

Memories of Life in South Africa by Mike Zaslansky

My earliest memories from Bloemfontein, South Africa where I was born, are of clear and bright things. The clinic where I had my tonsils and adenoids out when I was about 3 years old, was a bright and colorful place. I clearly remember hiding under the steps at the entrance to the clinic and the chloroform that put me to sleep. I remember circles going round and round above my head and then I woke up. There was a lace curtain next to the window blowing gently over my head in the breeze from the window...

Then the memory of the kindergarten when I was 3 or 4 years old. Here I caused a fuss when I pulled out a stool from under a child who was sitting on it and the stool broke. I never admitted that it was me. Why did I do it? I did it because others were doing it. There were not enough chairs for all of us or maybe because it was a game, but I was found out. I imagine the *ganenet** knew all along it was me. I remember her making me feel very bad for not standing up and admitting my guilt.

I remember trying to teach our cat to walk backwards by pulling it by the tail (and when the cat died, I tried to make it stand up but it was stiff and kept falling over)

South Africa, then, was a country of red and brown, the people, and the land. Winters were bright and dry and cold; summers were clean and wet. We grew up in a small town and had live-in black servants, and our house had electric wires on the walls because it had originally been built before electricity was available and was added afterwards...

After a stint in East London, we moved to Ladybrand in the Orange Free State. Ladybrand was cold in winter. The water pipes burst from the cold. We could see the nearby Maluti Mountains in Basutoland. The blacks who came from there had the most beautiful colored blankets which warmed us by just looking at them. Of the kids who came to my school, some were barefoot, some were on bikes and some on horses. I asked my mom if I could go barefoot (like they did), but she did not agree.

At the age of seven, the family moved to Cathcart into an old double story house near the entrance/exit from the town. Here we had an outdoors toilet in the backyard, (the toilet was really a big bucket under a wooden seat in a small closed shed). It did not flush, of course, and there was a "night cart" that used to come and empty the 'you know what', twice a week.

Our roads were not tarred, and in the fields there were *dongas*, holes in the ground caused by washaways from the rain. There was no TV of course, but we had lots of things to do. We were never bored.

We had great big radios called "wirelesses" because they could move sound and speech without wires. They worked with something called valves (little globes – that took a long time to warm up before the wireless would work). There were programs specially for kids like 'Superman'. He used to say "Up, up and away" as he took off and we kids repeated the magic words, but they never worked for us! We had Tarzan at a quarter to six every evening. He was brought to us by Jungle Oats, and we would all sing "If you wanna start your day in an energetic way eat oats, Jungle oats, get more energy for work and more energy for play with oats, Jungle oats.... Jungle, Jungle, Jungle, you get energy with oats, oats, oats !"

I remember happy things, like playing with Meccano games and collecting tadpoles in the pools in the fields.

Haircuts were always a problem. My brother Joss sat with me in the bath and my dad giving us a haircut or maybe it was my mom. I hated the itchy feeling after a haircut and hated going to the barber. I remember Joss being bribed with an ice cream to make him sit still on the barber's chair.

But most important of all, I remember how big and clean everything was.

We knew even then that as Jews we were different from the others. We were never religious, but we did not ride or write on Shabbat, and we never ate meat and milk together. As for going to shul, I don't remember ever going to shul in Ladybrand. And when we lived in Cathcart we used to go to a nearby town called Queenstown for the High Holidays. And before Pesach we used to order matza and store them for weeks so that we would have enough to keep us going over the *hag*. It is a funny thing, we were not *dati*** at all, but we did want to show the world we lived in a way that was different. So we kept far more of the laws than we would have done had we grown up in Israel, or amongst other Jews. Strange.

I remember on one of our visits to Queenstown, my parents were having tea with some friends of theirs. The friends had children, and we were 'sent to play' with them. Now - being sent to play with other kids did not mean that you actually had to play with them - or that it was even expected of you. It just meant that you had to get out of their way. This family had kids who were about the same age as we were and one of them (a sweet little girl) came up to me and said, absolutely seriously, "Are you Jews or Arabs?" She was not even aware that there were human beings who were neither Jewish nor Arab. This just goes to show how much the Jews in South Africa followed what was happening in Israel and identified with it, even then.....

When I got my first bicycle during the week, it rained cats and dogs every day after that. There was no hope of riding it. As you can imagine, it was very difficult to sit indoors and look at a brand-new bicycle, dying to be ridden, and me, dying to ride. As luck would have it, Saturday dawned, clear and beautiful, fresh and clean, warm and bright. But Saturday was Saturday, so no matter how beautiful the weather, the law was the law, and the bicycle could not be ridden.

My youngest brother Solly was born in the Cathcart Cottage hospital and when my dad came home from taking my mom to the maternity section, he told me it was going to be a long time before the baby was born and so he was going out to meet some friends. Shortly after he left, I

got a call from the hospital to ask where he was – my mom had gone into labor. I remember all I had to do (and did) was turn the handle on the phone (it was called a party line) and ask the operator to please find my dad and tell him to go to the hospital because my mom was giving birth.

After Cathcart and when I had to prepare for my barmitzvah, we moved to Johannesburg. Here I finished my primary school years at the Jewish government school and then went on to Athlone Boys High. When I was 17, I was lucky to land a job as a disk jockey on a radio program. The program used to air on Monday evenings at five and this meant that I had to go in to Broadcast House in Johannesburg on Saturday mornings and choose records from their record library to play for when we were on the air.

As the name of the program indicates, 'Of Cabbages and Kings', all kinds of people were invited to be on the air and I particularly remember the host of the program (whose name escapes me now), but not the fact that he was a well-known radio announcer famous for the budgie on his shoulder. We also attracted the presence of a Royal Canadian Mounted Policeman (a "Mountie") who brought a never ending supply of stories to our program and an attractive hostess from a shipping line that used to ply between South Africa and South America when she was in South Africa.

Our program catered to youngsters who were invited to take part in a weekly quiz competition where questions like: 'What is the capital of?', were posed and the listeners asked to send in answers on a postcard. We would then draw a postcard from a hat and announce the winner for the week. After a couple of weeks, we realized that the same five people were sending in answers every week so we would "choose" a winner to give all the contestants a chance at winning!

On one occasion after we finished our show, the Mountie suggested we all go for a drink together. He had his eye on some lady who had appeared on the show that night and he suggested I go with the hostess from the shipping line. This idea may have attracted me when I was a little older, but at the time, with two rands in my pocket to pay for drinks, I asked to be excused. His response rings to this day; "Sonny, do you want to teach or be taught?!"

After qualifying as a lawyer, I used to love spending my Saturdays in the family shop helping to serve customers. By the shop, I mean *Feigels*, the deli that my mom opened as a business for herself and for Joss and for Pats for when they would return from volunteering in kibbutzim in the Six Day War. It was here that I once saw fish flying through the air.

A Jewish woman had come in and went to the refrigerator where she took out a packet of fish which she brought to the counter and handed to Joss.

Looking at the price on the packet, she said, 'you have made a mistake, that fish sells for ??? at Checkers'....

Without saying a word and as though it were a boomerang, Joss sent the fish flying back into the fridge as he said to the woman 'So go to Checkers and buy it there'

She replied, 'but they are closed...'

'Aha exactly!' said Joss, taking her money.

I was at the shop one Saturday when I saw Joss leave the counter and sit down on the pavement holding his hands over his ears. And then I heard Pats yelling at a yenta who had taken a loaf of bread out of the bread bin and pushed her finger into it to see how fresh it was...

'And who do you think if going to buy that bread now??', she asked making all the heads in the shop turn and look...

'YOU ARE!', she ended with a flourish.

Our little dog used to love climbing all over me when I got back from the shop all covered in kosher meat smells. She loved them.

Then there was the look on the face of the black customer who came in one day to buy smoked beef and when I pointed out that our beef was expensive because it was kosher and that he could buy smoked beef at the Greek shop across the road, he replied, ' I have been a driver for Balkinds for ten years, I cannot eat their *hazzarei* anymore!

Our stories were different when we came to Israel in 1971.

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\*ganenet – nursery school teacher

\*\* dati - religious

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