

The House of Arthur Tintagel by Harry Friedland

PREAMBLE

Jews have a collective memory. Events begin as facts, they progress to becoming often-retold stories about facts, and eventually they pass into history and they stay on as legends and no-one is even sure whether those events occurred as described or at all, but they become part and parcel of the eternal memory of the Jewish people anyway. In the very text of the Passover service, we are admonished to treat the story as if we, personally, each one of us, was in the process of coming out of Egypt. Part of the enchantment of the festival is that it is a symbolic re-enactment of the event itself. And although that admonition is not repeated in the story of the giving of the Ten Commandments, nevertheless it is usually treated in the same way.

70 years after the Holocaust that memory is still too raw to pass into the realm of Jewish history in the same way that those ancient events have done, but the process has already begun. We are but one generation away from the survivors. Perhaps in a hundred years we will start to digest the event as history, but it is still too real for that. It is as if we heard an incredibly loud explosion and our ears are still ringing.

I was born six years after the end of World War II. The world was then generally aware that some monstrous evil thing had happened and that the foundations of the moral world had been shaken, but not the details. Not all of them. I grew up years after and thousands of kilometers from the center of that storm, but the aftershocks have gone on for most of my life. Hundreds of movies have been made, thousands upon thousands of pages have been written about the Holocaust – but still the shadow hangs over us like the ash-cloud of a volcano.

I grew up in South Africa, with a front-row seat to the very same emotions and thought processes which spawned Nazism playing out before me in my own country. I was jostled and torn by the same forces as had operated in Europe just before that. I had to deal with family members who said confusing and conflicting things, with secrecy and bitterness, with unthinking cruelty and with kindness which could never be rewarded. But the parallels between Europe during the War, and South Africa immediately post-World War, were so

striking that I wonder how History is going to treat all this one day: will it see this as a single, continuing event, or as two separate and unrelated events.

Chapter 1

In his early days the senior partner of our law firm had a part-time job as a sports newscaster for the South African Broadcasting Corporation, and as a result he was acquainted with many of the personalities there— including an announcer by the name of Arthur Tintagel. Arthur had the perfect diction of a BBC broadcaster. He was a little man, in every sense part of the image of “Little England” which was common among the English in South Africa in those days. He had already retired before I met him and he lived with his mother in a small house in Pinelands. I was introduced to him because he had an interest in vintage sports cars, which he kept crashing, and there were claims which had to be instituted or defended on a regular basis. Since my old partner had no interest in that sort of work, it fell to me, and I got to know old Tintagel.

On one occasion after a particularly successful claim Tintagel insisted that I go to lunch with him, and I got to know a little more than I might have wanted. As happens on these occasions, “he who pays for the lunch has the Freedom of the Table” and quite a lot came out which I wasn’t really expecting from this ersatz little Englishman. It turned out that he had a huge admiration for the Nazis. He regarded them as the pinnacle of civilisation, the logical conclusion of centuries of civilising German influence on Europe, the most advanced scientific ... blah blah blah which made them genetically superior and the undoubted *Urbarmensch* of the future. The Holocaust? – I asked tentatively – Oh, it probably wasn’t as bad as everyone made out and anyway it was just a historical aberration, a blip on the radar, a misstep along the golden road to the Future ... I was pretty much frozen into silence for the rest of that meal and we parted with vague goodbyes and I did my best to forget the meeting.

When Arthur’s mother died he was completely distraught. We administered her deceased estate. He had been very close to his “mammy” as he called her (I’d never heard that expression before and just assumed that it must have been an acceptable way for an Englishman of any age to refer to his mother with affection). Perhaps he had been an only

child, I don't remember. Sometime later I received the news that Arthur Tintagel himself had died, and we had another deceased estate to administer.

(As an attorney you get used to this: you live your life parallel to the lives of your clients; you are a witness and not infrequently an agent engaged in the rise and fall of their kingdoms, the wax and wane of their fortunes – you do work for clients, you watch their children arrive in the world, you do the parents' wills, and then those parents' deceased estates, and eventually, if you live long enough yourself, the ante-nuptial contracts and the wills and sometimes even the deceased estates of the children. You celebrate with them, you mourn with them, you introduce them to each other (if they don't already know each other – after all, you may be making a little community of your own or you may already be part of a community). You develop a sense of history. You are part of something which you did not start and which you will leave unfinished one day and it's all a progression, a long continuum with changes en route. My senior partner had a habit which was a standing joke at The Firm – he assiduously attended the funerals of all his old clients, and sometimes, if I had done work for the client at his behest, I would tag along. I knew that that caused sniggers at The Firm as well. It was said that he visited his clients to death! He had the driest sense of humour of anyone I'd ever met. One day as we left the cemetery he observed, "I come here more and more often as I get older. One day, I'm just going to stay here". Today he is buried right next to the Tahara House, the little building where they hold the burial services.)

I was a fairly thorough administrator of deceased estates. Where the assets of an estate included immovable property I would make a point of doing my own personal inspection of the properties since there was always the possibility that they could conceivably be sold and I liked to know what I was talking about as regards the location, quality, my own inexperienced impression of the value, etc., of the property – and thus it was in this case as well.

This house had stood empty since Arthur's death and we had to put it on the market – the nephew wasn't interested; he was emigrating to England. I had the keys.

So, one dreary morning after some light rainfall I made my way to Pinelands to go and have a look at the house. As in all cases like this we had taken possession of the keys. I made my way down the narrow, tarred road, strewn with fallen pine needles but otherwise immaculate. It was mid-morning, there were no moving vehicles, in fact I don't remember

any vehicles parked on the curbside as I drew level and stopped outside the property. Silence reigned. I might have expected birdsong from the trees, but there was none. The slam of my car door was unnaturally loud in the silence. I did not sense any signs of life from the neighbouring houses.

When I got to the front gate, I could already see that it had been unoccupied for some time. Houses have an air about them – unoccupied houses; houses where there is no love; rich houses; poor houses; alcoholic houses; houses where illegal abortions have been done; where children have been abused; brothels; desperate houses; happy houses. My father, as an anaesthetist, could tell your weight to the last kilogram just by looking at you – I can tell a house.

But I misread this house, or I would never have gone in.

Something about Pinelands: the whole of the original area of Pinelands was developed by a non-profit company called Garden Cities, which is still active. It was established during WWII with the express purpose of providing decent homes for soldiers returning from the war. Garden Cities is not just the name of a construction company, or a description of a kind of suburb – it's a social concept which was conceived in England. Check "Garden Cities" on Wikipedia.

This was one of the original houses.

It was a conventional single-storey middle-class house of that time, on a standard plot of about 1,000m², a 15m² stoep and two sash windows overlooking the front garden. I had grown up in a house exactly like this. It had a perfectly square footprint and sat under a clay tile roof. The garden was a neglected jungle and the walls were whitewashed, not painted, probably 15 years ago last, and the wall surfaces had gone yellow and were peeling and moss was starting to grow in the cracks. Even in summer Pinelands has a damp feel about it and doctors will tell you that if your children have allergies, you shouldn't live there. The top half of the front door contained a stained-glass window with a vaguely religious motif.

The suburb was very quiet on that weekday mid-morning, the street was dead and even the birds in the many pine trees seemed to have dozed off. My shoes crunched on the neglected cement path to the front stoep. The windows looked on in blank disinterest.

Even before I entered the house the sky seemed to darken as I walked through the garden. The front door opened silently when I turned the key in the lock. The door lock mechanism itself was smooth, well-oiled, and unlocked with a solid, unambiguous click and the door swung open smoothly and silently. The air in the house was cold and stale. The place had been shut up for weeks – ever since Arthur’s body had been removed by the undertakers. The furnishings and decor were harsh. The floors were bare wooden boards with carpet runners and loose carpets. The house was gloomy and dark in contrast to the mid-morning sunshine outside. It took a minute for my eyes to adjust.

As my eyes adjusted, I realised that the wall at the end of the passage was draped, floor-to-ceiling, with a large, vertically hung Nazi flag. It hit me like a punch between the eyes. Something happened in my chest. I wasn’t breathing. I had to tear my eyes away from that horrific flag. I left the front door open, because I needed lots of air. Then I pressed on.

A central passage stretched away into the house with rooms leading off on either side. The floor plan of the house was so similar to my childhood home that I knew where the passage went: it ended in a blank wall, taking a dog-leg to the left, where I would find a back room and a combined bathroom/toilet, while on the right it led into a large kitchen. The front rooms would consist of a lounge on the right and the master bedroom on the left. And indeed, so it was.

I turned left into the master bedroom. From the white lace doyleys, the dressing table laid out with little glass and silver cosmetic containers and ultimately a cursory inspection of the clothes which still hung in the giant wardrobe, it was clear that this wasn’t Arthur’s bedroom: It must have been “Mammy’s room”, and he had preserved it just as it had been, even though she had died long before. It was a shrine to Mammy.

There was a black-and-white photograph, framed and hung above the bed: a youngish couple in wedding clothing and in the customary pose of the time – the woman seated on a straight-backed chair and the man standing beside her. Presumably Mr and Mrs Tintagel (senior) on their wedding day.

A miniature Imbuia Kist, obviously a jewellery box, stood on the dressing table. It was empty – the nephew had already been there. I didn't check the drawers.

Suddenly, out of the corner of my eye I caught a movement behind me and for the second time my heart threatened to stand still– but it was only my reflection in the dressing table mirror. Time to move on.

The dining room was second on the left: solid, heavy, dark wooden furniture but otherwise quite bare and stark decor. The room did not warrant closer inspection and I moved on.

The third room on the left was very obviously Arthur's bedroom. The floor was bare save for a small rug alongside the old-fashioned high single bed. A couple of black-and-white portrait photos hung on the walls: the one was of an elder woman possibly the said Mammy later in life. The other picture was a well-known portrait of Adolf Hitler. I was shocked when i came into the house and saw that flag but now my flesh really started to creep. There was a stand-alone closet and a small desk (all Imbuia ball-and-claw, of course). On the desk stood a lamp and a polished brass canon shell casing with some pens and pencils in it. The closet still held Arthur's clothes.

There was a small bedside cabinet with some items on top. The drawer held the usual bric-a-brac, and the butt of a handgun projected from that. I pulled out the gun. It was a Webley .32 standard-issue English service revolver, circa 1920. I pulled back the hammer and spun the chamber. Fully loaded and properly oiled. Ugly little bastard, but not terribly deadly by today's standards. It would take a direct shot to the head to kill someone with that thing. Funny, I had expected a Luger.

And all the while, Uncle Adolf watched over me in silence. On an impulse I pulled out my phone and called my wife. I had to break the silence and talk to someone close to me. "Listen," I whispered (why was I whispering?) "I'm in a horrible place. You won't believe me. I'm actually OK but I feel scared ..." and I told her the story. I told her that I was going to keep her on the line for the whole time that I as in the place, I just needed to know that she was there and to hear her voice. "Well why don't you just leave?" she asked, "I think you should leave right now and come home and have some coffee and rusks. Don't be stupid."

By now it wasn't even a question of doing my job anymore. I'd seen everything that I'd come to see and I could have left, but I was mesmerized. I had to see it all. Of course there was going to be more.

As I exited Arthur's bedroom I noticed that there was a large kist in the hallway. I must have walked right past it on the way into the house. I'd leave it for later. I went round the dog-leg in the corridor to the back bedroom. There were two large closets and a small desk. On the walls were two black-and-white photos of fighter planes with Swastika decals. One was of the Messerschmitt 109 (The "Battle of Britain Plane") and the other of a Messerschmitt Me 262 (the first prototype fighter jet, it came out right at the end of WWII).

The closets yielded their own treasures. They were crammed with Nazi military uniforms — epaulettes, colours, hats and helmets, the works. All the while I had been telling Simone what I saw but at this point my voice must have faltered and she started shouting at me to leave the house and I was starting to think that that might be a good idea.

But there was more! How could I leave?

The kitchen was spic-and-span and unremarkable but there was a pantry off the kitchen and in that was a large rifle safe, to which I did not have the keys.

Back down the passage I went, past the kist and into the lounge — an absolute treasure trove (more so than I would still know for weeks, in fact). Aside from the expected lounge furniture (heavy, dark, Imbuia, ball-and-claw style), there were two large glass display cases with military medals and ribbons, as if in a museum. I don't know much about military medals but I would have guessed that the collection came from all over, including, of course, Nazi Germany.

I thought that I had pretty much exhausted the possibilities of the house now and prepared to leave so I made sure that I hadn't left anything, ended the call to my wife and headed for the door. I didn't have any keys which looked as if they would fit the lock on the kist (most people keep those things locked) so I just tugged thoughtlessly on the lid as I walked past — but the kist wasn't locked, and the lid came up. I stopped to check it out. It was pretty full of something. A white sheet lay over the contents but when I pulled part of that

aside I saw blankets, cushions, and so on. Oh, and a rifle barrel, sticking out right up against the side of the kist. What? – That’s funny, I thought.

I pulled back the blanket. Guns. Lots of them. All different. Most of them were not recognisable to me. What the hell ... time to call the police, I thought. I’m not going to mess with this, it doesn’t smell good to me. I pulled back the blankets and the sheet, making sure that nothing stuck out, got out of there and locked the door.

It was good to be back in the cool, fresh air. I needed more of it and I didn’t want to get back into the car just yet. Those old wartime houses were usually built with a lane down each side so that you could get from the front to the back without going through the house, and building regulations required that the outer walls of the house had to be set back at least 5 feet from the boundary line, so that there would be at least 10 feet between houses. In those days security would have been the last thought on anyone’s mind – today we wall houses off with 10-foot walls topped with electrified wiring, but not then, and this house had never been updated.

Looking back from the front gate I could see that while the lane on one side was indeed about 5 feet wide, the lane on the other side was much wider – in fact, now I noticed that there was a vehicle access over the pavement, a double gate and a driveway down the side of the house. Perhaps there was a garage in the backyard. I’ll check, I thought, and strolled down the overgrown driveway into the untamed forest at the back.

You could never have actually driven a car down there without some significant work at clearing away the undergrowth and even a few small trees, but it was definitely meant to be a driveway. As I got round to the back, an enormous wooden shed loomed out of the vegetation. It was about twice as high as a regular garden shed, reaching higher than the house walls and about half as high as the house roof. It was in very bad condition. It must have been painted once but most of the paint had peeled off and the underlying wood had weathered to grey. Many planks looked loose. The large double doors hung open and their hinges barely held them up. The front grill and bonnet of an old red Austin sports car peeped out of a jumble of junk in the garage. As I got closer, I could see a red MG convertible behind the Austin. Possibly dear old Arthur had harboured a desire to restore them one day. But I had now definitely been there too long, and I turned and left the property.

Chapter II

Arthur's only heir was a young nephew, who was a very busy young man. He had wasted no time in introducing himself to me when he got to Cape Town. He was sharp, forceful, efficient and resourceful. The research which he put into the business of clearing out Arthur's lifetime of possessions was impressive. Of course, he had always known of his uncle's strange interests and he knew what to expect when he got here. He got down to the business of finding a market for Arthur's strange collection immediately. The military uniforms required a very special kind of collector, but he hunted one down, negotiated a good price, and got rid of them. If he flinched at the idea of dealing with this bizzarerie, I certainly never saw him flinch. The military medals were somewhat easier to dispose of but again, he did his research, narrowed his target market to two or three collectors, and disposed of the medals for what appeared to be good value. He refused to follow the conservative approach of handing the whole collection to a local auctioneer and I am quite sure that he did much better on his own. It was all his inheritance anyway, so I had absolutely no reason to stand in his way or to insist that he deal with these things differently. I have no idea what happened to that abomination of a flag and I never asked. Other than for that particular item he kept me in the loop constantly. The only thing he couldn't deal with himself was the firearms because the legalities were very restrictive. His job done, he departed for England and left me with his contact details.

I had been in contact with the police in Pinelands because I could see that the firearms were going to be a headache. I had no idea how big the headache would be. Eventually it was arranged that I would meet Captain Abrie Voges, the firearms officer from Pinelands Police Station, at the house.

"No" said Voges, running his finger down the list of weapons for the umpteenth time as if in disbelief, "they are not all here" ...

The guns were laid out on Arthur's kitchen table and Voges was holding the list of Arthur's guns which the police kept in their records. They should have tallied, of course, but they

didn't. There were guns on the table which weren't on the list, and there were guns on the list which weren't on the table. As regards the first category perhaps once the safe was open we would gain more understanding but as regards the second category we could not do so in the absence of more information.

It would appear that Arthur was a well-known eccentric and although the police kept tabs on him, they had a good relationship with him. There seemed to have been some sort of tacit understanding between Arthur and the Pinelands Police whereby he held certain unlicensed weapons, they had a record of the weapons, and a "relationship of trust" existed between them. He was treated as a collector and no further questions were asked. I have no idea how legal this might have been but everybody believed that it worked – until this morning. I also have no idea how common it was for the police to have such relationships with other individuals but you have to remember that firearms officers are frequently firearms enthusiasts themselves. Regardless of our strict firearms laws, there probably are such tacit understandings from time to time.

Voges was a pale, earnest young man and had it not been for his uniform I would have taken him for a junior lecturer at a university, not a policeman. I could not imagine him as a cop on patrol, chasing down thugs and slapping handcuffs onto their wrists. But with the rank of a Captain, he must have done something to impress somebody.

The shriek of a power drill came from the adjoining pantry as a locksmith drilled out the lock of the rifle safe. That had been going on, intermittently, for a while now. There was a sudden "clunk" as the lock fell off on the inside of the door. The locksmith swung the door open to reveal – nothing. The safe was empty. Voges, the locksmith and I stood there looking at each other blankly. What the hell – why would anyone bother to lock an empty safe? I laughed involuntarily, but Voges wasn't laughing. He pointed at the empty safe with the back of his ballpoint pen. "There should have been two rifles in there", he said accusingly. He didn't actually say that it wasn't funny, but that's what he meant. The first one to recover was the locksmith. This wasn't his problem. With his job done, he gathered up his tools, greeted, and left.

Voges became visibly agitated. His pale white face acquired a red flush. He wasn't sure where to point his ballpoint pen now, and it swung round to me. "What happened to those rifles?", he demanded, as if I had performed some sort of trick and now this was all my

fault and I'd better own up and hand them over or there would be trouble. He dropped the pen amongst the guns on the table as the truth sunk in. No doubt at the end of the day if there was an enquiry, he would have to take the rap for trusting Tintagel.

“Damn!” he exclaimed, “Damn, damn, damn!” I hadn't moved or said anything. I visualised the gears spinning in Voges' head as he considered several possible explanations. Then he calmed down and recounted how on pleasant afternoons he and Tintagel had sat round this very table, talking guns, passing them to each other, turning them over in their hands as gently as porcelain statuettes, having completely shut out the thought that these were really killing machines, being merely cognoscenti appreciating a fine collection.

And all the while there was Tintagel – what was he doing – quietly trading in these things, guns in and guns out, with who knows who, for who knows what motive ... and now the old bugger was dead and there would probably never be any explanation for any of this. What a sucker he had been! Oh, what a damn sucker!

Voges was raised as a Gd-fearing white Afrikaner steeped in the traditions and beliefs of the Dutch Reformed Church, bolstered by 200 years of an intoxicating brew of myth and legend and just enough real history to sell to their people. As a policeman he was in the front line of the enforcement not only of the kind of laws against crime which has to be fought by police in every country, but also of laws which were quite unique to South Africa – laws which secured white people at the apex of society, people who believed that the Gd of Abraham and all who followed him had expressly set this land aside as their inheritance. As a policeman he worked at the coal-face: unlike other white South Africans who were comfortably shielded from the injustice and the cruelty which Apartheid created, the police lived with it daily.

As potentially brutalising as that experience may have been, many police – more than one might think – acquired a cynical attitude which became their coping mechanism. They knew, because they firsthand that the blacks who they had to control were neither evil nor stupid nor lazy nor in fact different from themselves. They were mostly just poor, uneducated country folk who were driven to the cities out of sheer necessity by the pathetic need for food and shelter, in a society where you can only acquire these things for money. They had come from a different world, where there was no concept of money, where humanity and common decency and family values were enough to ensure that

whatever food and shelter there was, would be distributed, if not equitably, then at least humanely. If whites had just learned their language, then many of these truths would have surfaced purely by virtue of the idioms and terminology of the language itself, because it was there, before our faces. But we whites were mostly too contemptuous to even learn their language. They even had to abandon their native names and adopt stupid names like “Beauty”; “Sweetness”; “Two Rand” or “Fifty Cents” or the names of the months, or the days of the week, so that the white people could pronounce them. There were no compromises. They were lied to, screwed, elbowed out, beaten and finally locked up. And all the while, we whites were worried that “they” (always called “they”, with a nervous glance over your shoulder) would overflow out of their “Townships” at night, steal into our nice houses and slit our throats. So we had the police as our guardians. And we all had guns.

I would say that many – if not most – white police knew the truth. They knew it, but they did not speak about it. They needed their jobs, the government had created a civil service in which no white man needs ever fear that he would be unemployed, or that he would retire without a respectable pension, or that he might get sick without proper medical care. But you pay a price for these things, and the South African police probably paid more than anyone else in the country because they had to stifle their consciences, bury them in the backyard and just live with that memory. So you give a bitter laugh, and put your children to bed, and you live another day.

But what we nice white folk did not generally know was that there just weren't enough white men to run the police: it had to be a massive force, and anyway, you don't want law enforcement to look too obviously like white oppression. So even in the 1970's and 1980's there were more black and coloured police than whites. And as the country slid ever closer to civil war, and the tension in the country was ratcheted up, those numbers climbed ever faster. Could black police be depended on to enforce white man's law on his black brethren? Well, as I said, a man must eat. To have a salary, a pension, and a medical aid, is a big deal to a family man.

I remember once on one of those days when I was out at the Langa Black Commissioner's Office doing my stint to defend the pass offenders, we were taking our usual mid-morning break in the proceedings (always called a “smoke break”, whether you did or you didn't). I had been there so often that I had some kind of rapport with the prosecutor, a black guy by the name of “John”, and the two of us were standing in a courtyard surveying the milling

crowd of family members of the prisoners, police, court officials and the like, and I asked him, “How do you do this job? – These are your own people you are prosecuting”. His knee-jerk reaction was, “They have broken the law. They are criminals. They must go home” (“home” being a poverty-stricken, godforsaken stretch of nothing filled with starving children and old women whose husbands and young men had been torn out of the bosom of their families to be virtual slave labourers in the cities). I let that sink in for a while and then asked, “Aren’t you afraid to go home at night?” I think that punch went home. He thought for a minute and then he said slowly, “They don’t know where I live. You know, here in my township, you will know when your neighbours don’t like you. And then you’d better make a plan, and move”

That’s what I thought, too.

Arthur’s ideology was evident all over his house. And yet, it was not that different to the ideology of Voges. Arthur might never have condescended to discuss the superiority of white men over black men – he was already dealing with the superiority of certain white men over others, but there is a link. There were many Nazi sympathisers in South Africa just before WWII: it was not a foregone conclusion that South Africa would go into the war on the side of England. This is a well-known and documented fact. Many white South Africans had picked up on the racist themes of the Nazis. And wherever you have these forces at work, the subject of guns is like a match to tinder.

So there were those links, parallel themes, overlapping ideologies, real and mythical histories which intersected, and men like Albrie Voges and myself were in that vortex. There was this side drama being played out alongside the main drama of the birth of a modern South Africa, and we were all trying to find our footing on a moving stage.

Chapter 3

Since there was no-one to actually prosecute as far as the firearms aspect of Tintagal’s estate was concerned, that issue was simply tidied up from a record-keeping point of view and the remaining firearms were sold to a collector. During all of this time I had to stay in close contact with the Pinelands Police and I got to know Voges the firearms officer quite

well and we had many conversations about firearms generally (he was an enthusiast) and South Africa even more generally! The house was sold to a young family and the other assets were transferred to Tintagel's nephew and thus the estate was finalised.

But there were two subsequent incidents which I have to record.

Firstly the young family man who bought the house called me one day – weeks after he had taken transfer of the house. He was in a total froth of outrage. Did I have any idea of what was hidden in that old garage?

Of course I didn't

Well, they had cleaned out the garage but in the process they noticed something strange about the floor surface and it occurred to them that something seemed to have been buried there, so they got a labourer to help them to investigate. It was a largish metal object – a cylinder of some kind – but as they dug and scratched around it became clear that they were looking at – an old bomb! Abrie Voges came back. He probably couldn't believe the sight that met his eyes. More fully exposed, it was now clear that they were looking at a WWII aerial bomb.

There's this thing about a bomb, when you see one for the first time: it is a menacing and malevolent presence. You know that it was built with a violent and evil intent. Unlike a firearm, which could possibly be used for sporting and competition purposes and therefore has the possibility of more pleasant usage (despite its initial purpose as a killing machine) there is no similar possibility for a bomb. Bombs are designed and built for one purpose only: to kill, maim and destroy as much as possible. There is nothing good about a bomb. Furthermore, in the absence of any knowledge about the bomb before you, you can't tell whether it is live or just a dummy and you can't tell whether it is primed and ready to explode or not. It just lies there, evil and silent, and waits for you to take the next move. And the older it is, the more unstable it becomes.

The bomb squad were called. Very gingerly the bomb was loaded onto a trailer and carted away and everyone resumed breathing. I eventually heard that it had been carted up the West Coast and detonated somewhere on a deserted beach, but I can't vouch for that story. But I wasn't done with Tintagel just yet.

A while later I received another call from this poor purchaser. This time he really was well-nigh hysterical. Oh God, I thought, what now? – Well, when they had sanded the wooden lounge floor the contractor had pointed out that there was a strange pattern in the wooden floorboards in the middle of the room. They made up a square about a meter long on each side. Sure enough, on investigation it turned out to be a tight-fitting trapdoor with no lock, handle or visible hinges. They prized it open to find a flight of rough wooden stairs going down into the foundations of the building. There was a small room down there with lots of shelves, lit by a single light bulb. I'm amazed that they never thought that it might be booby-trapped but fortunately it wasn't. It occurred to me that the room might originally have been intended as a small wine cellar of sorts – but right now, the shelves held hand grenades, land mines, assorted old bayonets and other items which I did not recognise.

I met Abrie Voges at the front gate and we went down together. He had a sort of resigned air about him as if he could no longer be surprised by anything about this house. I felt the same. This time he had the bomb squad with him and they carefully cleared out the room and went off down the road. There is, of course, a good reason why this sort of cargo was pulled in a trailer behind the vehicle, and not carried in the vehicle itself.

I never saw Voges again. Finally, Tintagel's house had yielded up all its secrets and the past was put where it belonged – behind us. But I won't forget that house ...

Postscript: I think it speaks volumes for the old South African government that they hired a Nazi sympathiser parading as an Englishman (something which their assiduous secret service must surely have known about) – not just that they hired him, but that they hired him to work in their public broadcasting corporation, where he was in a position to influence the thoughts and the mindset of thousands of people. I wonder to what extent the rank and file of the civil service had been infiltrated by like-minded types. But it's all history now, and it's time to move on.

The House of Arthur Tintagel written by Harry Friedland in 2021

Posted on the CHOL 'Share Your Story' site in February 2023