

My Birth by Harry Friedland

I was born at 4.45 p.m. on Tuesday 31 August 1954 at the government maternity home in Mowbray, Cape.

I had this old English children's rhyme in my favour;

"Monday's child is fair of face,
 Tuesday's child is full of grace.
 Wednesday's child is full of woe,
 Thursday's child has far to go.
 Friday's child is loving and giving,
 Saturday's child works hard for a living.
 But the child that is born on Sabbath day,
 Is bonny and blithe, good and gay."[\[1\]](#)

South Africa was very much part of the British Empire, and therefore the Commonwealth, and apparently still tingling with excitement from the Royal Family visit in 1947:

"King George VI and Queen Elizabeth and their two daughters, Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret, visited South Africa amid great fanfare. During a radio broadcast to the Commonwealth on her 21st birthday, which she celebrated in South Africa, the future Queen Elizabeth II stated: "I declare before you all that my whole life, whether it be long or short, shall be devoted to your service and the service of our great imperial family to which we all belong."

Ja well no fine.

4.45 p.m. was a good time to be born because the day shift nurses weren't yet too tired to focus, but well into the rhythm of the day. They would only go off duty at 6.00. The nurses in the labour ward were a bit special and they either already had or would shortly receive a green bar on their epaulettes, signifying their rank. Maternity nurses are not to be trifled with.

I remember on one occasion, during the birth of my own daughter at that same hospital in 1983, when I witnessed a line of pregnant mothers in the corridor outside the delivery rooms: the nurses had ordered them to walk, in spite of their growing birth-pains, because apparently it's a healthy thing to do while waiting for the baby to arrive. Some of them were in quite a lot of pain, and one or two of them were leaning against the passage walls, moaning softly to themselves, with anxious husbands

hanging solicitously onto their elbows. A senior nurse, obviously as much in charge as a sergeant major on a parade ground, stepped out into the corridor, surveyed the scene, and then yelled to the women generally, “You will WALK! You walk until it falls out!”

Giving birth, or indeed watching the process, is not for the faint-hearted.

Mowbray Maternity Home worked like a well-oiled machine and I dare say that all the best babies were born there. It only had one drawback. It was very close to the Southern Suburbs railway commuter line and although the good old SA Railways ran with British punctuality and efficiency, railways were bloody noisy in those days – a drawback which was downplayed in light of its positive aspects. The trains were hauled by great powerful 90 ton (I’m not joking!) locomotives, the coaches were heavy and the trains were long. And in addition, the rails were not welded together as they are in many modern countries today – they were bolted together with spaces between them to allow for expansion and contraction. Every set of wheels was mounted on a double bogey, so every coach rode on eight heavy steel wheels, which made for plenty of noise. Modern trains in the First World are much lighter and virtually silent by comparison.

So at 4.45 p.m. on Tuesday 31 August 1954, as my mother, purple-faced, sweating and grunting, with her legs spread and her feet in stirrups, ejected me into a cold indifferent world, bellowing out one last cry of pain and relief, and there I was, puny, crushed by a rough passage, naked and gasping for air.

The usual, in other words.

But my mother’s voice and the voices of encouragement coming from the nurses, and that of myself, over which I had as yet no control, were all drowned out under the wheels of that mighty metal beast, unseen but not unheard, as the 4.45 all-stations afternoon special thundered over the open railway crossing at the top of Klipfontein Road.

I was bloody furious at having been pushed out of my warm, comfy, safe little space inside an animal which I would shortly come to know as “Mama”. I intended to notify the authorities about this monstrous injustice, and indeed I would spend my adult years notifying the authorities about many alleged injustices. I would come to know and love the sights and sounds of those great trains, and if my as-yet unfocused eyes could have worked I would have caught a glimpse through the delivery-room window, of a glorious early Spring sun setting over the Swartrivier (Black River). At

that time the view would not yet have been impeded by the complex system of roads and freeways, the N2 and the M5, with their complex bridges and clover-leaf interchanges which still lay somewhere in the future.

For a new-born baby, the world awaits.

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