

THE ANGLO INTERLUDE



ON THE BUSINESS FRONT, I was now ensconced as a senior manager in the Anglo-American fold into which I had been warmly welcomed by the many friends and acquaintances whom I had made in the Engelhard years. A taste of things to come however was at my first official meeting with Julian Ogilve-Thompson, then a youthful finance director (and subsequently the formidable Chairman "JOT") who took me by the arm and told me that he was absolutely delighted to tell me that I was to take my daily lunch with the directors and senior managers – apparently a most high honour! I was also told that my Chairman was to be Christopher Griffith, a young, successful, aggressive executive director in the AMIC industrial subsidiary.

The old Engelhard establishment remained for a few months at French House, but inevitably had to move to 45 Main Street, where I reconstructed a pine-panelled office for myself, to the considerable envy of my new colleagues. My background, my friendship with the Anglo top echelon, and the fact that at that stage I was earning more than most of my peers, did not make for totally easy and uncomplicated relationships.

The Engelhard office was dismantled, with some of the staff finding somewhat unhappy employment in minor slots in Anglo. I had decided that my long-time secretary, Alice Weil, would not fit into the Anglo scene and our relationship sadly had to end. Her replacement was Ida Squara, an Italian South African who had been with Engelhard for some years in various confidential capacities, including that of private secretary to Sava Panitza who had been moved to an Engelhard associate company. It was a happy choice, and we remained together for many years and in changing circumstances, until she died in 2005.

In Anglo I was of course responsible for SAFI and Acme, and later Peak Timbers in Swaziland, a disastrous operation whose financial failure was to be hidden in the good SAFI results. There were also some Engelhard investments to wind up including Conlog, of which I was Chairman – a joint venture in the high-tech industry with John Moshal, not at

that stage particularly successful but eventually to become very much so. John was – and is – an extraordinarily imaginative entrepreneur with an expert eye for technical opportunities. That eye has served him well. I should note as an example that he invented the first prototype of the automatic speed control now common in most motor cars.



SALMA Chairman, 1965

I had in this period become very friendly with Tony Bloom and Gordon Waddell, who remain among my closest friends. Gordon, an Anglo Executive Director, was Harry Oppenheimer's ex son-in-law, and had re-married Kathy Gallagher. He was a Scot, a one-time English Lion's Rugby player, and a naturalised South African. He decided that, following in the steps of his ex father-in-law, he wanted to go into politics, and despite considerable opposition from inside Anglo, accepted a Progressive Party invitation to be the Johannesburg North candidate against the United Party incumbent, Dave Marais, a popular sporting figure who to the best of anyone's knowledge had yet to make his maiden speech in Parliament after having been an MP for ten years!

Gordon had persuaded Tony Bloom, a popular, politically outspoken and successful business executive to be his campaign manager. They asked me to help and I became Tony's deputy. We had a marvellous, if exhausting, few months of campaigning and mounted a campaign which

I believe could be a model for constituency politics. Against all of the odds, and the scepticism of his business colleagues (HFO told me bluntly that we were all wasting our time) we won a resounding 1400 vote victory and sent Gordon off to Parliament as part of the fourteen-strong Progressive Party contingent, probably the only MP who could not produce a single word of intelligible Afrikaans. He was however a model MP, hardworking and particularly effective on business matters.

The campaign produced some hilarious moments, many of which are reproduced when the campaign team get together, which they occasionally still do. Perhaps the funniest happened at the official ballot count at which I was the official Prog. representative. The election officer was a dour Afrikaans official who was obviously uncomfortable in this rather English northern suburb. The count began with him checking each ballot for transgressions. Anything found not to be in accordance with the strict rules was rejected, unless there was an objection from either of the two parties concerned. A ballot paper came out marked with a heavy black line across it, and the words "Fuck Waddell". The official regarded it with much distaste and was about to reject it when I objected. I had studied the Supreme Court rulings on ballot paper rejections, as every good party official should, and had come across a ruling which said that if a voter had clearly indicated a preference, then regardless of how this was done, the vote must be accepted. It was a woman voter, I said, who clearly loved Waddell. The vote must stand! Even the official cracked a smile, but I lost that vote!

On the business side I was enjoying my close involvement with SAFI, Acme and Peak Timbers, and continued to visit Sabie often, together with the family whenever possible. Mbulwa was still available to us but had been appropriated by Anglo and considerably enlarged. Its charm was diminishing. Sadly however my relationship with Griffith was deteriorating. He became more and more difficult to work with. I warned my friends in the top echelons of Anglo that they had a potential problem on their hands, which they acknowledged. They had decided, however, not to move just yet. They did – but not for another five years! I however decided not to wait and resigned after a four-year stint in an Anglo environment, which whilst always friendly and supportive, was not my natural operating climate. It did not encourage independence. In fact, early in my Anglo days, JOT had told me very clearly that Anglo was looking for solid performance, and did not encourage stars; there were already enough of these top level! A final view of the imperial Anglo approach was the proposed press release on my resignation. This had caused quite a stir because of my position in the forest industry.

The Anglo draft indicated clearly that Anglo had decided to dispense with my services! I told Barry Mortimer, a much-embarrassed friend who was the Anglo press attaché, that it either reflected the truth or we could put out separate releases and the press could choose which they thought was the more accurate. A white-faced Barry rushed around the corridors of power to consult on this unheard-of approach, and returned to work out a mutually acceptable version.

I was sad to leave my many friends behind to the tender mercies of Griffith and Pat Latham, the unstable head of Anglo-owned Bruynzeel Timbers with whom I would have had to work in joint harness. They included such long-time colleagues as David and Audrey Hull, Charles Brand, Duncan Turner and most of the SAFI-Acme-Peak executives. They did not fare very well or happily, and in fact with almost indecent haste after my departure, the proud SAFI public company was de-listed and folded into MONDI, becoming MONDI FORESTS and MONDI TIMBERS – a sad end to the Engelhard/Gevisser dreams.

A recollection from that period that is worth recording was my involvement in “The Year of the Green Heritage” which was a public relations exercise dreamed up by the then Minister of Forestry, Fanie Botha. He telephoned to ask me to become National Chairman of the campaign which I politely refused. He said, “David, you don’t understand – this is not a request, it is an instruction!!” I yielded! It was a weird year with functions in remote locations in every province, including the then South West Africa, where it is difficult to find a tree! The opening function was in a pretty grove of trees along the Eerste River outside Franschhoek and was graced by the presence of a very drunk State President Jim Fouché, various cabinet ministers and numerous members of the Diplomatic Corps. I had fortunately enquired about the catering and was horrified to hear that it was to be done by the prison department, with the waiters in prison clothes.

This was urgently changed but the broken noses, cauliflower ears, and lack of front teeth were nevertheless a clear indication of the waiters’ origins. The Diplomatic Corps look confused, and even more so when the country’s State President, Jim Fouché, a small leprechaun-like man, did a drunken cavort round the braai fire shouting, in Afrikaans, “We have a Jew here. Can you believe it? A Jew here with us!” He seemed genuinely pleased but surprised, but even more surprised when I told him that my parents were from Lithuania. He insisted that “all our Jews” were from Poland!

Meanwhile Paul Sauer, an elderly Cabinet Minister, was suggesting to a bemused Hedda that they take their clothes off and go for a swim

in the river. The evening was, from later accounts, thoroughly enjoyed by everyone (and particularly the prison waiters who, like the State President and Paul Sauer, were very drunk) except the Diplomatic Corps, Hedda and me. It was somewhat reminiscent of another evening in Pretoria, at the residence of Frank Waring who was the Minister of Forestry. The honoured guests were the ambassadors of numerous South American countries. Entertainment consisted of SATOUR propaganda films during which various large Afrikaners jumped up, looked fierce and yelled "Vrystaat". The Diplomatic Corps was huddled in an apprehensive uncomprehending group in one corner.

This was also regarded as a great success!