

# Escaping apartheid

by Adrian Furnham

I grew up a member of a double minority – an English-speaking, white South African of immigrant parents, who themselves longed, like many migrants, to ‘go home’ one day. Back to a place in their imagination that no longer existed and, indeed, may never have existed. They were part of the post-war emigration to the empire.

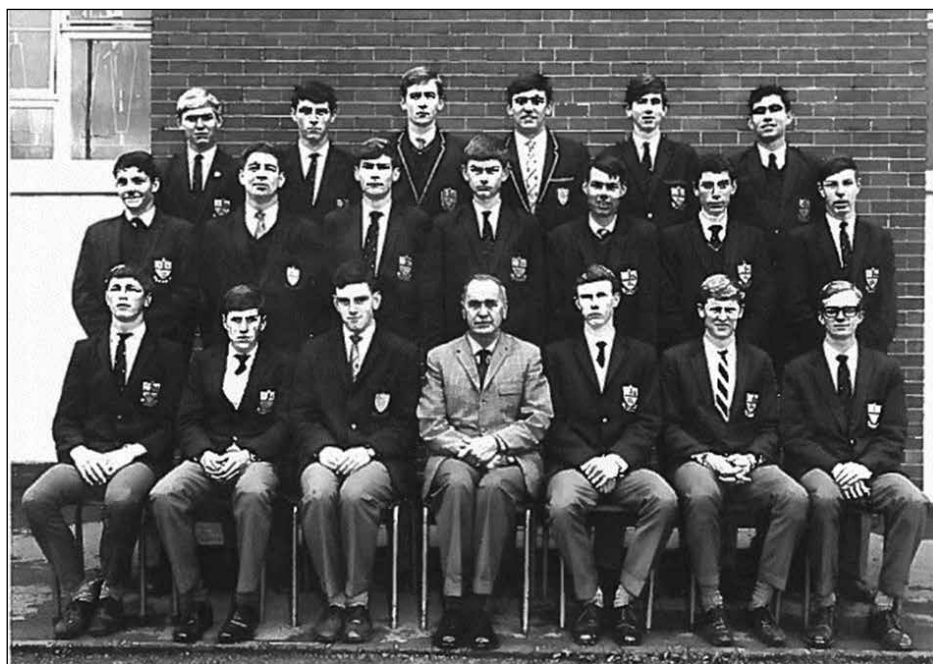
The small coastal town I was born in, had a majority Indian population followed by Zulus. It was in a province named by Portuguese explorers who never set foot on it. The Indians were mainly the offspring of indentured labourers and many thrived as merchants. Within 200 yards of our house was a small mosque where the muezzin through the loudspeaker caused consternation to our neighbours.

My birth certificate specifies my race: it says ‘European’. This was changed to ‘white’ when tourists from America in the 1950s saw signs ‘European’ and ‘Non-European’ and chose the latter! Port Shepstone, Natal, where I was born had had Norwegian and German migrants in the nineteenth century. A cultural mix indeed. The doctors my mother worked with at the local

hospital were all foreign-born: Irish, Russian and Polish. They had interesting pasts, which partly explained why they were there. The Russians and Poles anglicised their names to try to fit in.

I grew up through the high-point years of apartheid (the 1960s) in a country of great diversity, but one where skin colour and culture dictated every aspect of your life: it was what statisticians may call a *split-plot design*. People from different cultural, racial and ethnic groups were kept apart for everything from schooling to visiting the beach or the cinema. It was illegal not only to marry a person from another race, but even have them round to dinner.

Separate development, as it was called, tried to ensure there was little culture shock through mixing and interaction; but, of course, it failed. It was in effect a sort of culture dominance or hegemony where old-fashioned Western, puritan, colonialist culture imposed its ideas and ideals on all other local peoples. We all got to know our black servants, but you very rarely dealt with a person of another race except if they were serving you. You certainly had no contact with anyone your own



*Alexandra High, Pietermaritzburg, form 6A in 1969. The headmaster, Mr Titlestad, was a Rhodes scholar. The writer is second from the left in the middle row. Of the nineteen of us, to my knowledge seven are deceased*

age. There was usually neither friendship nor enmity, but there was pervasive distrust. The bitter harvest of this philosophy continues today.

There was no television and the media were heavily censored so one got little sense of what a strange society it was. It was being at a school with liberal and enlightened teachers that changed my views. Many, but by no means all, were open anti-apartheid advocates and helped us to understand how the history of the country shaped our everyday interactions. I remember UDI in Rhodesia and horror of decolonisation. And I recall the arrogance and defiance of the settler mentality. A pugilistic Afrikaans teacher told us in 1967 that the South African army could get to Cairo in two weeks. He may have had in mind that splendid Victorian cartoon of Rhodes with boots in the Nile Delta and Table Bay. We ignored the famous wind of change speech given by Harold Macmillan on my birthday in 1960.

I moved to England to escape the draft and continue my education. I remember just after I arrived and identified as South African being spat at; but on the same day taken aside and told 'your country has the right idea'. I went to the London School of Economics where a technician in the department was a prominent member of the National Front and greeted me like a fellow brother-in-arms while there were frequent noisy demonstrations, particularly after the Soweto uprising. It was all very confusing.

I have often been asked 'what was it like', so note five short stories.

### **First, the pencil test**

Perhaps this is the most shocking of all my memories on this topic. It was the relatively sudden disappearance of a boy around ten-years-old while I was at primary school. I have a picture of him in a class photograph. He was wiry, with green eyes and an impish grin. But if you look carefully, he has crinkly hair as it was called. When his mother came to pick him up there was 'talk'. She looked like a Cape Coloured, a person of mixed blood. She was a large matronly woman who had hair like his. It was the hair of a 'crossbreed'; a coloured person like Barack Obama. And in those days if you failed the pencil test you could be racially reclassified. The pencil test was laughable if it were not so deeply horrifying. A pencil was threaded through the hair and if it was not easily dislodged by a relatively vigorous shaking of the head this was a sure sign that you were coloured.

There was talk about him, and the fact that he would

fail the pencil test. It was the idle, vicious talk of young children. But before the school year ended, he suddenly left. There was no farewell; no explanation. He simply disappeared. The talk was that he and his mother were reclassified from European to coloured and therefore he had to be taken out of this white school and sent to one with a third of the facilities on the other side of town.

That sort of thing did happen in the 1950s and 1960s. People travelled in both directions (white to black, black to white) though no-one wanted to be 'downgraded'. If it were true, his life would have changed forever. Where he had played, prayed and been educated was all restricted. His chances in life would have halved. He would have had to wait thirty years before the colour of his skin or his particular hair condition would not dictate his future. That was the real nature of apartheid. One did not reach a socially consciousness state about the peculiar situation in South Africa until one's early teens.

### **Second, the black choir**

When I was at university, the psychology department had a number of technicians, two of whom were black. They were clever, kind and helpful and in relatively well-paid positions. They were also treated well by their liberal employers. One was in his late 50s and the other around 40 years old. The younger man had various health problems (particularly diabetes) and was charming and reserved.

We discovered by chance that this man sang with the now very famous Ladysmith male choral group that rose to worldwide prominence as a result of singing with Paul Simon on his 1986 album *Graceland*. I decided that, because my mother and grandmother really enjoyed music, I should invite half a dozen of them home to sing to us. Rather surprised, they agreed and we arranged a time. They dressed very smartly and arrived at the back door on time. They stood in our sitting room in the corner and looked rather uncomfortable. So did we. They sang with passion and glorious harmony. After about 30 minutes we offered them modest food and drink, which was illegal. And they could not legally use our toilet.

It was all so uncomfortable. Everyone was edgy: we were breaking the law and we all knew it. I asked them to sing two more songs. They ended with the now national anthem 'God bless Africa' in Zulu. To my surprise my mother, with a fine strong voice, sang the first verse with them as she knew the words. They left quietly through the back door. Apartheid was working: we never did anything like this ever again.

### **Third, the ambulance affair**

In my adolescent years we had moved to a bigger town and my mother had a job at the local hospital where she ran the casualty department. I visited her at work many times and ended up working as a male orderly over the summer holidays. It certainly cured me of any wish to be a doctor. I had often seen accidents arrive and the amazing responses of the nursing staff directed by my mother.

There was an incident that occurred when I was around 14 years old that really shocked me and brought me face-to-face with the reality of apartheid. It was reported in the local paper and chilled me to the core. The story was about a serious road accident that had occurred near a large dam where I experienced happy times hiking, camping and swimming. An ambulance was dispatched to treat and collect the wounded. But it was a whites-only ambulance and when it arrived to discover that all the injured passengers were black, it turned back. Relatively few black people had cars and it was assumed that the victims must be white.

Quite sometime later a blacks-only ambulance arrived. I don't remember if it was claimed that people had died because of not being treated immediately, but the whole thing struck me as not only ideologically indefensible but cruel. The 'non-white' ambulance was of course an older and less-equipped vehicle and took the patients to an overcrowded and less well-equipped hospital.

### **Fourth, the sermon**

My parents were churchgoers and so, naturally, was I. We attended the 7 am service at the local Anglican church and evensong when there was a guest preacher. When I was about 14, we went to listen to a man called Edgar Brookes. He was a professor, a senator and a famous liberal. He was also a minister. He looked like an Old Testament prophet to me, with fierce eyebrows and a shock of white hair. He started his sermon something like this: 'Less than five miles from this church tonight, *now*, children are going to bed hungry and without dinner. Many are the children of your servants/employees. These parents are not feckless or cruel, selfish or poor parents: they are good Christians, like some of you ... The society in which we live condemns them to poverty.'

He was right, and we knew it. There was a township, paradoxically called Edendale. We had thought about, and indeed prayed for, poor Africans but always thought of them as 'to the north'. Ours were the best educated

and fed in all Africa we were constantly told. The idea that they were down the road; and that we could do something about it brought it all home to me.

### **Fifth, the problematic weekend**

A number of years later I had the problem of spending time with a person of another race group. The year before I left South Africa I was invited by the American embassy in Cape Town to attend a small 'international' conference on race relations. I was 21 at the time, completing my masters degree in cross-cultural psychology and teaching at a school part-time. It was an honour to be asked and I dutifully read all four books that were recommended reading. At the conference there was a young Indian South African roughly my age from a neighbouring town. We hit it off and seemed to have a lot in common. We were staying at a "special hotel" that allowed mixed-race residency including meals and use of the bar. This was a rarity and there only to deal with diplomatic visitors, powerful business people and the like.

It was a strange experience for both of us. But my memory is of going sightseeing on the day off. We planned to catch a train to a famous sea-side restaurant, visit the docks and a museum. Everything, however, became a problem. We could not sit in the same train compartment and had to book our tickets at different ticket offices. We could not eat at the whites-only restaurant; we could not even sit on the same bench overlooking the sea and eat the sandwiches we had bought at different counters in the same shop. He was not allowed in the museum.

I had never had this experience and was affronted and angry. We were condemned to walk in public places for the day. We had a lot to talk about as we shared dreams, mainly of emigration and education. It was a relief to get back to the hotel. The whole system was designed to make any interaction well-nigh impossible and it certainly succeeded. We corresponded for a few years but eventually lost touch.

### **Not talking**

Many of my friends have remarked that I say very little about my upbringing. I think there are two reasons for this. The first is shame. Two nights before I left South Africa, I sat in the garden with a friend destined to become a professor at Cambridge and a judge. He said, 'they will treat us as Nazis'. I was shocked with disbelief as we were all vehemently anti-apartheid activists. The system was cruel, unsustainable and unjust

and we had gone on many demonstrations; but ‘They won’t believe you’, he said ....and he was right. And it became impossible to argue with some who wanted to assert their political views and moral superiority. We now call it ‘virtue signalling’. This teasing used to make me very angry. I have hit someone once in my life; a powerful blow to the stomach and at an Oxford sherry party no less. Even more shocking, he was quite well known; but I was extremely cross. But it worked: word got round and South Africa was not mentioned again.

The second reason is that ‘the past in another country’. They do things differently there and although I think we are, in part, products of our past we are not victims of it. I see little point in revisiting events I can do little about. I tried to move on, soften my accent, and be future, rather than past oriented

I was lucky. I chose my parents well, had a fine education and escaped apartheid to start again in my twenties. I am grateful for the fine teaching I received at school and at the University of Natal.