

CHOL – Community History On-Line

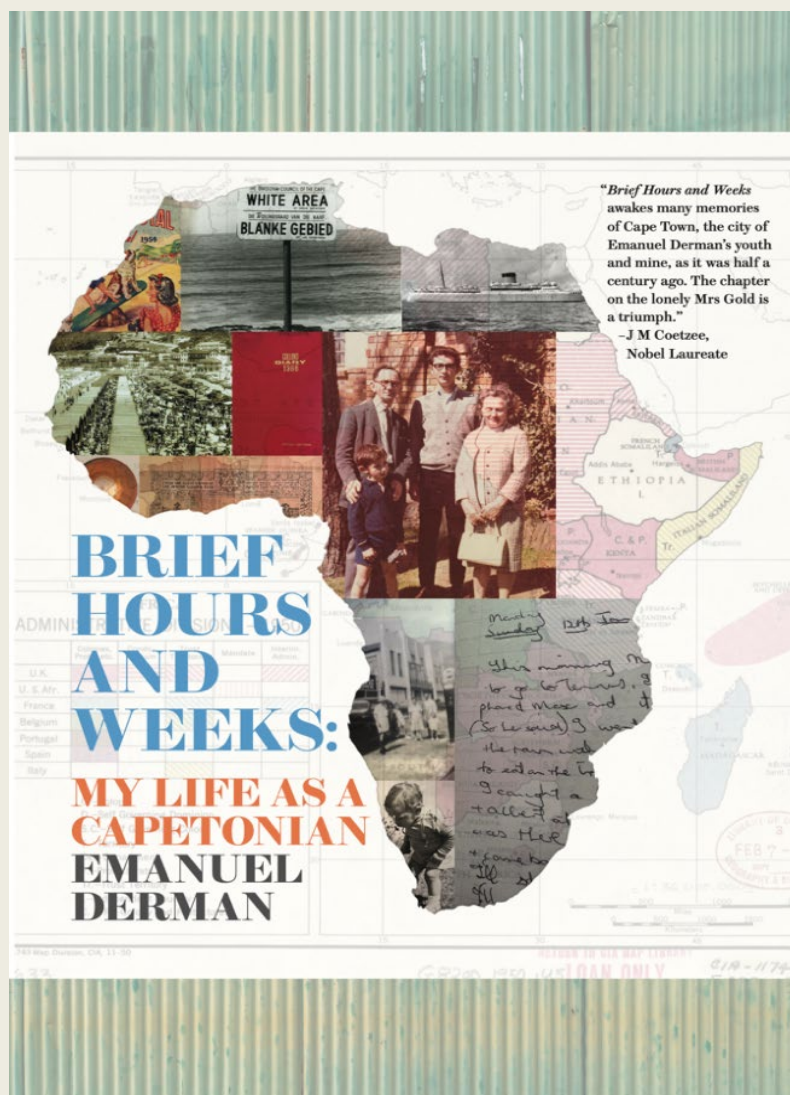
A forum for those involved in preserving the footprint of Southern African Jewish community life in digital form

Community History On-Line

Newsletter #15

February 2025

This month's Newsletter is written by **Emanuel Derman**, who shares his thoughts with us about growing up in Cape Town from his memoir which will be published in March. Emanuel has spent most of his adult life in the States. His stories and thoughts about his time in South Africa will surely ring a bell with us all and evoke similar memories of what touched him so many decades ago. Thank you, Emanuel, for sharing your experiences with us!



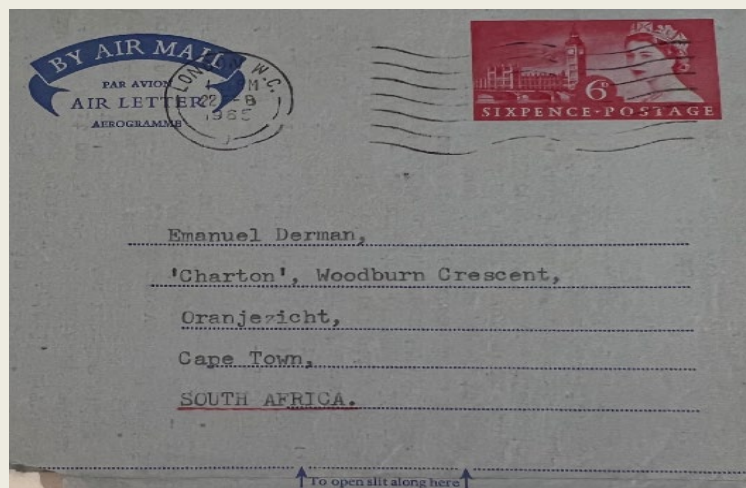
I can sum up the book I just wrote by quoting its epigraph that appears at the front of the book:

***"There are three kinds of people:
interesting people, boring people, and people you love."***

The Background

I began thinking of writing a book about growing up in Cape Town some time during the early part of the pandemic. My friends who read bits of it at that time thought I was writing it as history for my children or grandchildren, or for my own catharsis, but that wasn't the case. For better or worse, I write only if I can imagine a broader audience. Furthermore, a writer friend of mine quoted to me something James Salter said to him, which I believe to be true: *If you want to keep a secret from your children, put it in a book.*

So, a word about what I was trying to do. I spent my first 21 years in Cape Town. Shortly after my 21st birthday, I picked myself up and traveled to New York to study for a PhD in physics. I was passionate and ambitious about doing research in fundamental physics, and so, without fully knowing what I was doing or what I was letting myself in for, from an emotional point of view, I left my family and friends and Cape Town behind. I had been away from home for extended periods many times before, but never without the company of some friends. Now, in 1966, New York was unimaginably far from Cape Town in communication units, further than any place in the world is now from any other place, given email, texts, and Zoom. In 1966 the only practical way you could communicate with Cape Town was to write an aerogramme.



Younger people won't recognize that item. It took a week or ten days for the aerogramme to get to Cape Town, and a similar time waiting for an immediately written reply.

I was bitterly and achingly lonely when I got to New York, and, looking back, I am amazed that I got up and left Cape Town. If I'd known what I was in for I would never have gone. But it all turned out OK. As someone in the closing lines of the movie *The Brutalist* said (a movie I think you have to be an immigrant, and perhaps Jewish too, to appreciate): It's the destination, not the journey. So, in part I wanted to write about how I got to the point of leaving.

Second, I have a really good memory for the past. I wanted to write about childhood and youth in an immigrant Jewish family and community in Cape Town in the late 40s, 50s, and 60s. I thought of Stefan Zweig's memoir *The World of Yesterday*, and of Vladimir Nabokov's *Invitation of a Memory*. I wanted to do something similar for my yester-me, yester-you, yesterday, portray a world that was mostly gone.

Third, though my youth was filled with some of the usual sadnesses, happinesses, loves, and unrequited loves, I wanted to write about them dispassionately, in the continuous present tense. In this, I was influenced by three J. M. Coetzee books — *Boyhood*, *Youth*, and *Summertime* — marketed as novels but which seem to be novelized autobiographies. Their protagonist is John Coetzee himself. It's hard to know, and he doesn't want you to know, how much of them are fiction, since, at least in the first two, they seem to parallel his life. I wanted to write in a similar vein — autofiction as it's called — where I could deviate from exact facts. "Write the truth," as another friend told me, "not just the facts."

So, one year into the pandemic, I began to write a Substack newsletter along those lines. Starting from my earliest memories, I continued writing for about six months in 33 instalments, ending my story with my last day at home in Cape Town, just before going to what was then D. F. Malan airport.

A year or so later, I thought about turning the Substack into a book. I was hesitant because the memoir I'd written 20 years earlier, *My Life as a Quant*, recounted my traversal of the route from being an aspiring physicist to working on Wall Street, and that was a path many other people eventually took, so I was recalling a *zeitgeist* with a natural audience, But a book about my childhood in South Africa? There was a much smaller number of people who would be interested. My friends encouraged me but I felt a bit as though writing a book about my personal youth was too self-indulgent. Eventually I succumbed to the need for an audience and so now it's being published on Mar 1 2025. My publisher sent a copy to J. M. Coetzee without any request, and he replied to them with a gracious blurb which made me feel as though I hadn't been indulging myself.

Here below are some excerpts from chapters in the book, in chronological order, the way the book flows. The excerpts within each chapter are not contiguous, just isolated bits to provide a flavor. In the book itself, written in the continuous present, I used South African spelling, but that may not have survived the transcription to this newsletter.

CHAPTER 1 .SEPARATION ANXIETY

HOW CAN ONE HAVE EVERYTHING?

In daylight, a dark curtained room filled with a dark dining table. Several doors lead off it. I want to go through one of them to a bedroom on the far side but they won't let me. It must have been when we still lived on Burns Road and my father's mother, Henye Leah Dereczynski, had died, and her body was lying in that bedroom. It is 1946 and I am thirteen months old.

That was the dining table my sister Ruth was made to lie down on when they anaesthetised her and removed her tonsils. The big things happened at home in those days.

My mother's best friend, Mrs Schwartz, saved my life when I was a few weeks old. With bronchitis, a blocked nose, and a cough, I couldn't take my mother's breast. It was Mrs Schwartz, my mother says, who persisted, who encouraged my mother, who fed me with a teaspoon. So here I am.

... IT'S THE WOMEN WHO COMFORT ME



Marie, the Coloured maid who lives with us, looks after me when my mother is away. She has her own son, Joseph, older than me, who sometimes lives with us too, and a mother called Sophie. Marie takes me for a walk beside the park. I have just had my fingernails cut, and I run my newly bare fingertips over the sinusoidal bump bump bump of the dusty green corrugated iron fence. It's a strange pleasurable sensation to have the now raw ends of my fingers bounce and throb over the metal. My fingers turn a little green and grey from the dust. Marie quickly scolds me for getting my hands dirty and wipes them clean. She is too strict with me. My sisters want her to let me be more of a boy instead of a flower-smeller.



Marie looks after me a lot. She is let go soon, perhaps for stealing, and I'm told years later that I missed her, though I don't remember that part nor who came after her. Did her strictness and her early disappearance affect my character, add to my anxiety? ...

When my parents go to bioscope in town on a Saturday night, I often wake up before they come home and cry for my mother. Ruth sings me a song she made up, one with infinite verses:

...

Mommy and Daddy are leaving the film, coming home to Emanuel
Mommy and Daddy are walking to the car, coming home to Emanuel
Mommy and Daddy are starting the car, ready to come to Emanuel
Mommy and Daddy are driving back home, coming home to Emanuel
Mommy and Daddy are stopping at the shop, to buy sweets for Emanuel
Mommy and Daddy are driving again, on their way home to Emanuel

and so she continues until I fall asleep, or they arrive.

IT'S MY FATHER WHO PLAYS WITH ME



I don't think my mother ever entertains me. My father carries me on his back, tells me Bible stories. At bedtime I am allowed to choose the long version or the short version. He plays *putch* (Yiddish for "slap"), in which he rests his hands on mine and I try to flip my hands and slap his before he can remove them. He lets me pretend to be a doctor and examine him. I still have a miniature 78 rpm record, recorded in a kiosk on the English-style boardwalk in the seaside resort of Muizenberg, a South-African-Jewish Blackpool. He takes me into the little booth and has me sing Hebrew songs which the kiosk proprietor records with a needle in a long-engraved spiral on a small dark brown vinyl-coated tin plate. I am singing serious stuff, The WWII Jewish Partisan's Song in Hebrew, and *K'shenamut*, a tuneful Zionist plea to be buried in the wine cellars of Rishon LeZion when we die. My father, in his heavy foreign accent that embarrasses me throughout my childhood, can be heard periodically prompting me on the vinyl when I hesitate in the middle of a song. Some days he takes me into the camera obscura on the elevated promenade above the beach where, in the dim darkness, you see projected on the table the moving images of people strolling outside ...

LIKES, NEEDS, FEARS AND GUILTS

On a family outing to The Gay Adventure ice cream parlour in Lakeside I am greedy and insist on two helpings of ice cream before eating one, and then cannot eat the second. After that, Ruth periodically teases me: Remember the ice cream at The Gay Adventure! And I am periodically shown the print we have at home of a little boy with two pieces of cake, one in each hand, looking perplexed and saying "If only I had two *moufs*!" The teasing rankles. I remember it



Perhaps they see something in me that I am not yet aware of, a wanting more than is possible and imagining I can have it, an inability to compromise. Later in life I have the deluded feeling that I have no limits, that I can be better than anybody at almost anything, by natural ability. (I could probably be a really good miler!) Perhaps I have been overly praised?

There are so many dichotomies: pleasing oneself vs. pleasing others, growing up vs. staying a child, the independence of loneliness vs. the comfort of the group, domesticity vs. excitement, dangerous eroticism vs. duller safety. How can one have everything?

CHAPTER 2. PROST OR EIDEL

My mother's name in Cape Town is Sonia. She was Sara Sapirsztejnówna in Polish, Chaye Sara in Yiddish or Hebrew. In school in Poland other girls teased her by singing "Mała żydowska Chayka gra na bałalajce," *Little Jewish Chayka Plays the Balalaika*.



... *EIDELKEIT*

More than any other quality, my mother cares about *eidelkeit*, Yiddish for "refinement." She looks down on vulgarity and commonness, as does my father. The worst thing to say about a non-evil person is that they are *prost*, Polish-Yiddish for vulgar. She also looks down on people with insufficient education. But, to be fair, she recognises that uneducated people can be *eidel* too. One can be *eidel* by nature.

We, I deduce from many remarks about others, are *eidel*. Why, I wonder later, is *prostness* such a big deal to my immigrant parents, such a demarcator of people? Vulgarity is a big deal to my grown sisters too. Is it [the narcissism of small differences](#) among competitive immigrants? Were we really *eidel*? My sisters believe so, firmly and proudly. My mother, I decide, really was *eidel*. The rest of us, I'm really not sure.

CHAPTER 3. COLOUREDS, WHITES, GENTILES AND JEWS



A VISIT TO ISRAEL

... In Israel it is the famously cold winter of 1949–50. We live with my aunt Naomi and her ginger-haired husband Chanina in Ramat Gan on Rechov Herzl in their small flat. We've never seen snow in South Africa, so Shulamit, now sixteen or seventeen, heads off to the heights of Jerusalem, hoping to see the snow that has been forecast. Instead, it snows right where we are, on the coast in Tel Aviv, and we all wear pyjamas underneath our clothes for warmth. Ruth has photos of us in front of the snowman we build, our pyjama bottoms and tops peeping out.

Food is scarce after both World War II and the War of Independence, and my aunt Yafa takes me to a coupon bureau where she pleads for the right to get me an extra banana.



People give me rooster-shaped red lollipops, which I now realise must have originated in Russia. We eat corn on the cob that street vendors fish out of steaming barrels of hot water on dark street corners. In nearby fruit orchards, Ruth, my cousin Shaul, and I steal a few grapefruit from a tree and run away. We peel them like oranges and are disappointed at their sourness.

I get a toy tank with treads and a friction motor which I push back and forth on the sociable balcony that all Israeli apartments have.

I get an old-fashioned metal spark gun with flint inside that fires sparkling tracers when you pull the trigger.



One afternoon some friends of my parents take us for a sight-seeing drive away from Ramat Gan and Tel Aviv. Somewhere along the way, I hear one of them point out a nearby jail.

“But why is there a jail here?” I ask from the back seat. “Isn’t everyone Jewish?”

CHAPTER 4. DEATH, GIRLS, SONGS

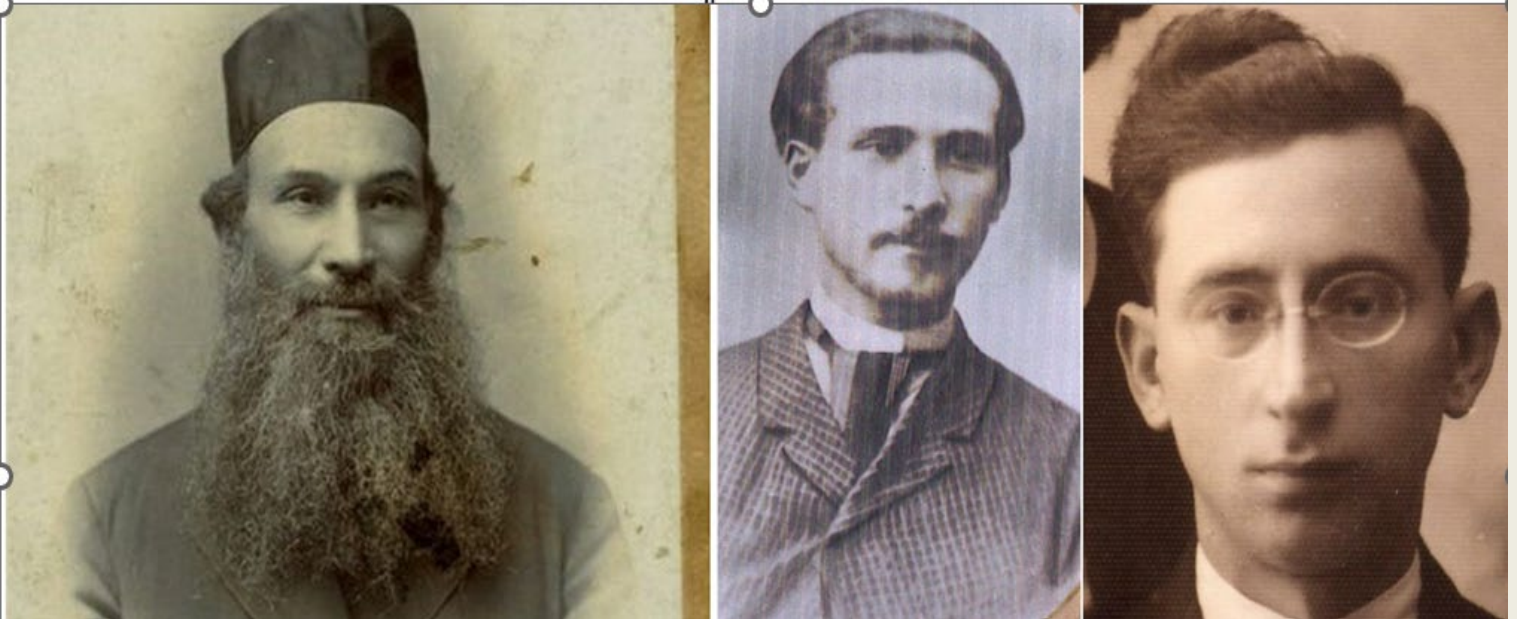
THE POWER OF ROMANCE

At home my mother sings cheerful-sad WWII songs: *Wish me luck as you wave me goodbye, Cheerio here I go on my way, Give me a smile I can keep for a while in my heart while I'm away.* Ruth listens to the upbeat, carefree pre-rock American pop music that has swept the world. Ruth plays the piano well and practices hard. Her music teacher, severe Mrs Dober, feels free to rap her knuckles with a little bamboo stick. It's allowed.

Ruth has classical records, including Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto in D, Op. 35, which requires playing many successive extra-large 12-inch 78 rpm vinyl records, a few minutes on each side, in order to capture the whole interrupted concerto

Our maid, though, listens to Nat King Cole and sings his songs about romance. I learn to croon *They try to tell us we're too young, too young to really be in love*, which brings me welcome attention from adults. A few years later, our new maid throws her entire soul into *Unchained Melody*. I'm not sure how, but very early in life, I grasp from them something about love's power and danger.

CHAPTER 5. 'FOR THIS I DIDN'T COME TO SOUTH AFRICA'



...

Lt -Rt: Eliyahu Moshe Dereczynski, born 1840 in Slonim; died 1912

Menachem Mendel Dereczynski, born 1866; died 1912

Chaim Dereczynski, born 1902 in Slonim; died 1985

My father's name is Chaim in any country or language, stubbornly the same in English, Polish, and Hebrew, as I see on my parents' wedding certificate and on his tombstone.

On his arrival in Cape Town in 1934 my father's mother arranged for him to work in a butcher shop with his younger brother Ephraim in Retreat, a run-down dangerous shabby suburb, really just a bare Main Road surrounded on both sides by sand dunes on which poor Cape Coloured people live in scattered corrugated-iron shanties. "For this, I didn't come to South Africa," he told his mother in Yiddish after a few days, and proceeded to set up his own garage. My uncle Ephraim still lives out there near Retreat, in Jewish suburban beach-side Muizenberg, and continues to run the butcher shop. As a child, I often spend a few days in summer with Uncle Ephraim and Aunt Jeanette, and I play with my cousin Ronnie. Sometimes we visit the butcher shop, and Ronnie shows me the revolver his father keeps in the drawer under the serving counter. Coloured people who have no running water walk across the dunes to the shop to fill a bucket with water and then schlep it back to their shanty. ...

CHAPTER 6. 'CHARTON', WOODBURN CRESCENT, ORANJEZICHT CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA, THE WORLD, THE SOLAR SYSTEM, THE UNIVERSE

... I have a more fluid existence in our new house. In Salt River, I never had a street or outdoor life. Here there are enough lawns in our garden to improvise a rope between a pine tree and a hedge and then practise high jump. One lawn is long enough to bowl cricket balls. There are secret places where you can hide and not be seen from the house. After the rain, the drops of water dripping off the thick leaves of cactus-y plants smell richly pure, and my cousin Leopold and I convince each other it's an anaesthetic we can use to put adults to sleep. When it's warmer, the pine trees all around the house let loose, from their hand-grenade cones on high, bursts of individual pine nuts in their hard dark powdery shells. You can hear them fall. Friends come over to search for the *dennepits* on the grass lawns or on the gravel paths between, collect them, crack them open on our cement garage roof with a small stone, and eat the pignola inside. They're a free luxury. Some of us first collect a whole bunch, thirty or forty, then take them to the top of the garage, crack them one by one without giving in to temptation, and then finally stuff a whole handful of the kernels into the mouth. Others, myself among them, crack them as we find them, eating one after the other.

... My mother won't pay to buy me Fair Isle sweaters like those my cousins have. She knits her own version for me and it's just as good. She sews her own dresses that people admire. She has a Singer sewing machine, with a treadle, that she can expertly use. She knows how to fix its insides when the spools of cotton thread tangle. She embroiders beautiful tablecloths with cross-stitching. She crochets. She sews me a pair of summer shorts from cotton when I am eight, which are both too tight and too loose. Once I decide to wear them without underpants and my testicle protrudes through one leg of the shorts. That is her only failure.



CHAPTER 8. IN THE 'HOOD

...THE MAIDS OF THE FLATS

Every flat in the block opposite us has a Coloured maid and comes with a single maid's room on the ground floor at the back of the block where the maids live. A maid's work is never done: they make breakfast, make lunch, make dinner, can be called back late at night to clean up after a dinner with guests. Only in the backyard are they out from under anyone's thumb. There, we see and hear the maids' lively social lives with each other and their boyfriends after work at night. They keep their doors open and shout out to each other. They treat us kids like equals, exposing us to activities our parents would never talk about. Sometimes they tell us too much too soon. One of them points us to the discarded used condoms lying in the overgrown grass field at the side of the flats.

...IMMORALITY ACTS VIOLATORS



On Sunday mornings my father brings me the comic section of the *Cape Times* in bed so I can read the adventures of Brick Bradford and his Time Top. One morning on the front page of the main section is a story about Mr Berlin, the father of the two boys, a grey-haired rotund man. A lawyer in his forties, he was found on the floor of his town office with a young Black woman, a consummation that is illegal under the 1957 *Immorality Act*, the Nationalist government law that forbids intercourse between whites and non-whites. His doctor testifies that he had prescribed pills for Mr Berlin's heart condition. Was the Black woman also doing it because of the side effects of a medicine she had been given? I don't recall what sentence, if any, either of them received.

CHAPTER 9. THE ISLE OF CAPRI

I do like girls, but all I want is for them to like me back, **a lot**. *Dayenu*.

In Montagu I like to hang out with the older kids. One of them is a girl who is also on vacation there the year I turn ten. She is twelve or thirteen, older, dark, vivacious. Her name is Rosa Ladny, from Sea Point in Cape Town. I've never known a girl with such a euphonious name – Rosa – before. She tosses her head and hair scornfully when she replies to boys' questions. Her mother is solidly built and has an acned face; her father is nondescript. The Ladnys are younger than my parents and walk together in an affectionate, almost sexy way that makes me think. Rosa's brother, a bit younger than me, is called Ivan. My mother remarks disparagingly on the name Ivan: it's a Russian peasant name, and why did they give a Jewish boy a Russian peasant name? But I am attracted to Rosa with the flashing eyes and dark looks. I follow her around sometimes and try to get her attention. My father, who babies and embarrasses me with his accent, repeatedly brings me fruit to eat while I am outdoors with the other boys and girls. "My father doesn't run after *me* to bring *me* an apple in the middle of the day!" says Rosa scornfully. Ask not for whom the bell tolls.

There is a red-haired, red-freckled girl called Louise, more my age, that I am friendly with. She comes from some smaller town, not the big city, but her family is spending a week in Montagu at The Baths too. My mother, who, like me, has heard my sister Shulamit's Eartha Kitt record played repeatedly, teases me about Louise by singing the slightly altered words of *Hey Jacque*:

*Hey, Jacque –
Have you seen Louise?
Is she still in Par-ee?*

One afternoon, when everyone is playing outside, I need to go to the toilet. I walk to one of the WC's at the end of the long outdoor corridor of rooms on the ground level, but it's occupied. Not to worry. A separate room with a bathtub is right next door, and it's empty. I enter, lock the door, urinate in the bathtub and then run the tap to clean it. When I emerge, Louise's mother is right outside and knows immediately that I have not been taking a bath. I am reprimanded.

I don't really care. My love for Louise is merely platonic. My love for Rosa is visceral, but nevertheless pure. I just want her to like me, **a lot**.

CHAPTER 12. SUMMERTIME

Everyone (white and Jewish) from the southern part of Africa migrates south to summer in Muizenberg for a few weeks. The richer visitors from Johannesburg go to The Balmoral, named after you-know-who's castle. It's fancier, more regal, and more English than The Queens where we go. Rhodesians also come to Muizenberg, but with their better British-sounding accents, they stay at Rhodesia By The Sea. My crowd is wary of the Johannesburgers. The local girls know that the boys from Johannesburg, the big city, are faster than those from Cape Town. Some of them like that.



In the Snake Pit, when I'm ten or eleven, the really cool boys and girls wear thin gold or silver chains with Stars of David around their necks. There is something sexy and shameless and insincere about their wearing the symbol. Still, I want one too, I want that look, but my sisters think it's *prost*, and I know I cannot embarrass myself by asking for one. Some other boys and girls wear silver-linked "identification bracelets" engraved with their name, which they swap to show they are "cased," going steady. I am years away from that, and anyway, the bracelets have a touch of *prostness* too.

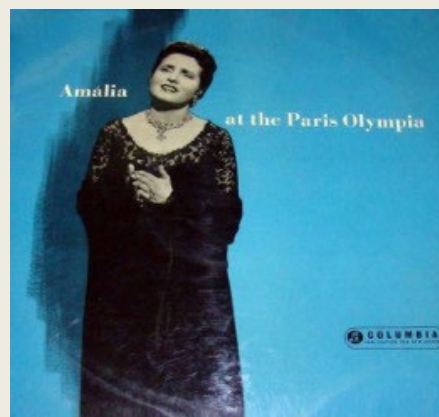
CHAPTER 13. SCHOOL'S OUT

I get *Tiger*, a weekly magazine from England, full of boys' sports adventures. But one of the girls in my neighbourhood, Sandra, subscribes to *Girls' Crystal*, the girls' equivalent of *Tiger*, mailed weekly from England. She lends me one and I become absorbed in one of the adventures in that issue, to be continued, and ask my mother and father to get me a surreptitious subscription. I don't want anyone to see *Girls' Crystal* lying around if they come to our house.



CHAPTER 14. LA VIE EN ROSE

JULIETTE GRECO, EDITH PIAF, EARTHA KITT, AMALIA SINGING
FADO AT THE OLYMPIA



Ten years old in 1955, I am too young for these songs, but I am opened up to them when my sister Shulamit returns from abroad.

She brings back with her the exotic cultural accoutrements of burgeoning European and Israeli life: Eartha Kitt records, Amalia singing fado at the Olympia, avocado dip (which I much later discover is called *guacamole*), *hummus*, *tahina*, espresso, steak which she broils bloody in the toaster oven (I hate the *żyła*, as my parents call it, Yiddish-Polish for the sinewy part of the meat).

And simultaneously, Cape Town begins to sprout pizzerias, gelaterias, Italian trattorias and Italian films that Shulamit and her friends go to. She is a social worker at Child Life in Queen Victoria Street not far from the centre of town. After work ends at 5 pm, she meets her friends at the Negrita coffee shop – such a sophisticated name – in nearby St George’s Street. Sometimes she takes me along. Years later when I visit Nice and see the Hotel Le Negresco on the Promenade des Anglais, with its pink dome allegedly inspired by the breast of the architect’s mistress, I think of the Negrita. At the Negrita they smoke and talk and drink espressos and eat toasted sandwiches. That’s the life I aspire to.



Hotel Negresco -Nice

By 1970 when I am married and living in New York and struggling through my PhD, my mother in Cape Town doesn’t feel well. Her arms are weak, she says, she has trouble lifting them. Shulamit and Ruth are passionate about my mother and father, and passionately anxious. They take her from doctor to doctor. One neurologist – I have the typewritten letter – writes a sarcastic report back to our general practitioner, Dr Berelowitz, that there is nothing physiological about my mother’s feeling of weakness, and that the cure would be to have *her daughters* get psychiatric therapy.

But eventually, after no success with either diagnosing or eliminating her weakness, my mother does see a psychiatrist, and it is he, the engineer of souls, who recognises the truth about her material body, and sends her for nerve conduction tests, which confirm *ALS*. This is the bell that tolls for Shulamit and Ruth, who frantically look after her for years as she deteriorates, as she first loses the use of her arms, then her legs, until eventually she has trouble swallowing and keeping her neck upright. It takes nine years to culminate.

CHAPTER 20. EIPHANIES

When my friends and I read *Atlas Shrugged*, we think it's a subversively leftwing book. The South African political spectrum skews many degrees to the right. Books and people get banned. There is no TV (for if there were all the material would be from England or America, in English, too liberal for the pro-apartheid Nationalist Party). The degree of the country's rightward shift and attitudinal distortion is what makes us fail to grasp that *Atlas Shrugged* is not a leftwing book. The libertarian individualism of the novel's characters reminds us of the South African Liberal Party which seeks political rights for everyone independent of colour. Their slogan is "One man, one vote," which sounds vaguely Randian.

LIBERAL

When I am at UCT, *liberal* is a very good word.

One day one of the liberal politicians rebukes the avowedly "conservative" Nationalist pro-apartheid government that has increasingly instituted arbitrary detention laws:

You call yourselves conservative but we are the actual conservatives, preserving the democratic customs of the past. It's you that are the radicals.

CHAPTER 21. TIME'S FOOL

Working at Jagers during the university summer holidays is a bit of a pose for me. I have taken the job in part because summer work is what self-respect and respect from other students at varsity requires. It's a real job, if only for six weeks until Christmas. I work from 8:30 until 5:00 on weekdays and then 8:30 to 1:00 on Saturdays. I earn £8 a week..

I don't mix with many people there. There is one boy I know from high school, a couple of years older than me. There is a Sephardic woman in charge of customer receipts, about 35 or even a bit older. She is a recent arrival, having fled the upheavals in the Belgian Congo. Manning the chute and the bins with me is Tokkie, a Coloured young man about my age, but already able to fend for himself. Tokkie is experienced, is a source of condoms for the white boys – he isn't afraid to ask for them at the chemist, and he resells them at a small profit to his clientele.

At the Jagers Christmas party at 4 pm one Friday we have music and refreshments. I dance a bit with some of the Afrikaner girls working there. At some point I ask Mrs Azoulay to dance, and

she accepts. We dance very formally even though the music is mostly pop and rock and roll. We foxtrot to Frank Sinatra, her arm on my shoulder, mine around her back. She's a lot shorter than me, curved and full in the way girls aren't, has pretty, even teeth. She shows her gums slightly when she smiles.

One day the following week I leave Jagers at 5 pm and decide to walk home. I head up St George's Street towards the Gardens and there in front of me is Mrs Azoulay going in the same direction ...

CHAPTER 23. THE CULT AND I

Between the ages of 17 and 21 I too am a member of a (well-intentioned but unintrospectively powerful) sort of cult: the *Shomrim* (*The Guards* in Hebrew), the most senior age group of *Habonim* (*The Builders*), the Jewish, aspirationally Zionist and Socialist-inspired youth movement I've mentioned many times earlier. We call it *the movement*. On Sunday mornings, as a *Madrach*, a group leader, I wear a derivative boy-scout uniform consisting of short khaki pants, a khaki shirt, long khaki socks, and a scarf folded into a triangle, rolled up and decoratively tied around the neck and held in place by a braided leather *woggle* – an atavistic Boer War uniform we still wear in the early 1960s.



There is an unwritten prejudice against girls wearing makeup. We are supposed to sanctimoniously look down on bourgeois social life and its ambitions. The highest aspiration is to upend the traditionally 19th century Jewish social structure of labor, which, we are taught, was an unfortunately inverted triangle, its top disproportionately heavy with professionals and brainworkers and its bottom too light with the agricultural and manual labourers that should have provided a stable societal base. There should be more workers and fewer *luftmenschen*. Labor is noble. The best thing you can do is emigrate to Israel, live on a kibbutz, and earn your keep by manual labor in a communal setting. On some kibbutzim the children are brought up communally,

sleeping in a children's unit apart from their parents. Some young men of my generation in South African *Habonim* choose to become fitters and turners or plumbers rather than go to university. For several years the movement runs a *Hachsharah* (preparation camp), a communal kibbutz-style farm within South Africa where you can live and learn agricultural skills to prepare for kibbutz life.

CHAPTER 25. THE RED AND THE BLACK



**Odalisque couchée aux magnolias.
Henri Matisse (1869-1954)**

I like her and I can see she likes me. I take what I can: the flattery of being taken seriously, the surreptitious glances at her incipiently vulnerable body, the beginning-to-get-heavy contours of her face, the full figure and legs, the slow curvaceous walk when she's relaxed, the index finger impatiently tapping on the cigarette to knock off ash, the sticky red imprint of her lips on the end of the cork filter, a glimpse of a slip between two buttons of the pink housecoat, the way she leans over to touch my arm, intimate and casual when she wants me to refocus my attention on some new question.

CHAPTER 26. DISTANT DRUMS

*Dim drums throbbing, in the hills half heard,
Where only on a nameless throne a crownless prince has stirred,
Where, risen from a doubtful seat and half attained stall,
The last knight of Europe takes weapons from the wall,
The last and lingering troubadour to whom the bird has sung,
That once went singing southward when all the world was young,
In that enormous silence, tiny and unafraid,
Comes up along a winding road the noise of the Crusade.*

from Lepanto by G. K. Chesterton

Somewhere during my third year at UCT, while majoring in Physics and Applied Maths, I begin to detect the sound of distant drums. There are universities in England and America where serious people go to do advanced physics. (Yes, we say “to do” physics, not “to study” physics. Physics is a vocation.) People I know have pulled up stakes and gone abroad to get a PhD, people serious and ambitious and willing to leave home even though they don’t have to. They want to do something wonderful.

CHAPTER 28. ALL THE LEAVES ARE BROWN

The last few nights before I leave South Africa my parents have at-homes where anyone can drop in.

Uncles, aunts, cousins, friends come by. We take some last group photos.

I'm the last child at home. My parents will be alone now in the big empty house. I tell them they should join a sports club and take up lawn bowls for social life as many people their age do, but I know that it's not their style.



One last photo and the next morning I'm gone.