said: 'Who, what, when?' None of them ever came forward to me personally... The truth is they were cloaking their political objections to me as personal ones. But behind it all, although it only appeared as 'number two' on the agenda, was the demand that I stop my attacks on P W Botha and Vorster.

Who was giving you these ultimatums, people in your congregation?

The committee of Temple David, and the President of the United Progressive Congregation of Johannesburg (UPCJ), Mr Leslie Bergman. Bergman seemed to delight in humiliating rabbis with Prussian efficiency — first myself, and then Wally [Walter] Blumenthal. The chairman of Temple David was a guy called Bernard Duchon, who just by coincidence has a brother-in-law called Aronson, who was the first Jewish Nationalist MP. I am sure that Duchon was an agent of the security police. An organised slander network emerged, which rabbis Ady Assabi and Dick Lampert have also been victims of.

Besides all that, I was not happy in Reform. I found it to be spiritually empty, and realised that religiously my roots were elsewhere. I think Reform basically exists as a place for quickie conversions. In 1981, I left the Reform Movement and Temple David amidst great controversy. The departure from Temple David was so horrendous that 150 families left with me. And that closed the Reform episode of my life. As far as that is concerned, I am a *baal teshuva* [a repentant].

My first thought at the time was to establish a Conservative Movement. Rabbi Tanzer and Rabbi Bernard [both Orthodox rabbis] came to see me and begged me not to establish a Conservative Movement. They said 'This is the worst thing that could happen.' They didn't want me to affiliate to the World Union of Conservative Synagogues. I agreed and instead we established the Independent Congregation of Har El, as a breakaway from Reform. It was a mixed congregation, men and women sat together, and there were Reform

converts in it. And it started to flourish and grow. Ady used to come as a guest, because they only had one night Rosh Hashanah at Temple Emmanuel, but we had two.¹⁵ So he used to come second night to Har El. Now he says he introduced second night Rosh Hashanah to progressive congregations. What is the matter with the guy?

I made a condition that anyone who joins Har El must know that this will be a centre against racism. And if you don't accept that, don't come. It didn't help. We grew. I built it.

It was a house in Houghton, 95 Central Street. I lived at the top. And you know what. *Ha Kodesh Boruch hu* [the Holy One, blessed be he], acts *mida keneged mida* [measure for measure]. I believe that the wheel comes round, *galgal chozeyr ba olam*. You know what it is today? A brothel. And it's appropriate, because the people who drove me out of Har El were whores. So I feel that I want to go and pay a nostalgic visit to where I lived for six years. But they won't give me a discount.

You wouldn't be the first rabbi to visit a brothel. You know what it says in the gemara in tractate Sotah . . . if you feel your desire overpowering you, wear black, and go to a place where no one knows you, and act out . . .

I am a single man. I am entitled. But I'm not interested. I have lived a life of celibacy for the last eight years. (Those who knew me when I was young wouldn't believe it.) But especially a spiritual celibacy, and this is what has destroyed me, destroyed my soul. Anyway, Har El grew and flourished. Reform youth leaders came to us. People like that. I mean it was bringing both Orthodox and Reform people in. I lived an Orthodox life, at this stage. I was *shomeyr shabbat, kashnut*. It was great. On Yomtov we used the big lawn, a couple of acres. We had marquees. Yom Kippur night we had 1 500 people in that marquee. It was unbelievable what I was doing. I really committed suicide, because I could have had that today, there would have been no need for Assabi's congregation, there would have been no place for it. But my self-destructive impulse, as you may call it, or as I would rather see it, my commitment to justice, overcame everything else: ambition, security, money. I am fifty-nine years old and I don't own a house, I don't own a car, I don't own a chair. Nothing. I paid heavily, heavily. In 1983 I became friendly with Desmond Tutu. He was the Bishop of Jo'burg, and I walked into his office, and I introduced myself, and we embraced. We became very close.

This was after inviting him to Har El for prayer and to fast for peace. Very few of the congregation joined us. I went to Khotso House. There was a young man there, Harold Winkler, fasting in the chapel, protesting against

¹⁵ Rosh Hashanah — the Jewish new year — is traditionally celebrated over two days, but most Reform congregations decided to observe it for one day only.

scription and troops in the townships. I joined Tutu for a moment. We closed our eyes and prayed, and afterwards the Bishop said, 'Thank you for coming, my brother.' It was all in the press. The congregants started to murmur. Desmond was already talking sanctions against SA. So they called a meeting and said, 'Rabbi, we pay your salary and he's trying to destroy our businesses? How do you reconcile that?' I said lucre, it's money . . .

Do you still feel the same way now, that their objection was illegitimate?

Of course. Prostitution of the worst kind. I had more respect for a whore in the sexual sense than a whore in the spiritual sense. That is the real prostitution of life. The prostitution of your soul for personal gain or expediency. And I am afraid that that is the story of our community, and our rabbis.

But what about the reality, I mean there are always trade-offs in getting to a place from which you can actually influence things. In some ways you completely marginalised yourself. Business people generally play the game by the unwritten rules . . . they run with the hare and hunt with the hounds . . . and when they want to change something they try to do it behind the scenes. Don't you regret not taking a more subtle, more consultative, less confrontational approach to change?

No. I don't think there can be subtlety in the condemnation of murder and injustice. We were very subtle during the Holocaust when what was needed was for the Pope, and the world, and the church, to speak openly. Maybe the businessman has to do it that way, I've never been a businessman, so I don't know. But I don't think that in the sphere of morals and ethics and justice, especially as taught to us by the prophets of Israel, there is any place for 'subtlety'. Elijah said it on Mount Carmel, *ad matai a tem poschim al shnei haseifim*. How long shall you halt between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him. And if Baal is God, follow him. There is no in between in the practice of justice. So I don't regret my stance whatsoever. What I regret is that my friends who should have stood beside me, who should have known better, have abandoned me. Those, like Desmond, whom I fought with. I was the first Jew, and the only rabbi, to embrace him. A year ago, I was in Cape Town, and I couldn't get an appointment to see him.

Why do you think that he wouldn't see you?

I don't know. Perhaps he's into the reconciliation business too. His secretary was adamant he had no time to see me. Beyers says that it is not possible, he thinks there was a misunderstanding, that the secretary was trying to shield him from too many appointments. I don't know.

But Har El broke up because of my overseas tour in 1986-87. People resigned en masse. I went with Rev Mokgoebo [speaking across the States

and Europe, calling for sanctions]. We went to thirty-five cities. Under the auspices of a very radical American Jewish organisation called New Jewish Agenda.

When I came back from that tour, my third wife had left me. I was crazy about her, obsessed with her, and it was very painful. Immediately after landing I was told by the chairman that the congregation was closing, the house was being sold, and then my wife told me she was leaving. There can be no greater blow in life. I lost my home, my career, and my love, in two hours. I had a bottle of scotch and a lot of pills, and landed up in the Sandton Clinic, in therapy, sleep therapy, whatever, for ten days. Then I stayed with Suzanne and Mike Belling for a few months, and then with Linda and Martin Behr, the only members of my family to show care and support for me. The whole of 1987 I stared at the roof, smoked, drank. Cyril Harris arrived on the scene early 1988.

Who did he replace, Rabbi Casper?

Yes. I had been to see the Beit Din, I said it's not a matter of being a *baal tshuva* [penitent], I have lived the Orthodox life already — the congregation wasn't Orthodox, but I have been. I went to Cape Town to look for a position and didn't get one. I lay in Jo'burg and began to feel sorry for myself. My family and I were kept alive (I support my ex-wife and kids) by two people. Most interesting. One was Beyers Naudé, then secretary-general of the SACC, who gave me a monthly allowance. The other is a wonderful *tzaddik* [saintly man], the only real *tzaddik* in the Jewish community — Rabbi Yerimiyahu Aloy, senior Dayan [judge] on the Beit Din. Do you know that during the fifties and sixties he went to visit all Jewish and other detainees in the prisons? He was a chaplain to prisoners. He never spoke about it, he never told anyone, but he told me privately. He loves me and I love him, I have great *koved* [respect] for him, he's a huge *lamdan* [scholar] and a *tzaddik*. He showed me letters [he received from people who were there]. Like Esther Barsel, who was in Barberton prison for nine years. She served five or six. Aloy visited them regularly, took them Paysach matzah, etc. He also visited the non-Jews who were there.

You were supporting your first wife?

No, no, my second wife. My third marriage was very short and very painful. She left me. Look you can't be devoted to the struggle for human rights and also be a family person. I allowed it. I am not making excuses. I have two girls from my first marriage, two boys from my second.

Barbara Masekela. Barbara sat with me. We hugged each other and we danced and we watched it on television. She's forgotten a good friend. They all came back home. Not me.

Then some Harare Jews started reacting to my activities. I must tell you, I have experienced racist Jews in my life, but racists like in Harare, that was something! You know what they did? My work permit was due for renewal, and Zimbabweans are very tough on this. Foreigners are not particularly liked in Zimbabwe. If there is a Zimbabwean who can do the job you're applying for, then you don't get your work permit. There wasn't a Zimbabwean rabbi, yet I was told at the end of 1989 that my work permit had been denied; I was to leave the country forthwith. I got the shock of my life. I phoned Thabo in Lusaka. I went to the Zimbabwe Council of Churches, and I met with two or three cabinet ministers, including Senator Culverwell, who told me on his death-bed that it had been leaders of the Jewish community who had tried to have me thrown out of the country. This was subsequently confirmed by Ali Halimeh (the PLO representative in Zimbabwe), to whom I appealed as well.

It turned out that certain leaders of the Jewish community had written to the immigration department stating that I was not the right person to be a rabbi, and would they revoke my work permit, and my immigration status. That's a case of *mosrim*, *moser* [an informer]. They tried to get me out. But they underestimated the combination of the ANC and the Zimbabwe Council of Churches, and above all, Ali. Ali Halimeh was all-powerful in Southern Africa in those days, the doyen of the diplomatic corps. He took matters to the very top and said 'A just man who loves all human beings, Jews, Palestinians, blacks, whites... who has given his life for the Struggle, is being thrown out of the country.' It was quietened. The Central Intelligence Organisation of Zimbabwe had dug in their heels but they were told to leave it. And I was asked not to talk about it. Ali had been shown some documents which he is not allowed to reveal, so I don't want to compromise him, even after all these years.

What were they angry about? Your ANC membership?

Absolutely. My dinner parties with exiles and activists, my links with Ali Halimeh. When I first arrived, with my record, my love of people and of human rights, Ali issued a statement welcoming me. We met, we became friends, I was the first one to say dialogue between Israel and the PLO is inevitable. Arafat invited me to Tunis, but I declined. For once in my life, I felt hey, *yesh gvul* [there's a limit]. I was also suspicious that I was being used. I was wrong. Ali is a good man, and he's been an unconditional friend. He never asked for anything back in return from me, never. I think he has been a bit let down by his own people.

So it was the ANC, it was Halimeh, it was my teaching at the Theological College, it was my anti-racism, it was the South African connection. The fact

is that they cloaked it with other things too. Not women this time, but all sorts of excuses. So I left Harare, again because of controversy. Wherever I have been it's been terrible. Except Bulawayo. I remember the last days of my ministry with affection because they have been kind to me. Alan Feigenbaum is an amazing man. A *gabai* that I waited all my life for . . . Cares for me, cares for my children, my family, brings them up to Bulawayo to clothe them, to give them things. Don't know why. He lives my distress, phones me at night. Says, 'Are you drinking, are you OK, are you alone?'

I am alone. There is no one to talk to. There is no Struggle. Everyone's gone home. They have destroyed me psychologically. I think I am deteriorating. I mean, you smoke as much as I do, and take sleeping pills . . . I am an insomniac. I'd rather die living where I want to live, than rot as I am . . . it's getting to my mind, and getting to my desire for life. No purpose in it. All that really keeps me alive is the thought of my children.

It's painful to be far away from my kids, not having been able to watch my sons grow up, and to have to solve problems from a distance. My health is deteriorating, I've got a permanent arthritic collapse of vertebrae in the neck, but I defy that as I defy everything else. I play tennis three times a week. As I always say, at least my tennis got better in Bulawayo. I play in pain, but I play.

And they appreciate what I have done for them here. Visitors come from all over the world and say 'What, in Africa! Such a congregation, and such wonderful service, and the sermon, how does this rabbi end up here?' Well I'm going to tell them the story: I love Africa, and that's why I'm still here. I was offered posts in America. But here is where I belong, I am an African.

I write to the Union of Orthodox Synagogues and ask them to help me come home [ie to South Africa]. They curtly acknowledge receipt of my letter — nothing more. In October 1993, a year before their centenary celebrations, Cyril Harris came to Bulawayo. As he leaves to board the plane, he puts his arm around me and says, 'You're a good guy. Next year you will be at the celebrations as a guest, not as the resident rabbi.' I don't think he'll come again. He knows, I think, that I would find it difficult to be courteous again. People have phoned him on my behalf. Dr Beyers Naudé, Reverend Mokgoebo. I applied for many congregations in South Africa but was refused. Beyers said, 'Don't lower your dignity. You know you're a talented preacher and scholar, but those doors are closed to you.' And Beyers nominated me for the Truth Commission. He phoned Cyril [Harris] to ask him to join him. Cyril didn't do so.

What happened when you spoke in Linksfield Synagogue shortly before the elections?

In January '94 I went down to SA and told Ronnie [Kasrils] I'd like to help the ANC with their election campaign. Paula Slier, at the Board of Deputies, offered to set up my speaking arrangements. Seymour Kopelowitz, director

of the Board, found it invalid that she should be helping me, and so, with no one to organise it, it was a flop. I still came down on my own funds, and spoke to the Union of Jewish Women, who were always pretty open and fair. I also spoke at Linksfield Synagogue. It was the Friday night just before the festival of Purim, and Gavin Michal, the rabbi of Linksfield, invited me to give the sermon. He was a young SA rabbi with a social conscience, and although he had encountered opposition to his views, he was adamant that I should speak. So Ronnie Kasrils came, the service took place, and I spoke. I was moderate and diplomatic, and I said Nelson Mandela was a righteous man who had forgiven those who persecuted him.

When I mentioned Mandela as being one of the great men of our time people began walking out — not the whole congregation, but individuals. One Mr Grusd accosted Kasrils in the foyer and started abusing him for the crimes of communism and Lenin etc. We all kept our cool — except for Mr Grusd — and then went for supper to Rabbi Michal. Kasrils said to me, 'I will not enter an Orthodox congregation again unless you are the rabbi there.' When I phoned the Chief Rabbi, Ann Harris gave me hell — she didn't wait to hear my side of the story, she just accepted all the accusations that I had given an out-and-out ANC election speech.

Shortly afterwards Gavin Michal resigned from Linksfield. Kasrils spoke to me briefly before I returned to Bulawayo, said I must be patient and my time will come. Neither Gavin nor I ever heard from Kasrils again. You know, I had established contact with Kasrils in 1991, after he'd returned to SA. I came down to visit my kids, and popped in to Shell House. This was during Operation Vula. Someone said 'Ronnie wants to meet you quietly, in the kosher restaurant at Gallagher's Corner.' We met there. He was on the run, had a beard, looked like an Orthodox rabbi. We sat talking. He said, 'I need a safe house for someone very urgently.' It transpired that it was a woman who had been caching arms in Parkhurst. And the police had discovered the arms cache. It was headlines. She is now a member of parliament, called Janet Love. And I, within two hours, found her a place with friends of mine. Endangering their lives. There's an interesting postscript to this Vula episode. During the course of 1994 Ali Halimeh was at a cocktail party at the Tambos' house... He went up to Ronnie and said, 'You know, your friend Ben in Bulawayo feels you've abandoned him.' Said Ronnie, quote: 'Tell Ben not to be pushy, and to be patient.'

I recounted this to Thabo when I met him. I said, 'This is what Ronnie is about. This is what you guys are about. I should have said then in 1991: Don't be pushy, be patient. No safe house.' Neither from Janet Love or Ronnie was there thanks. Abandonment there was.

Afterwards there came the election. Ben Isaacson's not invited to the inauguration. I sent a fax expressing my upset to Barbara Masekela, who was the MC. Didn't get a reply. I also wrote to Thabo, to Ronnie, asking for some sort of post in the diplomatic service. They didn't respond.

Maybe your letter never arrived. The post's not so hot these days.

It did get there. I saw Thabo at the end of the year, in 1994, on the 14th of November, in Tuynhuis. And I saw Professor Jakes Gerwel on the 15th of November. (I have not met my President, whom I fought to release for so many years.) It took me six months of phone calls from Bulawayo to set up the appointments. Thousands of Zimbabwe dollars, on phone calls which my *gabai* paid for. And I asked for them to have me brought back, and to help me. I didn't beg. I walked into Thabo's office. He embraced me. I said, 'Why have you abandoned me, Thabo?' 'No, we love you, we will never forget you.' He said, 'I will phone the Chief Rabbi and express my wishes that you be brought back. Where are you staying?' 'I am in Muizenberg.' 'What is your phone number?' '788 7893.' 'Within ten days I will phone you.' That was the last time I spoke to him.

I believe that they did phone. Ronnie would say to Seymour Kopelowitz [the SAJBD's director], 'Why don't you bring back Ben from political exile?' 'Ben is not in political exile, Ben's a problematic guy, it's not easy to get him a position.' 'But the reason he suffered is because of his convictions.' 'No, his personal life. Reform.' Thabo Mbeki did phone the Chief Rabbi. But Cyril [Harris] says to Zak [Mokgoebo]: 'I can't foist Ben on congregations, and Ben always shoots himself in the leg whenever he speaks.' So Zak says: 'What do you mean by that, I thought you were allowed to speak the truth in the New South Africa?' 'He goes on the past!' 'He's not allowed to talk about the past?'

This is a new thing now. That's why the Truth Commission won't work. Jews are allowed to talk about the past, aren't we? We won't forget Auschwitz. And we won't forgive. And quite rightly so because the dead didn't give us power of attorney to forgive on their behalf. Nelson Mandela has no moral right to forgive on behalf of those who suffered. He can forgive his own suffering. And if he wants to have tea with Percy Yutar, he can have tea with him, I suppose. But I get sick when I think of who that cruel bitter man is, and was.

Did you ever worry that your attacks on the Jewish community might provide ammunition for anti-Semites?

I never attacked individual Jews, there were wonderful Jews in Krugersdorp, in Bloemfontein, at Temple David, at Har El, in Harare. And there are great ones in Bulawayo. My attacks were aimed at the establishment, the wheeler dealers, the Boards of Deputies, Zionist federations. Shul committees. I couldn't confine those attacks solely within the community because they shut you up, they won't allow you to speak on Jewish platforms. It was also important to speak up so that blacks would know there were strong Jewish voices against apartheid. The role that had in combating anti-Semitism must be kept in mind when weighing up the possible damage of 'washing dirty

linen in public'. Besides, anti-Semitism should be fought proactively, not reactively.

Why are you still blacklisted today? Why won't the Board have you as a guest speaker?

It's vindictiveness, and they worry 'what awkward things that we'd rather forget about will he raise this time?' I'm not even invited to speak at Cyril Harris's annual rabbinic conference. I want to come home, and I can't come home.

What would you be doing if you were back in South Africa?

Abolishing apartheid was an act of law. Changing people's hearts is an act of education. I believe the youth must know what happened in this country. There's a place in this country for Ben Isaacson in that sphere. Whether in the general education system, or in the Jewish education system... or in the diplomatic service of this country. Whether it's in fund-raising that's necessary for the RDP, whatever, I think that the ANC government owes me support as I approach old age.

What does this 'abandonment' by both friend and foe make you feel about the current leadership of South Africa, or about human nature in general?

I want to end with my poem. And it answers your question. This is what I have written:

Do not go gentle into that good night
Old age should burn and rave at close of day
Rage rage against the dying of the light
Dylan Thomas

Eight years of silence now come to an end
Eight years of hope that justice will prevail
Eight years of unbearable pain and loneliness
Must be compensated by the only means left me
To speak now, as I did in the past, the truth
And the truth shall set me free
As I rage against the dying of the light.
I was told not to speak in public
Of my people's misdeeds
Not to compromise their image as a nation
of good yield.
But they shut the Jewish platform

And closed the Jewish Press.
 Where else then, could I express my distress.
 In any event the prophets of old
 neither flinched or wavered in their criticism
 of a people who abandoned the holy of holies
 'Love thy neighbour', and this the prophets
 did, even in public, for injustice cannot decide to hide
 just because Jews are sometimes on its side.
 I am neither a prophet, nor a son of a prophet
 But justice I have pursued from 1958
 And I must speak before it's too late.
 To Nelson and company whose cause I have served
 better friends I surely deserved.
 You reward the wicked and punish the righteous
 politics your motto, expediency your logo.
 Is this the justice you have wrought?
 Surely the God of justice is distraught.
 Cups of tea with fascists you drink
 and of your friends you do not think
 Voltaire or whoever said it was right
 enemies we can fight,
 but friends like you and company
 are a threat to a just man's sanity.
 Shame shall accompany you in God's sight.
 while I shall continue, to my very last
 to rage against the dying of the light.

It sounds like you're blaming a whole lot of other people, and accepting no responsibility for the way your life has turned out . . .

No, you spoke about this earlier. I was reckless. Had I been less reckless, I would have preserved Har El and would have been having tea with Nelson today. But I still want my tea with him, and Thabo is not invited, and nor is Ronnie or Pallo or Steve. And I want to be driven to the tea by Seymour Kopelowitz, with a chauffeur's cap on his head.

I regret the period I spent in the Reform Movement. There was a period in Israel which brought me to being *chiloni* [secular] for a while. And then I yearned for some spirituality, because I felt an emptiness. So I went the path of Reform, believing in their commitment to universality, but there was no real commitment to universality. I regret it, I do. I regret my personal life being a failure. And I take responsibility for that. But it cannot be held against me, because there is no halachic reason for it to be held against me. I regret very much that my marriages were a failure. It's bad. Bad for you, bad for children, bad for your image. I feel very pained about that. But that has nothing to do

with the ANC and Cyril Harris and the Board of Deputies, and the attempt to cover up what they have done.

Or not done.

Or not done. God bless you.