

HEDDA



STRANDS OF MY HERETOFORE rather fractured life were at last coming together. Although I was now 35 I had no particular thoughts of marriage and in fact my life-style almost prohibited it. I had now moved into a very pretty cottage in Craighall, but was still travelling frequently to Sabie. On one of my stays back in Johannesburg, I visited David and Cherry Katzen for Sunday lunch.

Cherry was at the time teaching English and History at Barnato Park Girl's School and had invited a fellow English teacher home to lunch. I was introduced to Hedda Cohen, from Pretoria, a stunningly attractive, dark-haired, wasp-waisted, braided, dimpled, cheeky, most intelligent 24-year old. I was immediately smitten. It was a whirlwind romance which really started at my cottage that afternoon with a very young Merry-Anne Katzen as chaperone at Cherry's uneasy insistence. Although a good friend, Cherry did not regard me as good marriage material!

We saw one another constantly for some weeks and there was absolutely no doubt in my mind that this was "it" and that past romances were pallid in comparison. Nevertheless at that "advanced" age one is inherently cautious and before a final commitment I joined some new friends on a brief Mediterranean yacht cruise which was wildly unsuccessful. I was lonely and wanted to return and made an absolute decision when standing on a hill overlooking the beautiful Santo Stefano harbour on the Italian West coast. I came home via London, bought an antique topaz ring which was accepted on my return. Marriage was arranged for four months hence. I was at last very happily and contentedly at the end of a long, sometimes chaotic, but adventurous and fascinating bachelorhood.

I believe that there was relief in the Durban community that one of its members, whom it had never really understood, had returned with a nice Jewish girl, albeit a semi-apostate who played the organ in the Pretoria reform temple! Sadly, my father had died many years before. He would have loved her. Sadly, also, Hedda's father had died shortly before our meeting, at a relatively young age. From all accounts, David Cohen,

a highly intelligent, widely-read lover of literature, theatre and music, and I would have got on very well together. After his death, Hedda's mother Gertie, had moved to Johannesburg with her, and they shared a flat in Hillbrow.

Gertie was kind, intelligent, devoted and self-effacing. She became a close and welcome part of our lives. Gertie, like Hedda, was very musical, and taught music at St. Andrew's girl's school for many years until she retired. She died at the good age of 91, leaving a great void, particularly in the lives of her four grandsons on whom she doted. I could not have wished for a better mother-in-law, nor the boys for a better Grandma.

Wedding preparations began for an early January wedding – 9 January 1963. As in all weddings, the guest list was fraught with potential disaster against the background of my enormous family and wide business commitments. It was planned for the Oxford shul, followed by a reception in a marquee in the grounds of Tilly and Willy Brittan's large and beautiful garden in Smits Road, Dunkeld. The night before the wedding saw the heaviest rainstorm in memory and reports from the Brittan house were sombre. The marquee was awash! We hurriedly switched the venue to the Shul hall. The frantic change and the logistics that accompanied it are today hazy, but it was duly accomplished. We drove off the next morning to the idyllic Engelhard "Mbulwa", a charming, luxurious cottage in the grounds of the Sabie River Bungalows, adjoining the Kruger Park for a marvellous honeymoon.



Wedding Day, Johannesburg, 9 January 1963

We returned to our lovely rented Craighall cottage where we lived very happily for a brief period until we bought a newly-completed single storey home on a panhandle plot in East Avenue, Atholl. It had little to commend it architecturally, but was roomy and comfortable and our very happy home for the next ten years.

Hedda had continued to teach and I was increasingly busy and often away both locally and overseas. Our circle of good friends began to widen and strengthen – among many others Frampton and Mae-Rose Kerr, John and Betty von Ahlefeldt, George and Mabel Palmer (he was the founder of the *Financial Mail*), Tony and Gisela Bloom, Myrna Bloom, Neil Herman and of course Cherry and David Katzen and their wide circle. Other than those who have died and the Palmers who are in America and we seldom see, they have all remained close friends. Social life was fairly hectic and covered a wide spread of political and cultural interests.

A great sadness for me was that Hedda had decided to give up the piano. From all accounts she was unusually gifted and on the brink of what could well have been a successful career as a concert pianist. She was however very passionate and definite about the necessity for excellence which demanded a daily regimen of practice. This she found impossible to combine with the pressures of teaching and the subsequent demands of motherhood. She never seriously sat down to the piano again, despite ongoing pleas from her family. The “baby grand” Karl Ecke, used for Ruby’s practice for her public debut that I had inherited from Janie, was finally given in 1999 to the Market Theatre Workshop. I had nurtured hopes of its return to favour for 36 years! There were fortunately compensations. Hedda was – and is – endlessly fascinating with an agile and enquiring mind and an enormous capacity for making and keeping friends, and for home-making. Her sense of personal style and imaginative home decor is widely and properly regarded as unique. I’m prepared to yield on the piano!

I have given a physical description of Hedda and she is an integral part of this narrative. None of that however comes close to doing justice to an extraordinary person who has been my life-long love and friend and confidante. She has an infinite capacity for friendliness and warmth to which a multitude of friends will attest. She is fiercely loyal, concerned and compassionate. She has a voracious appetite for books and theatre, opera, ballet, music. She is very feminine and vocally critical of the “locker-room atmosphere” in which she was forced to live with a husband and four sons but nevertheless very firm in her demands that her rights must be respected. She was – and is – a loving and concerned

mother and wife, intensely proud of their achievements and very jealous of their happiness and reputations. She is bright, sharp, witty, clever. We spar a great deal, fight, make-up, and enjoy it! She is a close and vital part of the lives of all our immediate family. She sometimes irritates but none of us could do without her.



Wedding Day, Johannesburg, 9 January 1963

The years at East Avenue were very happy ones. Mark, Antony, John and Peter arrived at fairly regular three-year intervals, fortunately with little difficulty for Hedda, who desperately wanted a daughter to play with and to dress, but became reconciled to being without one. They were delightful children, each with an early, very definite personality. Mark was serious, and an early reader; Antony was mischievous and full of nonsense; John was sometimes withdrawn, but loving and involved. Peter, probably because of his position in the family, showed very early signs of being a peacemaker and a potential psychologist.

We had two wonderful staff members – James Sibande from Mozambique, and Evelyn Mosue from Phokeng. Evelyn is still with us, 30 years later. James returned home on leave, was conscripted into an MPLA labour unit and never returned. We still miss him and were in occasional contact with him. He was followed by a Zimbabwean, Aaron Ncube, who retired after 20 years. He too was much loved by the family. He visits us annually.

The boys developed along predictable lines that in retrospect proved our early analysis. Mark started off as a difficult child, until in some desperation we consulted Gerald Fenster, a good friend who specialised

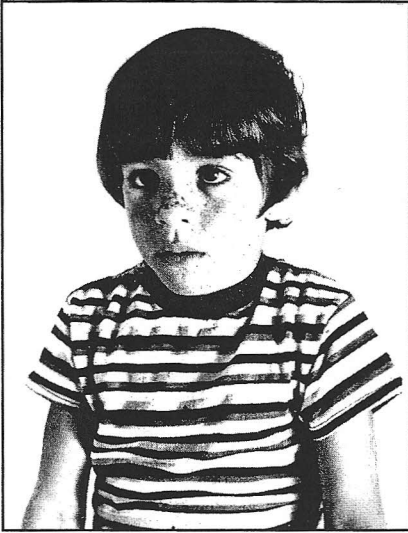
in child psychology. He very soon discovered that at six, Mark's mental age was ten or twelve, and we were treating him as such, whilst emotionally he was still a baby. Our changed approach to him gave instant and happy results. He started his proper schooling at King David, but after seven years found a clash with compulsory Hebrew, and he and his brothers transferred to Redhill. It became obvious very early in his school career that sports were not his *metier*, but academics, debating, and intellectual pursuits generally were his natural field. He starred in all of these, became head boy, and achieved the coveted Matric six A's, and the school "DUX" title.

Antony was very different. He had a lightning-quick brain and near-photographic memory which made hard work unnecessary and allowed plenty of time for sports – he was a very good rugby player – and getting into numerous schoolboy scrapes. His interest in girls surfaced very early and they were always very high on his agenda. Redhill, being a co-ed school, was fertile territory. He was an excellent actor and a superb debater. It was with proud surprise that we learned that he had followed in Mark's footsteps and was appointed Head Boy.

John was a solid worker, a very popular Redhillian and a superb rugby player and athlete, although, because of lack of competition, none of this reached the heights at the school that it did in fact do later. He had the rare ability to attract, make and keep close friends. After Matric in which he did well, he elected to do A-levels at Harrow where in the brief 18-month period he did magnificently on all fronts – school monitor, Head of house, captain of athletics, member of touring 1st XV. He still jointly holds the Middlesex junior record for the 400 metres.

Peter, today a brawny six-footer, was a slight child, somewhat introspective, hard working with a clear propensity for the stage, winning the "most promising actor" award at provincial level, and becoming a formidable debater. Academically very good, and passable at sports, he had a capacity for warm friendliness and helpfulness and leadership, and in due course also wore the coveted Head Boy's blazer.

With the demands of one, then two, three and four small children, Hedda had given up teaching with much regret. I was not much help as these were probably my busiest and most productive years. The Sabie mill was now working at full capacity and I had all but taken over full executive responsibility for the Acme company as well as major Moshal Gevisser duties. I was also heavily involved with the S.A. Lumber Millers' Association and the formation of the Forest Owners' Association. All of this, together with numerous overseas and domestic trips, coupled with an active social life, made life hectic for both of us. I know that I did not spend enough time with Hedda and the children during that period.



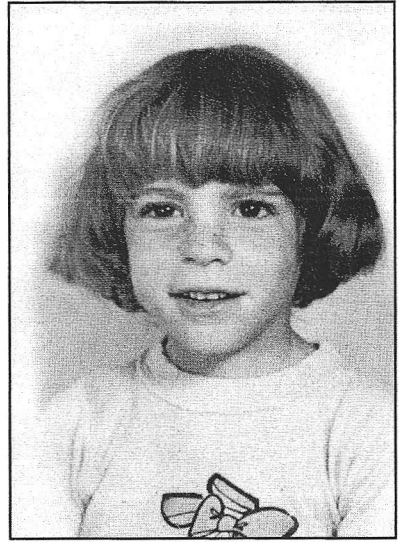
Mark



Antony



John



Peter

The Lumber Millers' involvement was both onerous and exciting. I had served on the Executive Committee for some time, and at the then relatively tender age of 38 had been elected chairman at a particularly difficult and divisive period in the history of that organisation and the timber industry. The next two years were spent – fairly successfully – in healing a chronic breach with the Government Department of Forestry and its impossible and arrogant Director. All of this is well recorded in the official history of SALMA which is in my library.

During these years I regularly used the Engelhard cottage at Sabie River Bungalows for weekend getaways from the boredom of Graskop and Sabie, and for entertaining people – Government officials, overseas visitors, journalists, etc., of value to either SAFI/Acme or to the industry. On one of these visits, when the guests were members of the Government Tender Board, we had the ritual party, which as usual was rather alcoholic. John Bowen, the director of SALMA, the Tender Board Chairman and I occupied the three bedrooms of the cottage. At about 3 a.m. I was woken by what I thought was running water. I then smelt smoke. The noise I heard was the crackling of flames in the tinder-dry thatched roof.

I woke the Government official, assumed that John was safe and went outside to find the roof a sea of flames, and no John Bowen. I rushed back in and found a confused man trying to force the burglar bars on the bathroom window. We got him out within a few minutes of the fiery collapse of the roof. That night convinced me of the danger of thatched roofs. Early the next morning, in borrowed clothes, I had the sad task of reporting the loss to Fritz Fuerst.

On the business front, two strands were apparent. As my involvement with Moshal Gevisser weakened, so my ties with the Engelhard interests strengthened. Also, I had become a director of Boustreds as a Moshal Gevisser representative. It was run by Willie Brittan and his son, Irvine – my first cousin. We had in my bachelor years become close friends. We now became business allies and grew to appreciate one another's strengths and weaknesses. We were in fact complementary and it was this growing awareness that played a critical role in my business life in the distant future.

Meanwhile, on the Acme front, I headed a committee whose task it was to recommend the future structure of the company's sawmilling activities in the Eastern Transvaal, and the technology to take it from its then rather basic approach, into the future. This involved a careful analysis of its existing three mills, an evaluation of available technology and of future log supplies, and a careful calculation of all the factors that influence a decision on whether to decentralise or concentrate.

It was a fascinating exercise that involved a crowded year of intense committee work, based in Graskop, and visits with Roland Jansson, Acme's superb Swedish technical manager, to the U.S.A., Scandinavia and Europe. The report, a massive document, led to the acceptance of its major recommendation that a large modern centralised sawmill should be built in Sabie. Jansson and I were mandated to proceed, and the largest and most modern sawmill in Africa, equal in technology to any in the world, was officially opened by Charles Engelhard and the then Minister of Forestry, Paul Sauer, in 1969.