UNIVERSITY

ALTHOUGH I HAD INTENDED to join the army, it soon became evident that this was not practical. The war in Europe was drawing to a close, and the S.A. forces were not involved in the Far East operations. The recruiting officer told me, kindly, that I would be of more use to the country if I continued with my studies. His advice was doubtless coloured by my size and short-sightedness!

There is little doubt today, with hindsight, that a more normal and rounded career would probably have been in the law. Accountancy certainly did not attract me, and nor did medicine, the other traditional choices. I am very hazy about the background reasons and the final decision to enrol as a student in the Forestry Faculty at the University of Stellenbosch. It was doubtless strongly influenced by my desire to escape from the confines of Durban and my romantic notion of an outdoor life of which I had had some taste, but of which the harsher and more practical aspects had not become apparent. I certainly had no inkling of the strong scientific nature of the forestry course which came very close to proving my undoing. It was English literature and history in which I should have happily wallowed in my university years, not the horrors of organic chemistry and systematic botany. Doubtless, Uncle Sol played a large part in the career choice, in a successful attempt to keep me connected to the family business. The family wooden box company was beginning to expand into primitive country sawmills and a national industry structure was beginning to develop with Sol as its driving force. Through this activity he had become acquainted with Professor Neethling, the head of the Forestry Faculty. The die was cast. In all of this my parents played little role. The profession of forestry meant nothing to them and the idea of a remote Afrikaans-speaking university was so foreign that I am sure that the potential problems and difficulties had never entered their minds. I was affectionately regarded by them and the extended family by the slightly derogatory term *holzhakker* – the woodchopper!

Stellenbosch University, in that year of 1945, was a mad choice for

a small, unworldly, unsporting Jewish boy from English-speaking Natal, with little knowledge of Afrikaans outside of formal school lessons, and with no contact whatsoever with Afrikanerdom other than the anglicised Rupert Waite and the brief holiday exposure to the Vermaaks. Even more important than this background was the complete absence of any personal encounter with anti-semitism in any form. I knew only that Jews were different.

I was beginning to be aware of the early indications of the Holocaust. I knew that we were separated for school prayers, that my parents and family kept to their own, that we were not members of the Durban Club or the Country Club. I also knew instinctively that this was not my preferred lifestyle and that I sought less constrained paths, and in this I was already partly successful, but nowhere had I encountered anti-semitism, by word or deed.

I thus went into the wider world, innocent and trusting, with no more concern than any other schoolboy entering university. Reality was brutal and physical.

To understand this, it is necessary to describe the South African situation as it was in late 1944. The country had been deeply split by the war, with Smuts taking it into that war by a very close vote in the Parliament of 1939. Afrikanerdom was largely and passionately anti-British and still smarting from its defeat in the Anglo-Boer war. Many of its leaders had studied at German universities. They and their people felt a strong affinity for the philosophy of the *ubermensch*. It fitted perfectly with the doctrinaire apartheid which was beginning to replace the traditional British colonial approach to the natives, and which would become the official and legal policy of the State after the 1948 election. German anti-Semitism also found a deeply sympathetic chord in the Afrikaner psyche which had been suckled on caricatures of the Jew as smous, exploiter, usurer, as Hoggenheimer of the infamous Honnibal cartoons. These attitudes were fed and strengthened by the Dutch Reformed Church which, with the embryonic Broederbond, had a deep aversion to anything non-Afrikaner, non-white, and non Calvinist Christian.

Backing up all of this were the political, quasi-military and youth groups, closely modelled on German lines. The most outspokenly pro-Nazi of these was the Greyshirt organisation, a clone of Hitler's "Brownshirts". Supporting them was the openly violent anti-war and anti-British Ossewa-Brandwag, led by Robey Leibbrandt. The National Party, rapidly gathering strength, was the political base. They all nurtured a prolific breeding ground in their youth organisations – the young Nationalists, the Voortrekkers, the Afrikaner Studentebond. The

Broederbond provided the intellectual muscle and stimulus. It was all a formidable combination.

Of this I was blithely unaware. Urban Natal was largely English-speaking and solidly pro-British. There were reports of clashes in the Transvaal and Orange Free State between pro-war and anti-war demonstrators, and some anti-Semitic outbreaks on the Witwatersrand, but Durban was physically quiet in this regard, and I was as yet too politically unaware, naïve and uninvolved, to have registered the extent of Afrikaner reaction to world events.

I certainly did not know that Stellenbosch was the intellectual and cultural heart of Nationalist Afrikanerdom and of opposition to the war. The student body was dominated by Nationalist policies and strongly influenced by the Greyshirt and O-B movements. The rector, Wilcox, was acknowledged as the Party's intellectual leader. Many of the professors and faculty were openly O-B. I doubt if any Professor who was not a Broederbond member could have been appointed. The sitting M.P. for Stellenbosch was the National Party leader, Dr. Malan. In 1944, the year before my arrival, there were no Jewish students at Stellenbosch. In 1945, I was the only Jew in residence. One other – a day student *Boere-Jood* attended day classes, and rapidly vanished. There was a small Jewish trading community and a small shul (the windows of which were occasionally smashed).

My introduction to all of this was on the so-called "Orange Express" for a two-night, three-day train trip in a six-berth second-class compartment from Durban to Stellenbosch. It started off normally, but as the train worked its way through the platteland towns of northern Natal and the Orange Free State, it collected both new and old students. The new students – the *sotte* – were left in no doubt that the initiation or *ontgroening* process had begun. At first this was almost fun with some ribaldry directed at the few English-speakers. Afrikaners, however, have an insatiable curiosity about religious and racial origins, and the news very quickly spread through the train that there was a Jew on board, heading for Stellenbosch. To almost all of the students this was a unique situation. They certainly had never come across a Jewish fellow-student. They almost certainly had never been in intimate or physical contact with a Jew. I was at once a curiosity, an intruder, and a good opportunity to convert their youthful unformed theoretical anti-semitism into something more real and practical and satisfying. They had a Jew all to themselves.

It started with the expression of fairly mild anti-semitic folk-lore, which was an unpleasant shock, but I was able to laugh it off. That

developed into rather one-sided debates or harangues on Jewish iniquity, responsibility for the crucifixion, the war, approval of what was happening in Germany and so on. That was a bit harder to take. There was as yet no physical unpleasantness except a bit of pushing and shoving that was little different to that being meted out to the other freshers. That changed in Bloemfontein. The freshers were instructed to push a railway coach and I was singled out for special attention and encouragement. My months of purgatory had begun, although I had no clear idea of what was in store for me.

I arrived at the Stellenbosch station, managed to find a taxi, which deposited me at *Victoriahuis*, a semi-private hostel housing about 40 students, which was the original hostel of the forerunner of the University, Victoria College. It was owned by a local character nicknamed – for good reason – *Stinkvoet* Benn, and run by his wife. My room was up an outside flight of wooden steps, quite large, with windows overlooking Dorp Street and the Grand Hotel. It was said to have been Jannie Smuts' room. There was an outside communal shower room, with hot water only once a day three times weekly, and fairly primitive toilets. Meals were basic *plaaskos* in restricted quantity, but with as much coarse bread and melon and ginger jam as we could eat. I still have a recollection of coffee that was largely chicory – possibly the origin of my preference for Ricoffy on fishing weekends!

I was welcomed by the Benns and introduced to my room-mate – Gysbert (Gys) Kleyn from the farm "Klein Kruis", near Le Roux Station, on the fringes of Oudtshoorn. Kleyn appeared to be a typical, raw *plaas-seun*, almost as confused by Stellenbosch as I. An immediate problem was that he had less English than I had Afrikaans. We conversed in pidgin for a while, and then with normal Afrikaner inquisitiveness he began probing my ancestry and religion. It was immediately apparent that I was the first Jew with whom he had come in contact, other than local shopkeepers in and around Oudtshoorn. He was both thunderstruck and horrified at what had befallen him. He stated very emphatically that neither his parents nor his Predikant would allow him to share a room with a Jewish non-Christian with filthy habits. On this latter score he was convinced that there was something in the Jewish religion which prohibited not only pig meat but also bathing. With that he rushed off white-faced to demand to be moved. As there was nothing immediately available he returned, and I persuaded him to come with me to the shower room, to prove that at least one of his prejudices could be proved wrong. This was the beginning of a strange and wonderful friendship which survived for many years, and which was a major reason for my being able to remain

at Stellenbosch for the five years it took to get my degree. Gys refused a trip overseas offered to him by his father after graduation. He confessed to me that the thought of foreign travel scared him. He returned to the farm, married and then soon contracted a degenerative disease that confined him to a wheelchair. We kept in touch until he died about ten years ago.

Our room consisted of two beds, bedclothes, two small tables and two upright chairs, a hanging rail and some drawers. That was it. I acquired, from a second-hand furniture shop, a morris chair and table lamp and bookcase. I unpacked and went in to supper where the head of the house committee introduced me to the others. Proceedings were of course totally in Afrikaans. They were a mixed bunch of freshers and old hands, covering pretty well all of the faculties but heavy in *tokolokke* – theological students. I was told the rather Draconian house and university rules – no drinking in the hostel, no girls in the rooms, suits and ties on Sundays, no noise after supper etc. Once again I endured the ethnic quiz, but this time not unfriendly but rather incredulous. I was one of a family. They had me whether or not they liked the idea.

The next morning was the start of the registration process. I wandered through the strange oak-lined leafy streets to the campus on the edge of the town centre. There were various queues of freshers standing in front of various doors and outside tables. I joined one of these, reached the table and was instructed in Afrikaans (there was definitely no English to be seen or heard anywhere) to pay a half-crown and sign my name. I wandered off, inside the main building, registered, wandered off again to find the Forestry faculty and to introduce myself to a friendly, fatherly Prof. Japie Neethling. Then to the bookstore for all of those things that a fresher thinks he needs, including a number of textbooks, many formidably in Afrikaans.

The initiation fortnight culminated in the Spring Rag. It is something of a blur except for the uncomfortable fact that the word had rapidly spread that there was a Jew on campus. I had become an object of extreme interest to be interrogated, shoved, poked, humiliated. Much of this was in fairly typical cruel adolescent vein, but some of it was openly racist. I was told in clear and threatening terms that Stellenbosch should be *Judenrein*, that I was regarded as the first of an unwelcome wave of Jewish infiltrators, that I should leave forthwith, and that if I had any doubts about all of this I should be aware of what was correctly and properly happening to "my people" in Germany. This was strongly underlined at my first class, Botany I, under a professor who was a formidable and overt General in the Ossewa-Brandewag. Botany I drew together

students from all of the faculties that included Botany in their curricula. It was held in the largest available lecture hall, housing about 300. It was a large semi-circular, banked room, with Herr Professor of course at the epicentre. I found a remote spot in the second-last row. It was my first ever university lecture. The professor came in, jocularly introduced himself, looked around and said, of course all in Afrikaans, "There's a Jew in my class. Can this be true. I wonder what he looks like. Jew – stand up." I stood. "Come and sit here in the front row under my eye. I must watch you." I had no option but to obey. Later that term, I wrote my first Botany test. It never varied from year to year. The question was always the same – draw and describe the root of a plant – and everyone passed. That is, everyone except the Jew! My reward was a red line and a zero. I went to see him to ask why. He looked at me coldly and said slowly – "*Jode moet weet dat hulle nie in Stellenbosch welkom is nie*". ("Jews must know that they are not welcome in Stellenbosch".)

Outside of classes, the initiation process was a nightmare. Freshers were paraded, inspected, humiliated and I was of course selected for extra-special treatment. On one memorable occasion I was forced to parade with a placard round my neck proclaiming "*Ons is die kak van die land*" ("We are the shit of the country"). The nights were occasionally brutal. It was custom to rout freshers out for a bit of "fun". This was an excellent opportunity for the "fun" to degenerate into physical attack, bruising and pain. I sometimes slept in a shelter on the Eerste River, close to the hostel.

I should have left after that first horrible week. That I did not was in large measure due to Gys Kleyn, my roommate, and two remarkable Afrikaners with whom he had become friendly. They were Toek Wessels and Rembrandt van Rhyn, the latter's home, predictably, being Van Rhynsdorp! Both were in their mid-twenties with considerable worldly experience, and Toek was married to Marie, a staff-nurse at the local hospital. They were disgusted at the initiation process and its apparent concentration on me. They spent much time with me and appointed themselves as my protectors. It became a personal crusade for them to persuade me to persevere. Gys, my roommate, was the most severely affected by all of this. Vilified for his friendship with me, he insisted on being taken along on the more unpleasant night excursions. Gys, Toek, Marie and Rem were my salvation and a clear and welcome indication that Afrikanerdom was not irremediably racist. Nevertheless, I was left with a very clear conclusion that at that time in South African history, a local Hitler could awaken the same disregard for humanity and acceptance of brutality that had become evident in Nazi Germany.

I imagine, with hindsight, that another reason for staying was that I was something of a lost soul. It was highly unlikely that anyone back home in the sheltered Durban community would understand what was happening to me. I would be a "namby-pamby" who could not face up to a few indignities when his betters were in the army! What would I do? The idea of the present day "gap-year" had not yet surfaced. I would be a failure. I stayed!

Things eased after the initiation period, and particularly because I was chosen to be a star turn at the final concert (I sang and danced "Lay that pistol down babe", with some ribald verses of my own). I was probably chosen not for my ability but because of my freak value, but that appeared to backfire. I had started the slow process of transformation from "*die fokkin Jood*" to "*ons Joodjie*" which took upwards of a year to complete. I even got to hold an Afrikaans girl's hand, but the "Jew thing" was always there, just below the surface, ready to break out verbally or physically, which it often did, but with decreasing frequency.

There was an incident, redolent of that time. About five weeks into the term I received a formal visit in my room from four dark-suited young gentlemen who very politely and seriously asked me if I, as a special favour to them and their movement, would formally resign from the Greyshirts, as it was "rather embarrassing" for them to have a Jewish member. I had apparently, innocently and mistakenly taken their recruiting table outside the University office as part of the registration process! I enquired why they did not expel me, and was told that their constitution did not cater for expulsions of paid up members. I declined the request, and for many years continued to receive Greyshirt – Nazi – anti-semitic literature.

Lectures were of course totally in Afrikaans and the first-year curriculum was common to all science and natural science freshmen. This meant that classes were enormous and personal attention zero. Most of these first year lecturers were desperately boring, the low-grade lecturers usually reading from printed notes that were distributed. For intellectual stimulation my matric classes at DHS were undoubtedly superior. At first I meticulously translated into English before trying to understand and memorise, but within weeks my Afrikaans had improved sufficiently for me to switch entirely – a clear advantage in that environment.

Socially, I had discovered the joys of "special" Castle lager across the road at the Grand Hotel (it was a cheap partially matured beer in a one litre bottle) and its snooker room. My regular companion was Brian Walsh, a South African who had been studying forestry in Norway when war broke out, had joined the Norwegian resistance, been captured and

tortured by the Gestapo, and had been cut down from a hanging tree by his friends whilst still alive. The rope burn on his neck was still clearly visible. He was a heavy drinker, often maudlin, and needed company. I also saw much of Gys, Toek and Rem and weekends were spent exploring the Boland on our bicycles or swimming at the nearby Somerset Strand. I was also making some very tentative approaches to one or two sweet hostel freshers who did not seem to be put off by the Jewish label.

Pocket money, as presumably for all students then and now, was an ongoing problem. Mine was pegged at ten pounds a month excluding costs of clothing, books, etc. It was a relatively high figure in those days compared with some of the poorer bursary students, some of whom received as little as five shillings monthly. Nevertheless it did not go very far, particularly as the Grand Hotel was so conveniently located and as I was becoming increasingly addicted to cigarettes. These could be bought loose at Solly Spanners pawnshop, even singly if necessary.

Solly and his shop were everything that epitomised the Jewish Shylock caricature. He was elderly, hunched, unshaven, dirty. The shop, which was a mix of trading store and pawnshop, was hung with old (pawned) clothes and dried fish. The smell easily outdid the bones and bag odours of my youth. It was normal for students to pawn clothes in exchange for temporary loans, to be redeemed as soon as the next tranche of pocket money arrived. My overcoat was my Solly currency, normally for cigarette, drinking and snooker money, and was pawned and redeemed on a number of occasions in that first year. Thereafter, as pocket money became more liberal, my visits to Solly became fewer, but he remained for me and for the general student body a very necessary adjunct to university life for many years.

I did very little work, possibly because of my strange situation but also because I had been given a solid reason for failing the first year. The family – including Sol – had all told me that it would be exceptionally difficult because of the Afrikaans and that it would be fully understood if I failed. This I did spectacularly, passing only two out of five subjects!

A memorable highlight of 1945 was the return to South Africa of my brother Leslie. He had had a rough war, being held in POW camps in North Africa, Italy and Germany. A few weeks before the Russian army overran the Dresden area where he was held, he escaped to the West, and after the kind of harrowing adventures that one reads about, made contact with the British forces who transferred him and other liberated POWs to Britain. They stayed there for a month or two getting back into a semblance of health and were then shipped back to Cape Town in a troopship. The scenes on the quay as these emaciated, haunted-looking

men filed off the ship were indescribable and there were few dry eyes. I was thirteen when Leslie left. He was then 19 or 20, and was now 25. I was not sure that I would recognise him, and I was not alone in this. Each young soldier, as they filed through the crowd looking anxiously for relatives, was closely scrutinised. They were shadows of the healthy, brash young men who had marched enthusiastically off to war. I did not recognise him immediately, and nor did he recognise me. We passed one another and then both did a double-take as something triggered memory. He was gaunt, grey, toothless, but physically sound. There was a warm reunion at Barney Moshal's temporary Cape Town home. He was a major in the medical corps, posted back to South Africa and awaiting demobilisation. Leslie boarded a train for the happy return to Durban.

The long year finally came to an end. It was not all unpleasant. I had made a number of good friends. I escaped over some weekends to Cape Town to see Rupert who was at UCT and other Durban friends. I had become accepted as a kind of a freakish mascot, with some affection. I was totally fluent in Afrikaans, and generally gaining confidence. I had my Matie maroon-striped blazer which I proudly sported in the holidays. In fact, back in Durban, I secretly revelled in my difference and the sneaking respect which it attracted.

The year 1945 had drawn to a close with VE-Day, the triumphant end to the long war in Europe. The defeat of Nazism was not welcomed with joy in Afrikanerdom. A hero nation was on its knees, and although its iniquities and horrors were becoming known, the passing of Nazi Germany was deeply mourned in Stellenbosch. On VE day, classes were cancelled, and many students wore black ties and armbands. This was too much for a small group of celebrators. We had a riotous party, and went from church to church, ringing bells when we could, with one eye open for irate Nazi vigilantes.

The second year at Stellenbosch opened in quite a different fashion to my introduction a year before. Most importantly, I was now a "Junior", sporting a University blazer, and able to lord it over the freshmen. I was something of a minor celebrity, although still and often subject to both overt and covert anti-semitism. I had firm and established friendships and was even on dating terms with some of the hostel girls who must have been the butt of considerable ridicule for going out with "*die Joodjie*". Alas, the dates were uniformly relatively chaste. Church-ridden Stellenbosch was a far far cry from the swinging sixties! I had, for example, to go to church on a Sunday evening which was a pre-requisite to taking out a hostel girl, who then had to be in by ten!

Classes had become more interesting and I had graduated to a

few forestry oriented subjects. Organic chemistry however remained a mystery – and still does. Sadly, lecturers were – with the solitary exception of geology – uniformly atrocious. A high school approach pervaded everything. I pined then – and still do in retrospect – for the need to write a decent essay and for a teacher who would appreciate good language.

Stellenbosch however, was about to sustain a major blow to its churchy, conservative, narrow psyche. For all practical purposes the war had ended for South Africans and demobilised young soldiers with a matriculation certificate were being encouraged, with generous Government loans, to go to university. A hundred or more young men of about twenty one and upwards descended on Stellenbosch, and forestry, agriculture and law were favourite choices. They were mostly English-speaking, had had some years in the army or air force or Navy, and had seen considerable action. In the nature of young soldiers everywhere they were hard-drinking, clannish, and obviously much more worldly than the average student. In short, they were not about to take any shit! The university dress code, drinking and dating rules were a joke. The Ossewa-Brandwag, Greyshirts and allied clowns were treated as such.

Forestry was, for many of them, an attractive career, and the first year class of 1946 of which I was now a partial member, (having passed some first-year courses), jumped to about twenty. It was, for me, a very happy infusion of people who very soon became my friends, and remained so for most of my professional career, some of them eventually working with or under me at SAFI/ACME and SAFCOL. I was again involved with totally separate groups, a continuing feature of my life. On the one hand there was Gys, Rem, Toek and company with whom I remained on intimate terms in a totally Afrikaans environment. On the other was a largely English-speaking, hard-drinking group of my classmates and their friends in which I found a natural and welcoming home. They were however, perhaps understandably, not particularly politically involved, and I thus found myself with yet another group, increasingly involved in liberal causes and student politics.

During my first year I had been subject to a growing liberal and political conscience and awareness. In common with all South African Jewry I was an unquestioning supporter of the anti-fascist war effort. If one thought no further than that, then one was also an unquestioning supporter of General Smuts and his United Party. The fact that it was unapologetically racist and nationalistic did not impinge on my consciousness to any degree, despite lectures from cousin Joan Moshal who prior to joining the army had been doing social work with "native"

clinics in rural Natal. I have no clear recollection of what turned me strongly and vehemently anti-nationalist and pro-liberal. It was probably a mix of revulsion to student/Afrikaner attitudes to "non-whites", to their growing adherence to the embryonic apartheid doctrine, and to Afrikanerdom's blatant racism of which I had become so clearly aware as a handy victim. Whatever the trigger, it was another major part of the core ideas and values that would henceforth direct my approach to life in South Africa.

During this second year I met Wilfred Cooper (now a retired Supreme Court judge in Cape Town) who had bravely established a branch of NUSAS at Stellenbosch. Standing as it did for student equality, it was not popular with its vociferous majority opponents – the Afrikaner Studentebond, the young Nats, the O-B, *et alia*. They found it almost impossible to swallow the sight of a NUSAS badge on a Matie blazer lapel.

NUSAS initial membership was a meagre twenty or thirty (out of a student body of three thousand). At its peak, that rose to about seventy five. It did the usual things common to a liberal student organisation – held meetings, tried to cross the colour line into local schools and communities, ran some adult night classes in neighbouring Ida's Valley. Eventually and inevitably we were banned as being "political" – despite the University's active support of the young Nats and other opposition supporters. At that stage in late 1947, Wilfred had graduated and had left me in the rather uncomfortable Chair. Of course, it was unthinkable to disband. Instead, we went "underground" in a room on the second storey of the Good Hope Cafe, where, inevitably, we were rumbled. As Chairman, I was suspended pending an investigation. I appealed to the NUSAS National Executive for help. Philip Tobias was National President and the organisation protested. I was rapidly re-instated, but the brief flowering of NUSAS at Stellenbosch was over.

For the next three years classes dragged boringly on, broken by fairly interesting field trips and practicals, and I was acquiring credits for a reasonable but not spectacular eventual passing grade. There were still minor outbreaks of anti-semitism but with my increasing senior status they became less obvious and I shrugged them off. There were in fact now two or three other Jews. Perhaps the Greyshirts were right! Was this the beginning of a wave of highly unwelcome Jewish influence? I had by then become something of a known figure on campus. The transformation to a semi-affectionate "*Ons Joodjie*" was all but complete.

I had acquired an old Hillman-Minx, having managed to evade the University restrictions on car ownership. Weekends were spent exploring

the Boland, and on an occasional Sunday I delighted in walking slowly through the Muizenburg "Snake-Park", peopled exclusively by Jewish sun worshippers, in my Stellenbosch blazer. I can still hear the whispered comments and the pools of silence that surrounded this apparently errant Afrikaner who had strayed – who is he? Looking for what? Why is he here? "*Kirbe!*" (country bumpkin).

A happy and quite uncalculated episode was a burgeoning friendship with the independent-minded daughter of the O-B general and Botany professor, my first tormentor. To do him credit he never showed me any further personal discourtesy in my frequent visits to his home. He and his wife were stiffly correct. I was apprehensive at first, but eventually rather enjoyed this strange environment.

It was in this year that Gys Kleyn invited me to spend the Easter week-end with his family on "Klein Kruis". I accepted happily until when approaching the farm Gys very embarrassedly asked me not to tell his parents that I was Jewish. They had never had a Jew in their house and because of the prejudice and superstitions they would be very very unhappy, although the iron rules of Afrikaner country hospitality would never allow them to reject me. I had to agree, and for a joke Gys decided to tell them that I was a *Tokalok* – an aspirant predikant. It must be remembered that I was then totally fluent in Afrikaans and had endured innumerable Sunday eve church services in order to be able to "walk out" with a hostel lady.

All went well until Easter Sunday, when in time-honoured style the family (seated) and the volk (standing) were gathered in the large Voorkamer for *Boeke-vat* (Bible-reading). We had all enjoyed a good measure of home-made peach brandy. Father Kleyn stood and informed the gathering that they were fortunate to have among them an aspirant Predikant and that after he had read the day's bible passage, he would ask him to speak. I somehow managed to dredge up sufficient fire and brimstone leavened with love of the Church and of God to pass muster for a long few minutes. Gys often referred to the fact that his father occasionally asked after that young man "*wie so mooi gepreek het*" (who preached so well). Gys never told him the awful truth.

1948 – my fourth year at Stellenbosch – placed me in the category of the campus gods. The student body was in those years only about 3500 which was small enough for the old hands to know one another, if not personally, at least by sight. Racial and other problems had all but disappeared. There were however two major external happenings in that year which radically altered my situation. It was the year of the Israeli War of Independence and the establishment of the State of Israel. I had not

been involved in any Zionist activities, but was enthralled at what was happening. Most surprising however was the reaction of Afrikanerdom. The Jew was suddenly elevated to being a warrior hero.

The Israelis were not only fighting to throw off the hated British yoke, but they were standing alone and bravely against the Arab hordes. Equate the British Mandate with the Boer War, and the Arabs with the kaffirs, and the instant feeling of solidarity is weird but explicable. Ossewa-Brandewag stalwarts would now cross the street to shake my hand to congratulate me on Israeli victories, as though I was personally responsible. It was a very welcome change, but – in retrospect – a warning of the strange alliance that was soon to develop between the Israeli and South African security and arms manufacturing establishments.

The other major event, which was to blight our lives for nearly thirty years, was the totally unexpected and shocking victory of the National Party over Jan Smuts' United Party. It was not however quite such a surprise to the dedicated Nationalist supporters who had a devout and religious belief in the rightness of their cause, supported Sunday after Sunday by fiery sermons that preached the biblical approach to the chosen people and their absolute right to rule over "the hewers of wood and the drawers of water." In the South African context they were in no doubt that Afrikanerdom was chosen of God – and this without even a by-your-leave from the other contender, the Jews.

Celebrations ranged from ringing church bells and special thanksgiving services to political rallies, to drunken student "jols". Dr. Malan the Stellenbosch MP, was the new Prime Minister. Glory had descended from on high on Stellenbosch!

There was not unalloyed joy. The UP was fairly well represented among the students, including the sons of at least two cabinet ministers (van der Byl and Waterson), but its members were almost entirely Afrikaans-speaking and were not too far from Nationalist ideology. Their opposition was more of the "*bloed-sap*" emotional variety which soon dissipated. Strangely, I found the major emotional hurt among Dr. Klasie Havenga's Afrikaner Party supporters. They were true democrats and feared Nationalist bullying. I have a sad recollection of one of their organisers in our hostel – a mature ex-schoolteacher – weeping quietly at his party's disastrous showing. He was devastated when Havenga accepted a cabinet post in a National–Afrikaner Party coalition.

The year ended reasonably satisfactorily. I went off to honour my practical commitments at a Graskop forest where I had my first real exposure to the profession of forestry. I was a forest ranger, on horse-back for twelve hours a day, mostly in the rain. It was mildly and uncomfortably

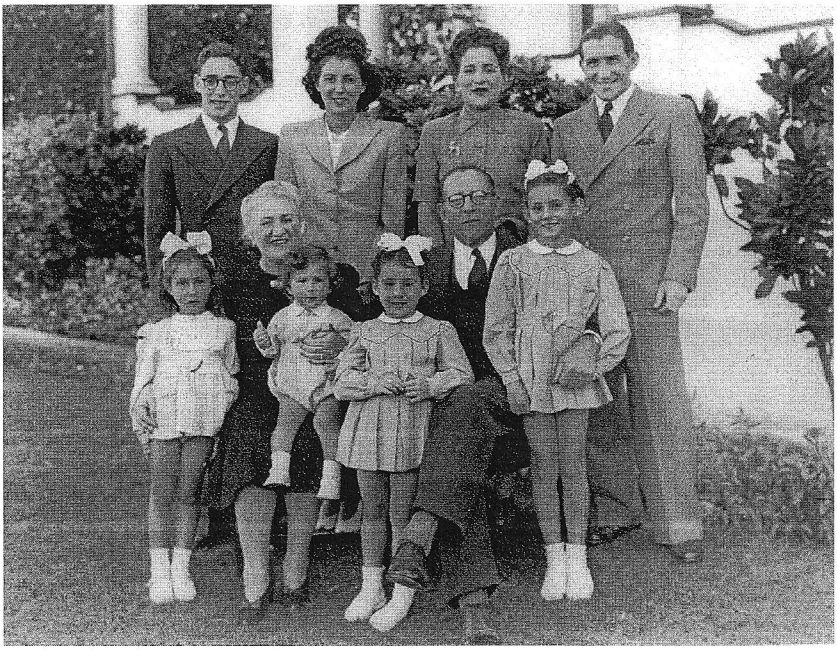
enjoyable, and also, much too late to backtrack.

1949 was a happy year. I was in the rare and elevated condition of a fifth-year student – one of very few, with important privileges such as a reserved front row seat at the annual UCT–Stellenbosch "Intervarsity". As I had carried some credits, the class load was light. The end was in sight, except for German I which I had managed to avoid for three years. It was a silly subject for a forester and had arisen from the idea that because early research work in forestry was written in German, serious students should have a reading knowledge of the language. I am not particularly proud of the manner of my passing the subject. I requested an oral examination, began by deliberately stuttering until it was in fact uncontrollable. The Herr Professor was a kindly, elderly man who was so upset and embarrassed that I passed the oral and left quickly. I returned to apologise some years later. He remembered our mutual ordeal very clearly!

BSc Forestry final year class. University of Stellenbosch, 1949
David is standing, third from right

The second half of the final year of the course was traditionally devoted to a practical – a "working plan" of a forest for the silviculturalists and a study of a sawmill for those planning to go the forest utilisation route. I chose the latter, and went off to Graskop for three months. My thesis was accepted and I was a proud David Gevisser B.Sc (For).

It had been decided that I should go to the U.S.A. for post-graduate work at the Acme company's expense in the guise of Assistant Research Officer. I was to leave in September to catch the 1949 intake and my departure was rather rushed. I borrowed cousin Shirley's new car in Cape Town to drive to Franschhoek for a farewell party with my classmates. It was inevitably riotous and en route back to Cape Town to catch the Edinburgh Castle for London, I crashed in heavy rain and mist somewhere on the treacherous Hell's Hoogte road. I am a little vague on how I reached Stellenbosch, organised a garage to collect the car, and travelled to Cape Town harbour. I did not see Shirley until, standing at the rail, I caught sight of her on the quay. I managed to shout directions about the whereabouts of her car. It was a strained farewell!



The Gevisser Family, circa 1949. Back, from left: David, Jocelyn, Ruby, Leslie
Front: Suzanne, Janie, Colin, Gillian, Morris, Jennifer