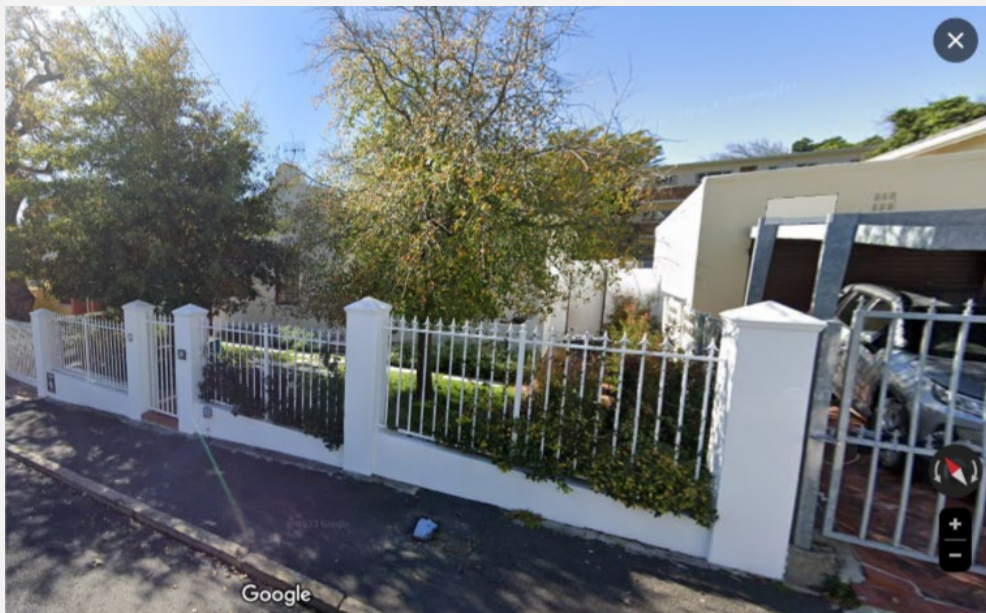


## Swastika Cookies by Harry Friedland

Between the years 1959 and 1967 we lived in Sophia Street, a quiet little street in the Gardens, Cape Town. The houses lining the East side of the street were all similar, typical single-story 4 or 5-roomed homes of the style often simply labelled as “pre-war”, free-standing houses with wooden sash windows, a single-car garage on the one side and a lane to the backyard on the other side; small garden in front; big garden at the back. The houses on either side of us were identical to ours and in all the time that we were there none of the houses changed hands.

The opposite side of the road was lined with small semi-detached houses and also a few modest two-storey blocks of flats – very plain and “pre-war” in style.



Credit: Google maps

It was a very modest, quiet neighbourhood. My school, Herzlia, was less than a kilometre uphill from my home and it took me about twenty minutes to walk there. Our shul, “Vredehoek Shul” was even closer - about fifteen minutes downhill from our house. There was at least one Jewish family in each block of flats and every second house was occupied by a Jewish family. My brother and I had friends all over the neighbourhood of all colours, religions and ages.

There was a red-haired boy of my age who lived in Heilbron flats, across the road (let’s call him DIETER, he’s still alive). His family spoke German at home: he was one of my closest friends and we spent every possible waking minute together.

This is the flat that they lived in (ground floor only):



Credit: Google Maps

He had a wonderful father, a tall, sinewy man with a ready smile and an uncanny ability to make or fix just about anything. He had a long-term project to build a motor car and sometimes we would go round to the garage and watch him work.

As far as I could make out he actually machined some of the components for the car himself, but it was a car that I had never heard of before – a Horch – which Hitler himself used for parades and public occasions before the Mercedes Benz company created their special Mercedes for him. According to Google, this is the Horch (in this picture he is riding with Mussolini):



Although I had no understanding of what it meant at that time, I was told that my friend's father had been in the German army during WWII. The explanation that I got was that he had "built tanks" for the Germans. I particularly remember seeing that unique front bumper and headlights in the garage.

I was in and out of their flat during those years – and he likewise in and out of our house - no doubt, my parents had no idea of that family's background. Although all the adults in our road knew and visited each other regularly, looking back, it now occurs to me that in this case, our respective parents were not friends and I don't even have a recollection of them ever speaking to each other. His family kept to themselves and I don't think that they mixed with anyone in our street. But I did not notice that at the time.

What I did however think was odd, was that my friends' parents had a boarder who stayed with them – at first I assumed that he was a brother to either DIETER's mother or father, because they referred to him as "Uncle" – but I was told quite emphatically (can't remember by who) that he was not, and that the reference to him as "Uncle P" was entirely a matter of politeness, as the way a child should refer to an adult, and no genetic relationship was implied. No further explanation was sought, or given.

But "Uncle P" cut a striking figure: he was tall, he had very stern features and an aristocratic bearing, he was always impeccably dressed, and his English was perfect, crisp, clipped, and precise. I was puzzled by his presence for the very practical reason that a little boy would naturally be: this was a small flat: it couldn't have had more than four rooms: unless all the three children slept in one room, there would not be

place for a boarder, and who would inconvenience themselves like that for a stranger?

But I envied my friend: his father had built a model electric train set for him – but not just a simple set of tracks and an engine and a couple of coaches: it was a permanent installation on an enormous board the length of a room, which folded up against the wall; it had several sets of tracks and multiple independently running trains which wove over and under each other, with little rivers and bridges, little houses and buildings that lit up, mountains and road-crossings, electrically operated booms and points – it really looked like a small rural town in Germany. In later life when I read the works of Herman Hesse and he wrote those passages describing the German countryside, I pictured my friend's train layout and I knew exactly what Hesse was talking about.

In addition to the Horch and the Marklin train (to this day Marklin make the very best model trains in the world, so of course it was a Marklin!), his father had a hobby of building and flying radio-controlled model airplanes: but these were model aeroplanes such as I have never seen before or since: they were scale models, about one and a half metres long, meticulous scaled-down replicas of German WWII fighter planes, in olive drab and grey paint. They even had little pilots and flight crew visible through the crystal clear windows - and the planes, of course, had true-to-life decals: there they were, in all their glory, scale model swastikas for all the world to see, on the wings and the tail fin. But I knew nothing about swastikas. I was born some years after the war ended and the truth about that terrible war, and the Holocaust, hadn't yet percolated through to the consciousness of an eleven-year-old Jewish boy in Cape Town, attending a private Jewish school in Cape Town, and those symbols meant nothing to me.

There was a little landing strip in the veld between Otto Du Plessis Drive and the Milnerton Lagoon, built and maintained by the modelling club that flew these planes, and that is where he used to take them. I distinctly remember that he had a two-engined plane that was his pride and joy – it could attain speeds of up to eighty miles per hour – which is nothing to be sneezed at, for a home-built model.

I did not know that those planes, and those decals, would also signal the end of our friendship.

I was at his home one day, and it was the end of summer. The sky was clear, but the heat of summer had dissipated. We played outside until teatime. Then he told me that this was a special day of some kind – a birthday or something (that’s odd, I thought, as no birthday boy seemed to be present). But being all of eleven years old I didn’t pay much attention. What was important was that his mum was baking cookies. I was given to understand that they were very special cookies. The family were all home, and they were waiting for the cookies to be ready and then eventually they came out of the oven, and everybody got cookies and tea and a celebratory mood prevailed – but, but, but... no birthday cake, no “Happy Birthday” song... and whose birthday was it anyway?

But now, looking back, I remember another puzzling little detail: I distinctly remember that there was a slight hesitation before I got my cookie. His mum wasn’t sure about something. She looked questioningly at his dad. It was just a fleeting thing, it wasn’t a big deal, and I think he gave a little nod, and then she handed me a cookie. It wasn’t round, it wasn’t square. I thought it resembled a star. I even thought for a moment that it might be a badly-formed Magen David, but it wasn’t, of course. And then it struck me: this was the same symbol that I had seen on the wings of the model aeroplanes. It was really delicious, but my friend and I had to wait for seconds because his mum said that we first had to see whether any of the adults wanted seconds. And then there was a mix-up and I got TWO seconds, so I quietly dropped one into my pocket “for later” and ate the other one.

When we wanted to go outside to play his mother told us quite pointedly that none of the cookies could leave the flat – we could have more when we came in. I had forgotten about the cookie in my pocket, and off we went.

The days were getting shorter and there wasn’t much time to play, and my mother called me in before long and I went home. I didn’t know it yet, but when I said goodbye to Dieter that afternoon, it would be the last time that I would speak to him.

My mother was a diligent housewife and a meticulous washer of clothes (definition of a Jewish mother: “if it moves, feed it; if it doesn’t move, clean it”) and as soon as the day’s clothes came off, they went straight into the washing basket. But not before a perfunctory pocket audit. God knows what you might find in a boy’s pockets!

And there it was – my cookie.

I was not present when she found it. I was in my room. She came in so quietly that I did not hear her. I just looked up and there she was. I got a hell of a fright because she appeared like a ghost. She was pale, her hand was outstretched, palm upwards, and in her palm lay the cookie. Then I got an even bigger fright when she began to speak in a dry-throated whisper such as I had never heard her use before. Even as I write this, I get a creepy feeling that starts between my shoulder blades and moves up under my scalp.

“Where – where did you get this?” she asked.

“I got it from DIETER’s mum” I said casually, “they had a birthday party”. She looked at me quizzically and then started to walk away.

“Wait, mom!” I said - “My cookie!”

“No!” she said – with such vehemence that I was completely taken aback. It was perfectly clear that that “No!” was not negotiable so I dropped the attempt to retrieve the cookie.

Then my dad came home, the usual pre-dinner mayhem ensued – probably provoked by my younger brother and myself, as usual, and the subject of the cookie was forgotten.

Or so I thought.

Usually, my dad visited my bedroom and that of my brother after we were bedded down and just before we went to sleep, to say a little prayer which he had devised for us. It was very simple and unpretentious and in due course it would evolve into something much grander but for now, it was just a few sentences in English, and I remember it perfectly to this day. As per tradition my dad started with my little brother. But on this night, he didn’t come straight to me afterwards: I could hear him and my mom whispering in the passage, but I couldn’t hear what they were talking about. It went on for quite a while. Then they both came into my room. My dad held the cookie. I was really worried. I was afraid they were going to accuse me of stealing

it and in my head, I was already starting to get my story straight for such an eventuality. They both had grim faces.

What, all this for one cookie??? I thought. OK, give it to me, I'll get out of bed right now and go across the road, in my pyjamas, and give it back and confess with all my heart!

My dad sat down on the bed and my mum stood next to him, still holding the cookie. My dad spoke – not in anger, but more in sorrow. That's how this dad of mine was.

"Where did you get this, Harry?"

"From Dieter. From Dieter's mum"

"Do you know what it is?"

It occurred to me fleetingly that my dad might have gone mad.

"It's a cookie?" I said. Was this a trick question?

"No, the shape. The shape of it. Do you know what the shape is?"

"Well, Dieter's dad has it on his aeroplanes"

I didn't suppose that my parents knew about Dieter's dad's aeroplanes, so I had to go into a whole explanation about how he had built these glorious flying radio-controlled model warplanes, and they had this sign painted on their wings.

When I finished, the room filled with silence. A long silence. I started to squirm. I was totally baffled by this weird turn of events. One cookie! Just one cookie! If I had known how to say, "What the Hell!" - that is what I would have said, but since I didn't know that expression, I just squirmed. My dad smoothed the blankets thoughtfully. Then he began to speak.

"Harry, you know that you've been hearing people talk about a war. You know what that is?"

"Fighting"

"Yes."

"Far away from here, big countries fought against each other in a war. A lot, a lot of people died. Many of them were not soldiers – they were just ordinary people like you and me"

"Like me?"

"Yes, even children, boys and girls, like you, and Dieter, and Lanie and Peter and David. And their mums and dads"

I was shocked. I was totally shocked. I pictured my 11-year-old self, holding a rifle, and a soldier, pointing his rifle at me. I was acutely aware of the fact that I would not know what to do. Fearsome, unwelcome, terrifying images poured into my mind, uninvited, against my will, not of my own making. In retrospect I don't believe that my dad handled that as well as he ought to have done. But – it was done anyway.

"The soldiers on the one side wore badges with that sign on them" my dad continued, "and our people were on the other side".

A terrible panic welled up in me, right out of the deepest depths of my belly, through my chest, into my throat. Hot tears were building up in my eyes.

"Where - where are they?"

"All gone now. All gone away. There is no more fighting. And there will be no more fighting. Ever again. So now you see why we don't want to ever see this sign again. It reminds us of bad things that we don't want in our world, ever again. We chased the soldiers with that sign away and they will never come back"

That explanation, of course, left a whole bunch of questions unanswered, but it would do for now. Mum and dad stayed with me for a little while after that, while the stress level came down and then I flopped down onto my pillow and drifted away.



## **POSTSCRIPT**

I have done a quick check on Bing and I see that "Dieter" still lives – in Cape Town, no less – and he owns a thriving business. I am sorry to learn that he has cancer. I hope he recovers. I never hated him – on the contrary, insofar as it is possible for children to love each other, I loved him. Children cannot, and should never, have to hate each other for something that their forebears did – unless that evil is transmitted to the next generation, and I absolutely do not believe that that happened, and I will not believe it unless it is proved to me. But we are both in or near our seventies now, there is too much water under the bridge, and he would probably think that I am a nutcase if I try to contact him, so I'm just going to let the sleeping dogs lie.

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## **Swastika Cookies**

**Written by Harry Friedland in April 2024**

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