PART I: A TRAITOR TO HATRED

On the night of 30 March 1960, I fled from South Africa to Swaziland to seek political asylum from the Government of South Africa. Until 31 May 1957, I had served that same Government loyally and to the best of my ability as Vice-Consul in Leopoldville. In less than three years, I had graduated from being a servant of the Government to being one of its extremest opponents. I was regarded by nearly all Afrikaners as a traitor and treated as such.

This book is not about myself. But I changed so radically in so short a time that there may be some value in examining the reasons. Perhaps, in describing those events in my life which did most to make me change, I can throw a little more light on the tragedy of misunderstanding that has unfolded in South Africa, where a frightened people have become committed to a course of action, and are unable to see how the present attempt to safeguard their future is the very factor most likely to destroy it.

I was born in Durban in December 1931, and shortly after my birth my parents separated. My mother had to go out to work and her job took her away from Durban, so she left me with my grandmother. It was my grandmother who brought me up, but not as an Afrikaner, although she herself was one. I was seventeen when I first began to think of myself as an Afrikaner and to wonder why I had been denied an Afrikaans upbringing.

My grandmother was crippled by rheumatism and unable to bend her left leg. She made a comfortable living for both of us by taking in boarders and by dressmaking. And she was helped financially by my father, whom I very rarely saw, and her unmarried son.

As a girl during the Boer War, she had been in a British concentration camp. Then she settled in Natal and married my French-speaking grandfather from Mauritius. They too were separated, but the marriage had left its mark in that my grandmother had taken her husband’s religion, Roman Catholicism, and shed most of her links with Afrikanerdom. She was an ardent supporter of Smuts, and an implacable foe of Afrikaner political nationalism, but she hardly ever spoke to me directly about our country’s politics or history, or even about her own upbringing.

She was a big woman, with a domineering personality and a very quick temper. She did not hesitate to beat me on the many occasions when she felt it necessary. She had had little formal education and was essentially a very simple person, inclined to sentimentality, and on the whole kind and generous.

I vividly recall an incident shortly before her death, when she and I had stayed on at the dinner-table one evening, chatting to two of her boarders. They were a newly married couple, both Afrikaner nationalists. (The husband was a railway worker. The young wife had taught me more about Afrikanerdom than I had ever learned from my grandmother.) That evening the conversation was about the strife between the two White language groups. The Boer War inevitably featured in the discussion, and with it the British maltreatment of Afrikaner women and
children in the concentration camps. When it cropped up, my grandmother became livid with rage. She banged the table with the walking-stick she always carried.

‘Have you ever been in one of those concentration camps?’ she screamed. They had no answer. They were both born at least twenty-five years after the whole thing was over. ‘Well, I have,’ she went on, shaking with emotion. She spiritedly denied the charges of cruelty that they had made. But what rankled with her most was that she, who had been an inmate of a concentration camp, could have forgotten and forgiven, while these people, born a full generation later, should summon up the ghosts of the past to sustain their present hatreds. She was so angry that she would not allow them to continue the argument. I knew better than to try to ask Om further questions, and out of sheer filial devotion I took her side. I was ten or eleven at the time, and this conversation lingered in my mind like a question mark. It was my first introduction to the politics of the White language groups of South Africa.

Outside our home, my setting was that of White Natal. People there have strong anti-Indian and anti-Afrikaner prejudices. One ‘liked the native’, who, one believed, in turn ‘liked’ us. He was, we thought, ‘perfectly happy’, sitting and laughing in the sun. He was lazy and unambitious, but what right had we to impose ‘our way of life’ on him? We genuinely believed that the ‘natives’ were happy as domestics and factory workers — simply because they really did seem to be forever smiling. As far as one can generalize, the Africans are by nature a gracious, smiling people, and this certainly created an impression of contentment. Today, the smiles are less frequent and the graciousness is tempered by bitterness. But today is a far cry from those misleading days.

One of the most frequently heard remarks from White South Africans, now as then, is, ‘I like the “old” type of native. He is courteous, polite, and knows his place. But these young, half-educated city slickers are a bad lot. They are the ones who cause all the trouble.’

At school we spoke of the African as ‘Jim Fish’, the ‘Munt’, or the ‘Coon’; the Indians were the ‘Coolies’ or the ‘Churrahs’; the Afrikaners the ‘Boets Maps’, or ‘Backvelders’; the Coloureds (or Eurafricans) the ‘Koetchies’; and the Jews the ‘Yids’. In our own house, Johannesburg was often called ‘Jewsburg’. I remember at high school how one Jewish boy was unmercifully and continuously ragged and taunted with being a Jew. He was an odd child who would probably have been ragged in any case, but the racial slander was significant. I never questioned any of these attitudes. This was what the world was like.

In their younger days my grandparents had lived in Avoca, a small town on the north coast of Natal. There was a substantial Indian community there. Of all the underprivileged, subjugated racial groups in Natal, it is the Indians who have been in the strongest and most direct economic competition with the Whites. A small minority, less than fifteen per cent, control powerful economic interests; a growing number are improving as technicians, artisans, and clerks; but the vast majority of them are poor and engaged in market-gardening and door-to-door vegetable selling.
At Avoca a handful of Indians owned sugar-cane farms, and many of the others worked on such farms, owned either by Indians or Europeans. A fair number of Mauritians live in this area because of the sugar farming, since the principal product of Mauritius is sugar, and many of them are of mixed racial origin. My grandfather was then a railway ticket inspector, and it was a point of pride in our family that he was racially ‘pure’. It was in this environment that my grandmother’s traditional racial consciousness found its expression. She knew exactly who was ‘pure White’ and who was not. A Mauritian family were our near neighbours, but she forbade me to play with the children: they were ‘not quite White’. Some of these people were infinitely richer than we were, but we were able to keep our heads high. We were White.

My grandfather’s relatives — also poor White Mauritians — maintained their friendship with my grandmother, despite her separation from her husband. They all felt rather as she did about the Mauritians. There is a large Indian population in Mauritius, and my relatives had brought with them a traditional attitude towards these people; that is to say, they despised the richer Indians more than the poorer ones. Whenever we saw Indians living in decent houses, there was always the same comment: ‘They are so filthy. Look how dirty they make their houses!’ My grandmother was far more generous towards the Indian vegetable hawker who came to the door. It was no threat to our pride to talk to him. He did not expect to be asked into the sitting-room. In no sense would we ever think of these people as our equals. I vividly recall that when I was nine or ten, a relative by marriage, an Englishwoman and an exquisite confectioner, had baked a cake and beautifully decorated it with pink icing that looked just like fine lace. The family was raffling it for some cause or other and the winning ticket was in the name of the hawker. He had bought it for sixpence while selling us vegetables, but everyone in the family agreed, when the raffle was drawn, that the hawker would not appreciate the cake and that it would be a waste to let him have it. So there was another draw and a white person came up as winner.

We always bought our vegetables from these Indian hawkers, who came to our door, and my grandmother drove a hard bargain with them. Still, she had a relaxed and fairly understanding relationship with one Indian woman who came frequently. And I was allowed long conversations with the butcher’s delivery boy, also an Indian, in which she sometimes joined. They were mostly about horse-racing. The legend was that every Indian had inside information about the horses.

Thus we assembled our stereotypes. Like most South Africans, we knew nothing about the lives of these people; nothing except a few superficial facts — but from these we built up images. It was the same with the African servants. We were always conscious of the fact that they were right at the bottom of the social scale, so conscious of it that we never stopped to think. They were simply there. We had a long succession of domestic servants: they were either lazy, or they stole, or they brewed ‘kaffir beer’ illicitly and the stench attracted policemen on patrol; or they broke crockery (deliberately), or they had boy-friends living on the premises. We were convinced of their ingrained, inherent immorality and inefficiency, although we were kind to them, in our fashion. We gave them extra food, or money, or occasional old clothes. We were also convinced they were
ungrateful, because, despite our kindness, they would steal more food than we
gave them, or pinch my uncle’s tobacco or liquor.

Throughout my schooldays I bore my grandmother’s married name, Lagesse. It
happened quite by accident. I regarded her as my mother and addressed her as
such, and anyone who had anything to do with us assumed that she was. I rarely
saw my real mother, whom I addressed by her Christian name. By now, my
childhood name had become anglicized and was pronounced ‘Lar-jess’.
Consequently I escaped being thought of as an Afrikaner, and indeed hardly
considered myself one. I was therefore never abused as an Afrikaner; on the
contrary, I joined in abusing them until well after the concentration camp
conversation had raised questions in my mind.

Natal has always been predominantly English-speaking, but between the two
world wars the Hertzog Afrikaner Government imported into Natal a large
number of Afrikaans-speaking people in order to increase contact between the
two groups. Unfortunately they brought in civil servants and railway workers,
poorer people who hardly represented a true cross-section of their group, and
were as a whole unlikely to make a particularly good impression on English-
speaking Natal. The only Afrikaners I knew, apart from my anglicized grandmother
and innumerable others equally anglicized, were the two young nationalists who
boarded with us. However, neither of these people conditioned my view of the
Afrikaner; it was conditioned rather by the boys who attended the local
Afrikaans-language school, whom we saw in the bus or in the street. We fought a
sort of running battle with them; one of the differences between us was that they
spoke the language we were forced to learn at school. Invariably they had close-
cropped haircuts and pug noses. I was influenced too by the men I saw at the
Railway Institute when my uncle went in for a drink on a Sunday, leaving me
waiting an hour or so in his car. They also had close-cropped heads of hair, wore
their national uniform of flannels and sports coats that hung halfway up their
backs, and looked somehow unlike any other Whites.

I saw my birth certificate for the first time soon after I left school, when I needed
it in applying for a job. My grandmother had been dead for nearly four years, and
the powerful emotional influence of a mother on her child had almost
disappeared. The Afrikaner Nationalist Government had been in power for the
best part of a year, and the shock of their unexpected and dramatic election
(which I felt chiefly because my elders did) had — so far as I was concerned —
given way to an inquisitive interest. I was only now properly discovering the
Nationalist Party and its creed. In this state of mind, I learned that I was van
Rensburg, and I felt that something had been withheld from me and denied me.

I had been uncertain as to what to do for a living. I should have liked to attend
university, but could not afford it. I had contemplated becoming a teacher and
accepting a loan from the education department of the provincial government to
cover my training. I also had a long-standing interest in journalism. In the end,
because I had a vague feeling of wanting to do something of public service, I was
deluded into thinking that I could best fulfil this need by joining the civil service.
My headmaster strongly advised me against becoming a teacher. ‘You’ll be
wasting your talents,’ he said. This flattered me enormously, and might well have
misled me. I had recently gained prizes in two public essay competitions, and
had attracted his attention and interest by this and one or two unorthodox extra-curricular activities. In fact, I drifted into the public service. I had to see a magistrate in Durban about joining, and he told me that I should revert to the name of my birth. It was largely from a strange and uncertain sense of pride that, on his advice, I did so. Legally, I could have kept the name I was known by.

There were more Afrikaners than English-speakers in the office of the Master of the Supreme Court, to which I was appointed. Among them I made two valuable friends. The Assistant Master, Mr J.J.A. Nel, was a tall, brilliant, middle-aged man, with a slight stoop and a balding head. He immediately took a fatherly interest in me, was always available to me, even though I was a very junior official, and spent hours in teaching me the finer details of my work. He encouraged me to wrestle with all the legal problems that cropped up and to argue them to a conclusion. Mr Nel also took a sympathetic interest in my personal problems, drew me out on them, and gave me advice. He was a quiet-spoken man, intense and serious, with a deep passion for good music. His one weakness — an endearing one — was for Tarzan films. When I began studying for an extra-mural degree, he kept me going with encouragement and interest. He drew me very gently towards a deeper understanding of and a greater sympathy for Afrikanerdom, and I suspect that he will be immensely sad about the course I have chosen in life.

My other friend was Daan van Tonder, a much younger and very different sort of man. He did not have anything like the insight, devotion, and intensity of Mr Nel, but he was a passionate nationalist. We argued constantly about politics, and his grudges were real. As a good Afrikaner nationalist, he had refused to fight in the war against Hitler and had been penalized. He argued well, if superficially, and spoke with no personal bitterness, despite his grudges. We shared an office, and he was always at hand to explain the unfolding Afrikaner Nationalist Government’s policy. There was nothing gentle about his attempt to win me over to Afrikanerdom, and there was a faint hint of emotional blackmail in his talk. When speaking to me of others like me, he hinted at the ‘renegade’.