Escape!

IT WAS 1949, and post-war austerity still prevailed. Nevertheless, the discomfort of the four-berth second class cabin on the Edinburgh Castle for the twelve day voyage to Southampton was minor compared with the excitement of travel, with the escape from the inhibitions of Durban, with the throwing off of the yoke of Afrikaner narrowness and prudery, with the glorious feeling of anonymity. No one knew me or cared about what I did. Apart from a lingering hangover and a faint seasickness, it was unalloyed joy tinged with some apprehension about the great world about which I knew almost nothing.

I have little recollection of the voyage, except that there were a number of people of my age and that it was pleasant. There was a very brief stop-over in London and a long trans-Atlantic flight to New York. Other than a contact in the office of the family company's shippers, I knew nó-one in America. My delight in my freedom started to fray a little.

It was mid-September and *Kol Nidre* night. I wandered up Fifth Avenue from my cheap hotel and found a shul – the Temple Emmanuel. Unbeknown to me it was the heart of ultra-liberal New York Jewish society. I was asked to remove my hat and instructed to say "happy holiday" and not "good *Yomtov*". There was no offer of friendship or hospitality.

I left New York by train the next day for New Haven as I had been accepted by Yale as a Master of Forestry student. On arrival I was told that an error had been made as undergraduate mathematics was a pre-requisite and it had just been discovered that I lacked this. Arrangements had, however, been tentatively made for my acceptance by the New York State College of Forestry situated on the campus of Syracuse University in northern New York. I had heard of neither the college nor the town but had little option but blindly to accept. Gathering my luggage, and with neither help nor advice available, I caught a succession of trains to Syracuse and found an unattractive industrial city redeemed by the glorious surrounding autumn countryside.

I found my way to the Dean of the College, Prof. Nelson C. Brown, whom I soon discovered was more of a public relations fund raiser than an academic. He was delighted to have his first South African graduate student to add to his considerable list of foreigners and made me feel very special and welcome. We settled on a "Forest Utilization" curriculum as being potentially the most suitable for my future career, and I was directed, for accommodation, to the foreign graduate students' hostel.

Despite my lack of experience and means of comparison, I knew immediately that it was not for me. It was a dingy old building, with primitive ablutions, and double rooms. *Victoriahuis* in remote Stellenbosch was palatial by comparison. Someone had told me that there were rooms available in private homes and I set off to explore the leafy streets in the vicinity of the campus. I soon found a classic two-storey wood-clad house in Euclid Avenue, with a sign "student rooms available". Mrs. Riley showed me a good upstairs front room, complete with all necessary furniture, desk and bookshelf, an easy chair, bay window, and a bathroom to be shared with two others. I had found my Syracuse home. I may, however, have hesitated had I known that Mr. Riley ran a school for morticians in the house basement and that practice corpses were often trundled in and out. There was also a pervading odour of formaldehyde to which I soon became acclimatised. Riley and I occasionally had an evening drink in these macabre surroundings. Liquor was forbidden by Mrs. Riley in the house proper. She kept an accusing eye on "her" students as well as on her husband.

Very soon after arrival, and to the consternation of the Rileys, I received a visitor, the local FBI agent who had been asked to check on my whereabouts and activities. I should mention that this was at the time of the McCarthy lunacy and the witch-hunt for communist sympathisers. The probable background to this is that I had arrived in New York with a very "red" book under my arm – I think it was Trotsky's *Life of Karl Marx*! I was questioned about it, without any particular heat, and had quite forgotten the incident. The FBI had not! I was visited monthly during my stay and my landlady, my professors, and some of my friends were politely questioned about my activities. I became quite friendly with the agent and the monthly check-up was later carried out in the local pub. I discovered that checking on foreign students was his chief activity.

Syracuse University was, and probably still is, an enormous institution with all of the usual faculties. I recall that its total student registration was about 30 000. It had a mediocre reputation somewhere in the middle of the academic range. On its campus was the New York State College of

Forestry, catering for about 300 undergraduate and about 50 graduate students. The Dean, Nelson C. Brown, was better known for his friendship with President Roosevelt than for his academic prowess. The faculty was a mixed bag. One or two of the professors had some international status, but most were nonentities. There were some weird professorships which could only have been dreamed up in a minor American college. A prime example was the Chair of Wood Glues, occupied by Prof. Al Bishop, uninformed and pedestrian, who asked me if Johannesburg was close to Casablanca! Fortunately there was a layer of graduate fellows who redeemed the College to some extent, and many of them became friends. Among them was John Yaworsky, to become head of FAO in Rome, Aubrey Wiley, a future professor at Madison, and Harold Gatslick now an emeritus professor at Amherst.

The graduate students were my natural companions and I soon got to know them as well as a number of the senior undergraduates, as I attended some classes with them. In the manner of American spoilt graduate students, I had a small office, a telephone, and the shared use of a secretary!

The teaching in my particular discipline – Forest Utilization—was uniformly puerile and in intellectual content no better than good high school level. I did learn something of wood glues and similar silly subjects, but nothing that could not be picked up by a quick reference to manufacturers' catalogues. "Sawmilling techniques" had little relevance to plantation forestry and seem to assume that graduates would flock to the world's rain forests to use outmoded machinery. My thesis on "International lumber trade" was culled from a couple of library books and written in a few days. The "MF" (or MSc (For)) was, academically, a joke. From a practical viewpoint however it was, in retrospect, invaluable. It gave me an entreé into the American sawmilling and wood utilising industries, and to the forestry practices in the pine plantations of the Carolinas, Arkansas and Mississippi. With the assistance of a young P.R. employee of the College, "Prof" Jim Owens, I travelled quite widely and as it was clear to my hosts that I would not be competitive with them, they were much more free with information than they would have been with an American student. There were also a number of senior student field trips which I joined, which were both instructive and enjoyable.

Social life at Syracuse was pleasant but not spectacular. The early 1950s were still heavily influenced by fraternities and sororities. I was invited to join one or two but was not interested, particularly as they were either racist or religious. They all were identified by the meaningless Greek letters so beloved of American students. There was veiled hostility

between the Anglo-Saxon and Jewish houses, and fairly open hostility between white and black.

Academically, the students were generally serious, with a significant leavening of veterans from both the World and Korean wars. I was vaguely aware of a very social scene particularly among the Jewish students, Syracuse being a favoured college for New York Jews who were not accepted by the Ivy Leagues, but did not get involved. As appears to be endemic with students world-wide, there was considerable drinking of both beer and whiskey. American-style drinking was uncomfortable. It was not friendly, social, "pub" drinking. It was drinking to get drunk. "Chug-a-lug", a shot-glass of neat bourbon followed by a beer chaser, at one of the many student bars. "Downtown" Syracuse was unattractive and rarely visited, except for a night-club which was part owned by a mature graduate student in logopoedics whom I occasionally dated. That rather strange friendship arose through my having registered at the University speech clinic in my eternal quest for the holy grail of a cure.

The philosophy of the clinic was that stuttering was "diagnosgenic". It is not there until it is diagnosed. I am convinced that this was my history, as I have discussed earlier. Because of an inexplicable ability to speak totally without stuttering when I put my mind to it, I was rapidly elevated to the pedestal of the most spectacular cure achieved by the particular method invented and propagated by the clinic, known as deliberate non-fluency. You were encouraged to sp-sp-sp-sp-speak l-l-l-like th-th-th-this to prove to yourself that you didn't care. In search of this utopia we were sent off on expeditions, for example into a jewellery shop to ask f-f-f-for a g-g-g-glass of m-m-m milk! The more outlandish the non-fluent request the better its purpose was supposed to be served! I have a strong feeling that somewhere in this reasoning there is a psychological flaw and I was certain that my supposed cure had nothing to do with the treatment. I was elevated to junior lecturer and paid! My lectures to wide-eyed students were illustrated, before during and after the "cure", with vivid examples. It was a total fraud. I was as much cured then as I am now. To my mind there is in fact no cure, except perhaps via deep psychoanalysis. A stutterer may at times speak fluently, as I do, but whilst there is anxiety he is still a stutterer. A sad example of this was a student patient of the clinic. He spoke well and fluently, but whenever he had to speak, he sweated profusely. He was as much a stutterer as I was.

Holiday periods appeared set to be rather miserable and with the Christmas break approaching, I was fortunate to be asked home by an ex-army senior student, Bob Greene. Bob's home was a remote Vermont farm in beautiful snow-covered mountain country. The family was

friendly and warm and the life-style to someone with no experience outside of South Africa, fascinating. I had my first experience of sleds, snowshoes, skis, of huge mountains of flapjacks covered with home-harvested maple syrup, of roast whole pig, of home-brewed apple cider and corn liquor. It was a marvellous week.

Back in Syracuse, I was sitting one morning at a student hang-out fast-food counter. On the stool next to me was a slight, interesting looking, short-haired blond. We chatted. She was a second year 20-year-old student of English, Peggy Bruce Alison. It was the beginning of a student affair that lasted until I left Syracuse at the end of that year. It was also my introduction to the totally, to me, unknown and weird world of Christian Science. There were the Alison parents, Peggy, and a younger sister and brother. Father appeared to be the grey sheep of a Pilgrim Father Philadelphian WASP family. Mother was the devout rock around whom the family flowed. She and the children were deeply involved in the church. Father's involvement was rather superficial.

In this very strictly teetotal household, he and I occasionally sneaked into the basement for a couple of quick shots of forbidden whisky. Despite the totally differing backgrounds, I was always a welcome visitor in their home, although father gently warned me off any thought of a permanent liaison. I may have saved younger brother's life when I insisted that he should be hospitalised for acute appendicitis. The family were prepared to pray and have a "laying on of the hands". To paint another part of this extraordinary picture, I should record that Peggy and I won the church waltz competition at the annual social. The Durban ghetto would never have believed it! It was, however, a very happy and stabilising few months. Had I been older and more distant from my background, marriage might have been possible. The situation, however, was becoming difficult. It was with considerable regret and some relief that I embraced the suggestion from South Africa that, after graduating, I should spend some time with a Swedish sawmilling and forestry company. The College was pressing me to stay for a Ph.D. degree which they promised in one year instead of two. This was not because of my academic prowess, but for the PR value of a foreign doctoral student. Perhaps I should have stayed. A Ph.D. would have been very useful in the strange Afrikaner world to which I was to return and in which the title "*Doktor*" was an immediate cause for deference, if not servility. Conversely, however, I have not regretted avoiding that possibility of matrimony. The distance between our cultures and life-styles was too vast.

Peggy married a Canadian dentist who I met briefly on a visit to Syracuse some years later. We were not again in contact until more than

40 years had passed, when I contacted her through the Alumni Association and visited her in Virginia. She had not fared well. Her husband had died after contracting a degenerative disease, and her only son was born retarded, and died in his twenties. She remains vital, and involved in church, musical and literary pursuits.

The year in the U.S.A. had another important advantage. During the summer holiday I was invited to join a fellow-student, Ken Watson, on an expenses-sharing motor-tour of the U.S.A., an offer which I enthusiastically accepted. We planned to camp out wherever possible and to see as much of the country as we could fit into an eight week tour. The trip began in Syracuse, entered Canada through northern New York, returned to the U.S.A. via the Canadian Rockies to Chicago and the mid-West, then on to the West coast and back to New York via the southern States. We erected our two-man tent in locations as different as a public park in Chicago and a bear-infested roadside in Yellowstone. We met a large cross-section of the American people, and experienced America in all its vastness. By the time I left the U.S.A., this trip and my other travels had taken me to almost all of the American states. I had acquired a good working knowledge of the country and its people, and that, added to my exposure to the forest industry, was to prove far more valuable than the institution to which I was formally attached. I learned quickly not to generalise about America. People and customs are vastly different East to West and North to South, and racism is certainly not unique to South Africa.

It was now September of 1950. I was on a small passenger vessel of the Swedish-American line en route from New York to Stockholm, for my next adventure for which I was again ill-prepared. I have little recollection of the six day voyage, other than that I was subject to almost constant nausea, from either sea-sickness or alcohol. The latter was as a result of having, as a travel companion, the great Swedish operatic tenor, Jossi Björling. It is not surprising that he died an alcoholic in early middle-age. He was already a compulsive drinker. We became good friends and corresponded intermittently over the next few years.

I was met in Stockholm by an elegant Swede, Carl Setterwall, who was the export agent for "Bolinder", the manufacturer of the frame-saws that were being increasingly used in South Africa, where Acme had become the leading sawmiller. I was thus, happily, treated with more consideration than in the U.S., and placed in a comfortable hotel for a couple of days whilst the necessary formalities were taken care of. One of these, as I was heading for the very cold North, was to arrange for a reasonable supply of liquor, ordinarily not available to a visitor of my

tender age under the draconian Swedish drinking laws.

On my second evening I was subjected to my first exposure to Swedish customs which it was necessary to absorb and observe before venturing into any level of Swedish society. I was invited to a dinner at the home of minor Swedish aristocracy. There were about 20 people at a sparkling, formal table. As the youngest, by far, I was at the foot. We sat. Our glasses were filled. I was nervous and thirsty. I picked up my glass, drank half of it, and looking over the rim, saw everyone's eyes fixed on me. I had just committed in one stroke a series of almost unforgivable gaffes:

- a guest never drinks until asked to do so by the host. Only thereafter can he initiate a toast;
- the youngest guest (me!) never, ever initiates a toast. He waits patiently to be invited;
- no-one, ever, drinks on his own. You raise your glass to another guest, lock eyes, bow over the rim, turn away, drink, lock eyes again, bow, and so on.

It was a painful lesson.

I travelled by train to Skellefteå, a small town on the Baltic, in the very north of Sweden. I was met by a driver from my employer, the Bureå company, based about two hours drive still further north in a village of the same name. The October late autumn weather was turning very cold. We were almost on the Arctic circle, Lapland was close by. I had not realised until then where I was to be located and how cold and remote it was to be.

Bureå is a bleak, rather ugly village of about 200 inhabitants. It is basically a company town, housing the workers and dependants of Burë AB, the forestry and sawmilling company for whom I was to work as a *praktikant*. The life of the village revolved around the Inn, which appeared to be more of a pub and simple restaurant than an hotel. I think that I was the only resident in a simply furnished, comfortable room. Food was very basic and seemed to consist largely of oatmeal porridge (*havregrynsgröt*) topped with whatever berries were available. I recall pork, and occasional venison and reindeer meat, and escaping the drinking laws, a local home-brewed variety of aquavit flowed freely at all times.

I was taken to meet the Direktor of the company at his office in the large manor house. K-G (Karl-Gustav) Anderson appeared to be rather a forbidding humourless man with little English, and I sensed that he was not too pleased at having been landed with the responsibility for a young unknown South African, but I was connected to a customer and this was a duty! He introduced me to his sawmill and forestry managers, told them that I would be there "for some time", that I was a *praktikant*

getting experience, that I was unpaid, and that I shouldn't be allowed to interfere too much with production. At least, that is what I think he said as the translation was not all that supple.

I returned to the Inn where there was fortunately an old-fashioned drinking party in process. I joined it, sang some Afrikaans songs, was taught some bawdy Swedish drinking songs, and found that I was accepted. This made an enormous difference. I was subsequently treated as a friend, and the company people were uniformly helpful to the best of their limited language ability.

I started in the sawmill, spending a few days on each machine and moving from department to department. I quickly discovered that I did not have the right work-clothes, either for in the mill or in the forest, and was equipped at the local general dealer, together with snowshoes and *langlauf* skis in anticipation of the winter which was about to descend. I firmly refused ice-skates "for skating across the Baltic!"

My social life then changed abruptly for the better. K-G had recently become divorced, and lived on his own in the enormous rambling manor house. He may have had good reports of me, was lonely, or may have wanted to practise his rusty English. For whatever combination of reasons, he invited me to move to the house which I did with enthusiasm. Our first dinner was memorable. We sat at either end of a long, well-appointed dining room table, with a waiter for each of us. As this was not a formal occasion they were not liveried, but in other similar homes they were. Northern-most Sweden was still a semi-feudal society, with vast estates and enormous manor houses many miles from each other, with workers and the general population housed in small villages much like Bureå.

I discovered, to my ultimate cost, that K-G was a dedicated drinker. There were strict drinking laws and restrictions on liquor purchases, but the company had its own harbour for timber exports and custom controls were almost non-existent. Champagne, cognac, whiskey and wine were a normal unofficial part of harbour dues.

Before this first meal, we had a couple of large whiskies. At dinner, with the herring course, there was an aquavit welcome toast (Swedes are very formal) to which I had to reply. I refused a third aquavit, but was told – in accent and words which still ring in my memory – "Herr Gevisser. Here, in Sweden, in the North, in winter, when we open a bottle of aquavit, we finish it!" He did most of it, and the bottle was indeed finished. With the fish course there was white wine, with the meat, red, and a sweet *Punsch* with the dessert. A cognac was obligatory with coffee, but I was allowed to refuse a whisky nightcap. I must have passed some kind of test that night because whilst all future meals were very alcoholic, there was not a

repetition of that first night, except for fairly frequent special occasions. K-G was in fact a warm-hearted, delightful host, if somewhat withdrawn with people he did not know well, as is the Swedish fashion. He became a good friend whom I later visited and with whom I stayed in contact until he died.

Another reason for his wanting a companion soon surfaced. The Burë company was owned by a Swedish-Norwegian family, Landmark. They had two daughters – Margarethe then aged about 35 and Solveig, about 30. Both were unhappily married. Margarethe was separated and having a clandestine affair with K-G, and Solveig had a sea-captain husband who was away for most of the year. Both sisters were living in their own homes in the vicinity. Happy parties were inevitable and I never did meet Bengt Åvall, Solveig's husband, from whom she was divorced a year or two later. My social life became rather hectic, particularly over the Christmas season, and large parties were regular occurrences in the country houses, where sauna-parties were considered neither unusual nor risqué.

The weather was deteriorating, the temperature dropping to unbelievable below zero levels. I never did take to skiing, but snow-shoeing, sledding, and *langlaufing* to work were common. The Baltic, at our front doorstep, was frozen solid all the way to Finland and snow was deep on the ground. Towards the winter solstice, there was no sun, only a dim twilight for an hour at noon. The Swedes go rather peculiar in this atmosphere. Drinking is more frenzied, suicides more frequent, quarrels and fights are common. It is difficult to get away from people. You are literally locked in with them and they look inward. I plodded to work, drank, partied, and started again. On one or two occasions I went on expeditions to the relative sophistication of Skelleftea and to the wilds of Lapland on a routine forest visit. The stink of reindeer skins, reindeer oil, Lap women laved in reindeer oil with teeth worn down from chewing and softening reindeer skins, vies with the memories of Morris's bones, Charles Lachman's leather and Riley's formaldehyde.

I learned much about sawmilling and northern hemisphere forestry and even more about life. I suppose this was the rather unique environment that helped me finally to break out of my sheltered background. It was about as far as one could get from the mores and concerns of that remote sub-tropical town on the Indian Ocean.

The long winter passed coldly, but quite quickly. I could speak a little Swedish, drink with them, and was feeling comfortable in the work and training and happy in the social environment. Spring was a glorious release for everybody and almost made the long winter worthwhile. I

was not to enjoy the full summer, as it had been arranged for me to board a twelve-passenger Norwegian freighter at Oslo for a leisurely and uneventful voyage down the West African coast to Cape Town, and finally back to Durban.