

Telephone 439-6525

46 Avenue La Croix  
Sea Point  
Cape Town  
8001

22 November 1990

GROWING UP IN TAUNGS

by Freda Freeman

Copyright - Freda Freeman

## GROWING UP IN TAUNGS

by Freda Freeman

When I watch my grandson playing with his grotesque mechanical toys - the Dinosaurs, rapidly discarded for the GI Joes, then discarded for the Ninja Turtles - I wonder how I spent my days as a child, growing up at Taungs Station without a Brontosaurus or a Thundercat.

In 1925 World War I was over; the 1918 'flu epidemic was over. We were in a stable period, when large parts of the globe were painted pink, and "God Save the King" was sung at the end of every social function.

Taungs Station was a railway siding in the Northern Cape, where the trains stopped to pick up coal and water, and where commercial travellers alighted. My grandfather owned the shop and hotel nearby. My parents lived in a small white house next door. Both the house and the hotel had corrugated iron roofs and wire netting over the shuttered windows to keep out flies and mosquitoes.

Grandfather had built the hotel himself, without an architect. The private living rooms were all interleading, arranged in a higgledy-piggledy style. The hotel bedrooms were in a straight line, like a railway carriage, and the floors were stamped out of cow dung and peach pips. I did not realise how proud he was of his buildings - they were a status symbol for a Jew who had never been allowed to own land in Russia.

To reach the village proper you had to travel by horse and cart for three miles. I could never see any reason for going there - it consisted of a post office, a bank, a tiny library and half a dozen houses for the doctor, the predikant, the teacher and the magistrate. And everywhere you looked was barren soil, where a lettuce had a hard job to grow, for lack of rain water. The peppercorn trees were the only green things for miles around.

In this space and time slot you awoke to silence except for the crowing of cocks. You washed yourself with icy water poured from a flowered blue porcelain jug into a matching basin. Sometimes you'd be called to have a bath - I say sometimes, because it was a bother to get the hot water going on a coal stove.

"Did you have to rub two sticks together to make a fire, Gran?", asked my grandson.

"No, it was not as bad as that", I replied; but it took hours to heat up the paraffin tins filled with brown brackish water, which the servants emptied into a zinc bath, like the one you bath your dog in today.

Breakfast was always in the hotel. I can still taste the kaffir-corn porridge, served with milk and cream. It was thick and brown, unlike what you get today in the supermarkets, and would be followed by a glass of warm milk, fresh from the cow, for there were no refrigerators.

And what did a child do all day? There was very little to do, and the same of it each day, and a sister of one year old was no company. I was like a wild bird, dropping in on other people's activities, listening and watching. You watched the black men milking the cows or feeding the hens with mealies. I hated the smell of raw hides being tanned and was afraid to go too near the animals, as they often died of a disease called anthrax, which people could catch.

The kitchen was the most fascinating place, for it was really a number of miniature factories. I'd watch the servants melt down the animal fat for making soap. I'd see them put wicks into wax and carefully mould the candles. Or they'd be boiling great pots of moskonfyt, quince jam and marmalade, or processing home-made yoghurt called "thick milk", or churning butter in huge wooden

tubs. Nearby was the biltong hanging out to dry, after the raw meat had been treated with sugar, salt and saltpetre. I disliked going into my father's butchery - the smell of stale blood nauseated me, and I could not bear the idea of animals being slaughtered or chickens' necks being wrung.

Sometimes I'd walk up to the station and speak to the station master. I loved to hear his whistle and see him waving his flag; and then the train would be off. On other days I'd visit the shop. Here I could look on while the assistants weighed out rice and sugar, tea and mealie meal, stored in great hessian sacks. And they'd pack everything into brown paper packets or twisted cones of newspaper. Occasionally I'd be given sweets from the large glass jars filled with small black balls or tiny pink Sensens. I remember so well the mingling of smells given out by those bales of blankets and cotton material, the tobacco and coffee.

Whenever goods arrived for the hotel or the shop I'd be standing in front beside the wagons being unloaded with all kinds of curious things - water in tanks from Kimberley when the rain failed, extra beds and mattresses, and building materials. Everyone was so busy - the servants were cooking huge meals for the hotel - roasts, potatoes, rice pudding. The housekeeper was writing out the menus. Only my mother was not busy. A sensitive and frustrated musician, she was having frequent nervous breakdowns; but that's another story. And all the time I did not realise that my relatives were helping to build South Africa - the trading posts, the hotels, the farms and later the town councils. They were pioneers, with little time to spare. No wonder when I study those sepia photographs in my albums everyone looks so stern - the women with birds' nest hair styles, the men with moustaches and straw hats. Did no-one tell them to say "cheese" and smile for the dicky bird?

And then there were the customers in the shop to peer at. The station was surrounded by a location of thirty thousand Native people, but no member of my family slept with a gun under his pillow. We called them "kaffirs", with no intention of any insult. This was our name for the indigenous people, the Tswanas, the Batlapeng. Gentle, tall and dignified, the men wore blankets wrapped around themselves, fastened with a large pin at one shoulder. Their women balanced buckets of water on their heads, ever so gracefully. Very few of them worked for us. They were too concerned with their tribal affairs. They would just buy their groceries or materials and return to their round straw-roofed huts. I once visited a kraal with my nursemaid Kunie and saw them cooking mealie-pap and pumpkin in three-legged iron pots. I could not converse with them, as they spoke a strange language, stranger even than the Yiddish my parents spoke to one another.

Once in a while the whole place would be astir for nagmaal. Hundreds of Afrikaans people with their barefooted children would arrive in wagons. They'd outspan their oxen and pitch their tents, and everyone would go to church.

In her own way my Aunt Fanny, aged 20, also made a stir one day. She'd spent a holiday in Johannesburg. When she returned she gave us a performance, dressed in a short skirt, a sash round her hips and a cloche hat hugging her ears. She demonstrated the Charleston dance and sang a little song, "Show me the way to go home, I'm tired and I want to go to bed." She epitomised the excitement of the great world that lay outside Taungs Station.

I can't remember much about playing. Only one child of my age lived nearby. But there was a field between us, and on days when Bessie the cow was roaming there I'd be afraid to cross the field. When we got together we sat in the dry, dry sand in the shade of the peppercorn trees, and played with kewpie dolls made of celluloid, or we made squashy mixtures of wet biscuits in toy tin pots and cups.

I think my favourite occupation was listening to the grown-ups talking. They would gather on the verandah in the winter time, to drink coffee or tea, into which they dipped home-made rusks. They followed the sun around, the weather was so extreme. If you left a bucket of water outside overnight it turned to ice. But by midday things warmed up. The sun burnt delicious holes in your back when you sat still. Here you listened and listened, for this was a world without radio or TV or movies.

I'd keep an eye on my grandfather especially, with his fiery blue eyes; grandfather with his gold-topped walking stick and a gold watch and chain across his pot belly; grandfather rolling tobacco leaves for his pipe. He was a compulsive talker, and never stopped chatting about his cattle deals and money affairs. His conversation was peppered with words like "bank", "interest", "bank manager", "stock". He was proud of his cattle and his farm, for they were *his* animals and it was *his* land at last. This was not the life in the shtetl of Eastern Europe, where the feudal landlord owned the village and everyone worked for a pittance. Here you worked for yourself; he was a free man. But he put back a great deal, with service to the community.

He was a restless person, often away from the hotel and his farm. "I can do anything except stay with the sheep", he would say. He made the divisional council repair potholes in the roads and he got a fire brigade going. He also concerned himself with the affairs of the nearest Zionist organisation, though he was not observant of the Jewish tradition.

He eventually became a town councillor, but neglected his own business. His life was for the public, his pride in not being in the servant role but in the master role. But what a muddler he was! I heard the word "bankrupt" four times over the years. He went bankrupt through neglect, leaving his affairs in the hands of casual employees. He should have made a fortune, but money

slipped through his fingers. He disappointed my mother. I remember the angry words. But to me he remained a vibrant, energetic figure.

On the verandah I would hear the adults mention the names of the little towns in Russia where everyone came from. Such lovely names - Plumyan, Kovno, Ponovez, Shavel, Sadova in Lithuania; Dvinsk, Riga and Talsin in Latvia; Vilna in Poland.

"But why did you come all the way from Sadova to Taungs?" I asked.

"Because my cousin wrote and told me there was work here."

And so I discovered that Great-uncle Ben and Great-uncle Sam, and many, many cousins were working in shops like ours, all along the railway line. Through the grapevine the messages had gone out from Beaufort West, Fourteen Streams, Border and Andalusia, Dry Harts and Kuruman.

"But why did they leave Russia?" I persisted.

"Because they were hungry, and the soldiers of the Tsar were burning their homes and their synagogues."

"But why don't Uncle Ben and Uncle Sam come to visit us?"

"They are too busy making a living."

"But what is a living?"

I seldom got a satisfactory reply, for they would lapse into pessimistic sounding Yiddish words. There was such an atmosphere of gloom, because they were all so insecure. And they had little time to talk to children. But sometimes things would be a little

different - like the first time Uncle Harry arrived with a great tin object called a motor car. It took a lot of trouble to start. There was a large handle in front, and he spent a long time turning it round and round. He called it cranking. Finally the car gave a splutter and we climbed in and drove to neighbouring farms of cattle and sheep; and each time we reached a cattle gate a barefooted piccanin would open the gate and be given a pink-striped sugar stick. Another time we'd drive to the dusty cement works eleven miles away, which became famous overnight for the discovery by Professor Dart of the skeleton of the Taungs man, a missing link in anthropology. A fossilised bird's nest was also found buried in the lime.

"We're on the map," said my mother. "The whole world is reading about us."

But I never really enjoyed these drives. I was afraid of the startled animals scuttling across our path, and the dust kicked up by the car was suffocating on a hot day.

Sometimes there were picnics at the Blue Pool. The name sounds romantic, but South African rivers are little more than dried up streams in the summer time. The Blue Pool was no exception. But if a picnic were organised dozens of adults would appear as if from nowhere, and someone was sure to bring a gramophone with a trumpet, from which songs would blare out, like "It happened in Monterey, a long time ago."

There was of course a farm school. A few children of various ages attended from neighbouring villages. It was a one-roomed building, also with a corrugated iron roof. A very Victorian schoolmistress presided over it. But this was no "toddler's workshop" or colourful kindergarten. I can't remember anything we ever did there.

I do remember the brilliant sunsets. And at night I'd watch the

bright stars in a clear sky. And then it was bedtime. I slept on a mattress of great feather pillows brought out from Europe, but over my bed was an animal skin called a kaross, very heavy and warm. When it grew dark someone lit a candle in the corner of the room, and someone snuffed it out when you were asleep. And in between you lay awake with many fears - of the scary shadows across the sparsely furnished room; the drunken noisy men reeling about in the road outside the bar, shouting in many strange accents; the field mice creeping along the skirtings; the sound of thunder; and the sight of forked lightning streaking across the open window. At last you'd fall asleep; and then another day would be exactly the same as the one before, until it was holiday time.

A grand tour was to go to Cape Town, to visit a rich aunt and uncle. Aunt had a great deal of cutlery on the table, and you never knew which piece to pick up. She also had a little silver bell, and whenever she rang it a light coloured man would appear, wearing white gloves.

On the way to Cape Town by train we'd have the fun of seeing all the relatives, and there were many of them. Ours was a very large family of brothers and sisters and cousins, first, second and third times removed. Then there were the "aangetroudes" - anyone who was even remotely attached to the family by marriage was deemed to be a relative. When the train stopped at every station someone was bound to meet us and push a present through the window. I especially remember cousin Jack and cousin Philip, because I was told they were going to be doctors some day. Some relatives we never saw, because of quarrels. Maybe someone had not been invited to a wedding. And then the feud would be as fierce and last as long as that between the Montagues and the Capulets.

Those were memorable, those journeys, memorable especially for their monotony. We'd pass the desolate wastes of the Karoo, with

its miles and miles of salt bushes and flat-topped koppies. And we'd pass the little Karoo towns, all the same, with their church spires dominating the humble dwellings. Occasionally a landmark would be pointed out to me, like the mountain called the Three Sisters. Even the foods we took with us were always the same - chicken and rolls and hard-boiled eggs, and water in a canvas bag hung in a window to keep cool. A meal in the dining saloon cost two and sixpence, which was much too expensive for us.

Muizenberg was our Mecca. This was the place to come to before the days of air travel to Europe. This was where the rich came. They built grand holiday homes on the mountainside overlooking the bay; but down below were sandy wastes, almost up to Atlantic Road and far to the North where the built-up suburb now lies. When the South Easter wind blew it would sting you, for there was no shelter except for a small wooden pavilion. But what a paradise otherwise - no surfboards, no ball games. Just stretches of unpolluted sparkling sea. Then it was back to Taungs again.

I remember no birthdays or celebrations of Jewish holidays. It is said that if a Jew lives in an environment fifty miles away from a synagogue or a Jewish cemetery his Judaism will fade; and this is what happened to my grandfather and so many others stranded in the Northern Cape, stranded in those days of unrelenting toil. I'm told that when grandfather first arrived he'd tried to keep up his religion. He closed his shop on Saturdays and even forbade his daughters to play tennis on the Sabbath. He even held services in the hotel. But after a while he became discouraged because of lack of attendance. Many years later my husband was attending a conference in Livingstone (Northern Rhodesia, as it then was), and as he had not met grandfather he stopped off the train at Taungs on the eve of the Day of Atonement. Grandfather was delighted to see him, but asked, "Why did you choose this day to spend with us?"

"Because it is Yom Kippur."

"I did not know", he replied.

A wilderness of values? Yes, perhaps of some conventional values, but then public-spirited people are often unlike the rest. As for a child coming from this background, one seemed to have had nothing, judged by ordinary standards; but what you had was endless space and endless time, before your world was structured by the city life that was to come.

Copyright

Freda Freeman