

# THE HIGH SCHOOL YEARS

## 1939 – 1944



MY BARMITZVAH ORDEAL was over and the passing from the congratulations and ephemeral limelight to being a normal schoolboy, was painful. I had performed well and I understand that there was some desultory talk of my being trained for the Rabbinate! The Durban Jewish community was not yet large or affluent enough to afford a Jewish day school, and the Durban High School, a hallowed and highly-regarded Government school, was thus the obvious choice. Equipped with long grey pants, white shirt with collar and school tie, blue blazer and straw basher, I clambered onto the tramcar every morning – a 100 metres from our front door – for the 20 minute clanging pull up Florida Road, and along the crest of the Berea to be deposited close to the school.

It was a generally happy four years, although a reading of the official school history shows that it was denuded of some key staff because of the war and was presided over by an alcoholic headmaster. I had a good relationship with him and was increasingly drawn to and influenced by two superb teachers – Neville Nuttall for English and Charlie Evans for History. Both of these had a lasting influence on me, well past my school years and were directly responsible for my continuing love of and feel for the English language and for history. Nuttall had an additional major influence. He was a dedicated trout fisherman, and in a schoolboy effort to please, I wrote essays on that subject, necessitating some basic knowledge, which drew me to trying the sport at the family-owned farm in Underberg. I was hooked!

The Underberg farm – “The Banks” – situated on the borders of and between the Underberg and Himeville villages, was a 3500 acre tract in the glorious foothills of the Drakensberg, bordered by a two mile stretch of the Umzimkulu river. It was a mixed farm of dairy and beef cattle, sheep, maize and potatoes. It had been bought by Sol, Morris and Issy in the early days of the war, partly I believe as a Government-encouraged tax shelter. It was a marvellous escape for someone of my age. It was there

that, by trial and error, I learned to ride, to drive a tractor and a pick-up van, to plough and plant, and to build up the type of close relationship with the black farm-workers and their families that was not possible in an urban environment. I became junior assistant farm manager whenever a long week-end or holiday provided the opportunity and there was a family car going to Underberg, despite war-time petrol restrictions and the long journey through Pietermaritzburg and the Umkomaas Valley (Alan Paton country) on dirt roads. Even a full-day train journey with a switch from broad to narrow-gauge track at Ixopo was an exciting rather than a daunting prospect. Frank and Maggie Collier, the manager and his wife, became close and understanding friends.

My first two years at high school were largely a continuation of the past, but happily without *cheder*. I still did well academically, and remained at the top of the "A" class in those years. "DHS" being a "British" school, cricket, rugby, athletics, and cadets filled the afternoons. I was poor at all of these but attendance was compulsory unless there was good or medical reason which required the authority of the Headmaster himself.

Fortunately he and I struck up an early understanding that I cannot explain. He was willing to accept a note written by me indicating that I had some ailment of which he had been previously made aware. Perhaps in his alcoholic haze he did not wish to admit that he couldn't remember. I like to think that it was because he liked me! He only caned me once in four years, and that was very lightly, very reluctantly, and apologetically!

Friendships had begun to settle and solidify, and began to show clearly a split that would influence and characterise much of my future adult life and activities. On the one hand there were the Jewish friends with whom I had grown up – Percy Cohen, Leon Lewis, Gerald Hackner, and on the distant horizon of the 5th and 6th form Phillip Tobias, Ramon Leon, Aaron Klug. On the other hand was the gentile contingent – Rupert Wait, Freddie van der Merwe, Noel Winship and their circle. I was the only link between the two.

Outside of school, my life diverged along these lines. Domestically, and in the Jewish Community, there was little change. Friday nights and *Yomtovim* followed one another with increasing monotony. I was still, briefly, in the shul choir. Shul attendance was now clearly only a duty, to be avoided whenever possible. Morning prayers at home were a thing of the past. I doubt if I put on the ritual *Tefillin* more than once or twice after my barmitzvah. In retrospect, it is strange that my father never insisted, but then perhaps the sub-tropical torpor of Durban and his increasing distance from the shtetl were having their effect.

The war of course was always there. Leslie had been shipped "up

North” and was captured by the Italians in Libya. There was the anxious time after the awful telegram “missing in action”, the anxious evenings gathered around the static-ridden radio listening to the Nazi propaganda on Radio Zeesen, and the nightly interspersions between the propaganda of a few names of prisoners-of-war. Finally his name was heard. He was held first in North Africa, then Italy, and finally Dresden in East Germany. He had a rough, long war, but his diary, recovered many years later, shows an amazingly resourceful and tough 20-year old, whose “adoption” of Christianity for the duration of his imprisonment probably saved his life.

Durban was an important port for the increasingly heavy sea traffic of men and material for the North African and Eastern war zones. Troopships became regular callers and the Durban Jewish Club, started many years earlier by Sol and his friends, was transformed, under his management, into a canteen and entertainment and rest centre for visiting troops. I became enthusiastically involved and on most weekends was serving the thousands of men who were its grateful users. On Sunday evenings I switched roles and became a stage-hand for the weekly variety troop concerts. I eventually graduated to “lights” and finally to stage-manager. There lies the origin of my life-long involvement with theatre.

Durban, because of its importance as a harbour and industrial centre, was regarded by the authorities as being a potential target for Japanese submarines and aircraft carriers. A black-out was imposed, and the structure of Air Raid Precautions (ARP) was assembled. I enrolled, first as a runner and finally as an assistant Air Raid Warden. I was delighted with my helmet, arm-band and new-found authority and particularly with my legitimate escape from home whenever an air-raid warning was sounded or on my twice-weekly routine rounds to check the black-out in our neighbourhood. I understand that there were a small number of genuine warnings among the many siren alarms, but no bombs. There were however a number of sinkings of troopships off the Natal coast and bodies were reported to have been washed up on the shore. There was a well-stocked air-raid shelter in our back yard, as there was in all of the homes of my parent’s more affluent friends. There were even one or two test runs when the family went to ground. It is an interesting commentary on South Africa, then and now, that I do not recall the servants being involved, other than perhaps to bring us tea in the shelter!

The seeds of revolt were beginning to sprout. Rupert and I occasionally had an illicit under-age drink at the friendly Kew Hotel, where we occasionally met, by chance, a teacher on a night out. Gerald and I began visiting rather disreputable mid-town snooker rooms, snooker having

become a secret passion. Surreptitious smoking during the lunch-break was regular as it was during some evenings when I “helped” behind the counter at Hans and Fanny Manasse’s “Classical Tea Room”.

Back at school I had reached the first of the final two years before the Matriculation examination, and, academically, I began rapidly to weaken and to lose my place at the head of the Class. I had just managed a further bursary in the Junior Certificate (Std.VIII) but that was the peak of my academic achievement. I continued to do well at English and History, Latin and Afrikaans, the “soft” subjects, but Science was mysterious and Mathematics quite beyond me, the latter requiring extensive private tuition and learning by rote rather than through understanding. The Matriculation Examination was finally behind me. I just managed a first class pass, despite a near-failure in Mathematics.

This academic collapse, in retrospect, was a direct result of being quite unwilling or unable to concentrate. Concentration was devoted to fantasising about girls. Gunvar, Signy, Heather, Margaret, Bernicia and Ellie were good friends who featured strongly in the fantasies. Alas, fantasies they largely remained. They were all non-Jewish *shiksas*. Relationships – platonic or otherwise – with Jewish girls just did not occur. At this distance it is difficult to recall whether this was from choice or lack of opportunity. It was probably because of a sub-conscious awareness that in that society I was starting to be looked upon as embryonic marriage material. Instinctively I recoiled – a recoil which lasted well into my late twenties.

Leisure time during school terms – apart from escaping at night to run with Rupert and Freddie and company – was largely devoted to the beach and the sea. Whilst I was never an enthusiastic swimmer there was something about a beach and the sea which had a basic strong attraction – and still does. As a youngster, I was sometimes taken by Morris for an early morning swim before school. I don’t think that he liked it but it was “the thing to do”. It showed that the escape from the *shtetl* and its weekly bathhouse was real. I have a mental picture, sad in retrospect, of Morris standing knee-deep in the small waves splashing water on his body prior to immersing himself, vertically. I cannot remember his ever diving into the water.

However, the introduction to the sea had taken place, and on numerous afternoons after school, I and others jumped onto a tramcar into town, transferred to another, (in all an half-hour journey) and reached the beach. I was – and am – rather water-timorous, but it was fun. Saturday afternoons were for watching athletics, or rugby or cricket at Kingsmead. Sunday morning was beach morning. Sunday afternoon, after a heavy

family lunch, was dedicated to short drives with the family, up or down the coast. They were fun at first, but soon degenerated into monotony.

In a household dominated by Janie, now indisputably the premier Jewish cook in Durban, meals played an important role. Apart from the unavoidable bowl of fruit salad, Jewish cooking and a sub-tropical climate are not natural partners. The food was very traditional. For “meat” meals, it was chopped liver, *ptcha* (brawn), hot beetroot soup with large chunks of soupmeat, chicken or a roast, or a steaming plate of *flomen-tzimmes* – a delicious mix of prunes, carrots, meat and syrup. On “milk” nights it was *smetana* or *stjavy* (cold sorrel soup), herring, fish. There was no thought of wine with meals, except for sweet kiddush wine. I remember meals as happy and laugh-filled. Many of the dishes are still served in our 21<sup>st</sup> century home. Others are, regretfully, a memory.

Holidays came in July and at the year-end. There was no escape in July. It was “The Season”, and we were inundated with Johannesburg relatives – Moss’s, Ustievs, Kneps, and their children who from the height of their Johannesburg sophistication looked down on their provincial Durban cousins.

There was some strain between the representatives of the younger generation. The adults outdid each other both in dress and in a catalogue of financial achievements. A cherished memory is that of a cousin and her daughter, promenading along the beach-front walk under gay parasols, with mother swathed in fur, and pendulant with jewels. It was after all the “winter” season. The temperature was probably in the mid-70s! Janie threw herself into a frenzy of competitive entertaining – bridge and rummy and poker parties, elaborate dinners, interminable lunches. There could be five or six separate card games running simultaneously. Elaborate teas were essential. Of course there was never, ever, any sign of a gentile in this world. My aversions to this closed life-style began slowly to crystallise, and my desire for escape to strengthen.

The year-end was the “away” holiday. In my early years, part of it was spent with Ruby or Jocelyn in Pietersburg or Benoni. This apparently was normal in the community, but Benoni particularly was a strange place for a child’s holiday. The Porter household was a busy doctor’s house on the Benoni main street. Jocelyn and Aaron were enthusiastic competitors in the East Rand Jewish social stakes. They had no children of my age, and nor had their friends. It was miserable! Johannesburg and the Cassel cousins was another inexplicable venue for a teenager with few contacts and no transport.

Pietersburg, happily, was another story. Ruby and Cecil lived on a small farm just outside the town. There were horses and cattle and gentile

friends and associates. Cecil's business, (asbestos and corundum mining), took him to remote towns in the then very wild Transvaal bushveld – Mica, Gravelotte, Hoedspruit, Phalaborwa. I often went with him and had many happy adventures. On one occasion, aged fourteen or fifteen, I accompanied an associate of Cecil's who unaccountably became more and more drunk as he drank from his tea flask. The tea was largely gin and I was soon at the wheel for the remainder of the three-day drive. Drinking was normal not only in the mining circles in which Cecil operated, but in his home. It was pervasive. I recall that I once surprised Grandpa Moshal (Zeisi to his grandchildren) opening a small travelling case. It contained a bottle of gin, a bottle of whisky and two glasses "in case he should be somewhere where there was not a schnapps available". It was my first encounter with a long acquaintance with the Moshal drinking gene which ran through the family – Janie excepted. Cecil was by no means the only drinker in the family, but undoubtedly the most exotic! The closest that Janie ever came to a strong drink was a crust of bread dipped in gin. I have never seen anyone else do this. I wonder if it was a *shtetl* custom.

The farm at Underberg was of course a beloved holiday venue, but the real holidays were at holiday farms at Swinburne on the Free State – Natal border, or at one or other of the Drakensburg resorts, of which the Royal Natal National Park was my favourite. Swinburne however was the annual destination for most of my early years. It had become the favoured holiday spot for the Durban Jewish community – a sort of South African Adirondacks. Fathers played bowls (another compulsory *shtetl* escape); mothers gossiped and criticised one another's children, habits, clothing, morals; children played tennis, swam in the river, and some of the braver ones even rode horses. There was some admixture of gentiles, perhaps the only place where this occurred, but the adults were inclined to keep to their own kind. I believe that the only sports trophy ever won by Morris was a cheap bowling shield, still in my possession. I am filled with sadness at what this must have meant to him, against the memories of life in the old world.

I have happy memories of Swinburne and the Sparks family who owned it and with whom I became fast friends. I was infatuated with daughter Ellie, a year younger than I, and corresponded with her for some time at her school in Pietermaritzburg. Father Don was a lovely man who talked to me about farming and let me work with his farm foreman Vermaak and his son Hendrik, a year or two older than I. We became close friends and I delighted in driving the Vermaak family horse-and-trap past the astonished assembly on the guest home verandah. Hendrik

was the last South African war casualty, just before peace was signed.

Everyone assembled every afternoon at four p.m. for tea on the wide verandah. That assembly was the cause of one of my major disappointments. Hendrik and I had heard of a local witch-doctor who sold a particularly strong aphrodisiac powder. We purchased a small packet for a half-crown and slipped it into the large teapot that was about to dispense tea. We went to ground behind a nearby hedge and waited in prurient anticipation for an orgiastic outbreak of unrestrained sex among the staid middle-aged parents on the front lawn. There was sadly absolutely no action. What was even more disappointing was that the sangoma refused to refund our half-crown. He insisted that his product worked perfectly on his black clients.

In later years Swinburne was replaced by the Royal Natal National Park to which I began going on my own. The lease over the hotel was owned by Rupert's family and we had holiday breaks together there that were everything a sixteen-year old could wish for. This was primarily freedom from adult intrusiveness and the cloying family embrace, but with it came hiking, riding, fishing and companionship.

School years drew to an end in 1944 with Leslie still a prisoner; with the war apparently drawing to a close; with a myriad of activities but little direction; with a mediocre recent academic record; with no clear vision of my future.