

## Return to Durban and The “Twenties” Years



ON MY ARRIVAL I was told the sad news that my father had suffered a severe stroke, from which he never recovered. He was paralysed on his left side and his speech and brain were impaired. He could just drag himself around with the aid of a stick and my parent's bedroom had been moved to the ground-floor dining room. The once bustling, vital house, now devoid of children and laughter, was quiet and sad.

I had effectively left Durban as an unworldly 18-year-old, and returned now a travelled, educated 25-year-old. The future had become the present and I was immediately thrown into a number of very different and conflicting environments which were to define, retard and sometimes illuminate the next decade.

The family, both close and extended, and the Durban community moved to reclaim one of their own, the business heir-apparent to the now all-powerful Sol Moshal and possibly heir also to the many aspects of communal leadership which he had assumed, and in fact in large measure had himself created. Friday nights, family functions, visits of and to relatives and the almost compulsory Thursday “club night” at the Durban Jewish Club, were again part of the essential life-style of a proper young Jewish male. I was apparently good marriage material and a succession of young ladies were produced including the daughter of the local rabbi. The cantor, a jovial character, Rev. Kaplan, was the *shadchan* or marriage broker, operating with the enthusiastic support of my parents. For my father, a marriage into a rabbinical family was a prize to be pursued. I'm afraid that I played the ritual dance for fun. The highlight was a Friday night dinner at the Rabbi's home at which the Rabbi, an orthodox type with a Chassidic bent, and I, managed to drink a bottle of whiskey, to the patent annoyance of mother and daughter. The *shtetl* was still very close!



*Morris and Janie, circa 1950*

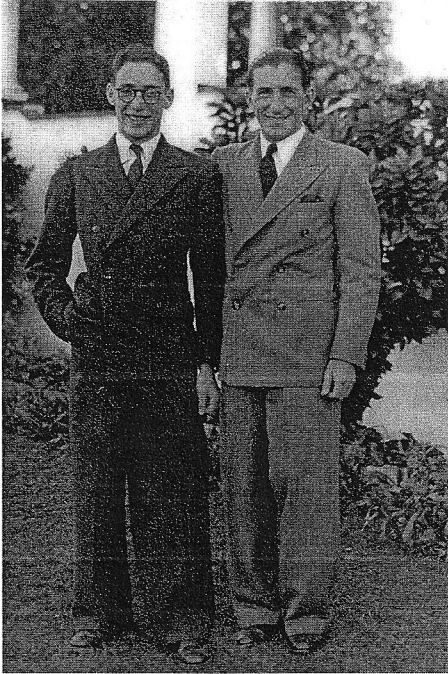
Community life was restrictive and incestuous. The Jewish population of Durban was about three thousand, of whom possibly no more than half were from the right side of the “tracks” (either material, intellectual, or religious). Of those there were a few “first families”. The Moshals were the royalty, with the Gevissers, by virtue of Janie’s origins, clinging to their robes. The others that I can recall are still today names to conjure with in that community – Magid, Frame, Zulman, Kaplan, Cohen, Beare, Goldberg, Freed, Wolpert.

My generation could be, and were often, wild. They drank, gambled, and were involved with *shikasas*, but they were always part of the solid core. Few if any married out, and if they did they were quietly ostracised. As long as that was comprehended, deviants were understood, tolerated, and even financed when necessary.

I had two escape hatches. Barney Moshal, my uncle, was a highly respected physician, and a man of wide culture, as was his wife, Ida. Although he was deeply immersed in Jewish affairs and a leading figure in Freemasonry, he was blessed with a broad understanding. He and Ida provided a welcome haven where matters of interest that were not purely parochial and communal could be discussed. The other hatch led to another Moshal aunt, Anne Freed, and her husband Harold. She was a theatrical personality of note, and a leading producer of plays and musicals. Although these were always at the Jewish Club, her casts and range of friends and colleagues were broad, and even included gays, of

both sexes, as yet still social outcasts. The Freed household both welcomed and encouraged my increasing apostasy.

Deep down at the other extreme of Jewish society was a burgeoning friendship with the Lurie brothers, Sidney and Robbie, who remained friends until their premature deaths. They were the butcher sons of a butcher who had been murdered in strange circumstances. They had made and were making large profits. They drank heavily, gambled immoderately, brawled, mixed with the local low-life and married decidedly "out". They fascinated me, and they and their wives trusted me both as a friend and as a window on a world which they viewed from a long distance, as did I in reverse. They were rough, physical, and totally dependable to their friends. I fortunately never had to call on them but always knew that if I was in serious trouble, the Lurie brothers would come to my aid with whatever remedy might be necessary.



*David and Leslie, Durban 1950*

A very different part of my Durban life revolved around my ongoing close relationship with my childhood friend, Rupert Wait. Rupert had suffered a breakdown at UCT medical school and had abandoned university and music, for which he had great talent. He was managing a small licensed hotel on the Esplanade, the Astra (subsequently sold to Sol Kerzner). The Astra pub was my regular port of call after work. I had

moved out of Madeline Road into a maisonette on the Berea, and my life and my time were largely my own. Rupert moved in a strange circle. I can recall an alcoholic Afrikaans prosecutor whom the Government had just appointed to the Bench at the beginning of their move to politicise the judiciary; a defrocked magistrate; a gay nightclub manager/owner; a female bus-conductor; and a recent Mr South Africa now masquerading as an accountant with a "beginners guide to accountancy" in the drawer of his desk. Added to this was a group of old school friends. The result was a number of years of partying and night-clubbing and there were many nights when bedtime was on the wrong side of dawn. Incidents, some hilarious, some embarrassing, some nostalgic, crowd the memory. This part of my life was mindless, hedonistic and sometimes dangerous. I do not regret it but certainly cannot commend it.

A third strand in my Durban life in the late 1950s was the result of my increasing political awareness and unhappiness with the burgeoning oppression of the Nationalist government. My cousin, Pat Elkin, was living in Durban and had become involved with the local branch of the S.A. Institute of Race Relations which I joined. I soon met the National Director, Quinton Whyte, and the local team – Mary Draper, Patrick McKenzie, Eve Braatvedt, Violaine Junod, Hansi Pollack. We were both overt and covert, having strong links with the Congress movements. I became an enthusiastic Institute member, involved in cross-cultural multi-racial friendships and activities during which I made two particular friends who greatly influenced my views – Alan Paton, and Arthur Lazarus, the Indian educationist who co-founded and headed Sastri College. Alan and I joined the Durban Parliamentary Debating Society which met in the Durban Municipal Council chamber and conducted debates on strict parliamentary lines. I was regularly a cabinet minister to Alan's premiership! Our regular opponent was Jan Volker, soon to become leader of the National Party in Natal.

These evenings invariably ended with a party at my flat, which always ended with a severe hangover. Alan was his normal dour self to begin with, but ensconced in a comfortable chair with his favourite bottle of whiskey close at hand, he was a delightful raconteur and companion.

This was the era when Chief Luthuli was making fruitless pleas for change to avert violence. He was exiled to Stanger for his pains, and teams of Institute volunteers, including me, were on a roster to visit him over weekends. He was a lovely and inspiring man.

Alan had founded the Liberal Association of which I was a founder member. When he went on to transform it into the Liberal Party, we parted political company as I was sure that we could do more as an

unbanned Association than as a party which would inevitably be banned. In retrospect I believe that I was right, but it sadly caused a rift between us which was not really healed until I became National Chairman of the Institute many years later.

This was also the era of the Black Sash of which all of my women friends were ardent members. I was once invited to go to a public meeting in the City Hall addressed by John Vorster. It was very reminiscent of an early Nazi rally. *Vierkleurs* and banners proliferated. Uniformed *Voortrekker-jeug* members were everywhere, and formed a double column through which the official party grimly approached the stage. *Die Stem* was sung passionately and repeatedly. I thought it was odd that when we arrived my friends split up and sat separately. I was in total ignorance of what was to follow.

I was sitting quietly and inconspicuously next to Pat, surrounded of course by ardent Nationalist supporters. Just as Vorster rose to speak, and at some signal of which I was unaware, Pat and another dozen woman scattered throughout the hall, stood up, removed their jackets, and sombrely showed their black sashes. They stood for the whole of Vorster's speech to the furious catcalls, threats and insults from the audience. As it was part of the Nationalist ethos not to physically harm women, I came in for a fair amount of Stellenbosch-style roughhousing on the way out. Fortunately my language was at least the equal of theirs which rather confused them. I escaped bruised, relatively unhurt, and something of an Institute legend.

This also was at the height of the McCarthy anti-communist madness in the U.S. I was friendly with the sister of a very active, high-level anti-government personality, who herself was publicly involved. She told me, of course in the strictest confidence, that she was a CIA agent and that she had been instructed to recruit someone who had access to left-wing organisations, such as the Congress of Democrats, to report on communist infiltration. This was in no way subversive and was in defence of the free world! The pay was good, payable anywhere in the world, and if I was rumbled, American citizenship was guaranteed. I wasn't seriously tempted!

All of this might seem to ignore the fact that I was simultaneously employed as Assistant Research Officer of Acme Timber Industries Ltd., with an office and the part-time use of a secretary at company headquarters at Jacobs, on the Durban outskirts. The secretary was a very pretty 18-year-old who regularly took long week-ends to compete in the minor beauty contests that were just becoming popular. She won most of these but as she was "Miss Umhlanga" or "Miss Amanzimtoti" they did

not signify much. Her absences at last became a bit too much and I read her a little lecture which in essence said that she was obviously pretty, that she had the makings of an excellent secretary, which career would be much more rewarding than the beauty queen route. She did not take my advice and became a beauty queen of a constituency somewhat larger than Amanzimtoti. Her name was Penny Coelen, soon to become Miss World!

With an MF degree, I was by far the most professionally qualified member of a company largely staffed by gifted amateurs, led by Sol the Chairman, and Colin Sternberg, the M.D. It soon became apparent that the research job was something of a blind for a training ground for the heir apparent that I was tacitly regarded as being unless I proved otherwise. This suited me. Scientific research is definitely not my forte, and it is embarrassing even at this great time distance to recall some of the silly experiments with which I tried to justify my first pay of £60 per month.

All of this however opened up, in the forest industry, an entire new world of people, friends, activities, opportunity, all of which were quite remote from any of my past activities, and indeed remote from the superficial knowledge of Sol and Colin who guided me. It was a world that I was to inhabit for most of the remainder of my working life.

The first real job was to take control of two small sawmills in Zululand, at Port Durnford and Kwambonambi, which were managed by a couple of typical Afrikaner practical backwoods sawmillers. It was a fairly brutal introduction to sawmill management and to our main supplier, the Department of Forestry, my nemesis for many years to come and eventually destined to re-appear in different guise.

I was also involved in the building of a new sawmill at Kwambonambi designed by Roland Jansson, Acme's Swedish sawdoctor who was a close and constant friend. He and I laid it out on the ground, using a simple theodolite and my rudimentary and very imperfect knowledge of land surveying. It is fairly miraculous that the mill, which still operates today, has everything more or less in the right place, and that both of us survived numerous encounters with very unfriendly snakes and malarial mosquitoes with which the future mill area abounded.

Kwambonambi in summer is very very hot, the temperature often rising to well over the 100°F mark. Metal was too hot to touch without gloves. It was murderous. Home for many months was the Richards Bay Hotel, in those days, before the harbour development, a collection of thatched rondavels round the central bar and dining room. It was owned by Bill and Agnes Reid, pioneers of aviation in South Africa, and its

adjacent airstrip was a fly-in mecca for flying types from all over South Africa. This encouraged me to get a pilot's licence, another story that will follow.

The Kwambonambi area, north of Empangeni, was rough country. White staff at the sugar mills and sawmills were usually there by necessity rather than choice. It certainly did not offer sought-after job opportunities. There were often drunken brawls among white staff and their wives, and frequent problems between them and the poorly paid Indian and Zulu workers. As head office representative, I was the arbitrator. It is the only time in my life that I regularly carried a pistol in my car, and had it ready in a half-open drawer on payday.

Back in Durban, I was promoted to Research Officer, and introduced to membership of the S.A. Lumber Millers' Association, and the S.A. Timber Growers' Association, in both of which I was to play a considerable future role. I had developed a taste for experiences that embraced a hint of the unusual, perhaps as a personal test. I decided to learn to fly and joined the Durban Flying Club where I ultimately was granted my licence to fly single engine planes. These were somewhat simpler than today. There was no radio! The control panel was simpler than that of a luxury motor-car, and you flew by sight and dead reckoning – which I was never able to master properly. My navigation depended totally on ground geography – coastline, roads, railways, towns. If there were clouds in the sky, I did not fly!

Flying lessons were a problem as they were early in the morning. I was still living at home and left at 6 a.m. often after a very late night out. Mother Janie, who would have been horrified at the idea of her son flying, was told that the reason for the early departure was the workload. She finally complained bitterly to the Chief Executive that he was killing me. He was naturally mystified until the truth was exposed.

I was apparently proving myself, which resulted in rather an unwelcome honour. Uncle Sol had a small second desk placed in his cramped office at which I was to sit to observe and absorb the intricacies of business, and his method of handling them, in the wholesale general merchanting trade, in the timber business, and in the manufacture of tea and coffee. I was to sit in whenever possible, but was to continue with my duties at Acme.

It was excruciatingly boring, as I had no direct tasks or responsibilities, but in retrospect, invaluable. An unwelcome side-effect was the effect that it had on my cousins, Julius and Bernard Gevisser, and particularly on my brother Leslie who was a junior manager in the company. It was the sad but probably unavoidable beginning of a much regretted widening gap between Leslie and myself.

At one of the industry meetings I became acquainted with Eric McKenzie, head of a well-known Natal midlands family and chairman of the Clan Syndicate, a forestry and sawmilling company in the Greytown area. This blossomed into a close friendship. Eric was a paraplegic, as a result of a polo accident. He was nevertheless active and reasonably agile. He had acquired a retired Navy torpedo recovery boat, outfitted her and renamed her the "M.S. Melody", and intended sailing her to Bazaruto on the Portuguese East Coast, and then to charter her out for deep-sea fishing. To obtain permission to go to sea out of the Durban harbour, a boat needed a licenced captain (which he was) and a licenced radio operator. On the strength of my pilot's licence, I was invited to be the latter, it being assumed that I had radio clearance. I of course had no radio experience at all but was accepted by the port inspector after he had been heavily entertained. My call sign M-M-M-Motor Yacht M-M-Melody was a standing joke at Durban Harbour radio for some time.

The voyage was eventful. We hit a serious storm off the Zululand coast and I was responsible for us very nearly being wrecked. I was doing my stint at the wheel at about midnight, following a pre-set compass course. Unfortunately I had forgotten that we were equipped with an old-fashioned compass divided into four quadrants of 90° each, instead of the more usual 360°. I followed my course – I thought – but a wave had hit us whilst I had left the wheel for a moment to be sick over the side. It swung us 180° degrees, but as far as I was concerned, my course was unchanged. We were headed for the rocks and not Australia! I was relieved of helmsman duties!

We stayed for a fortnight at Paradise Island, fishing every day until noon. (Appendix iv.) We caught so many fish of such variety that it became routine. Shore-time and an open-ended party was enlivened by Rhodesian nurses for whom Paradise Island was a favourite holiday destination. We left Melody there, and flew back to Durban.

My Acme duties had expanded into some involvement in the Eastern Transvaal sawmills at Graskop and Hendriksdal, and some small forest areas which the company was then acquiring. My home there was in the Graskop Mill single quarters which I shared with various fitters, turners, carpenters – very rough, very hard-drinking, but very friendly. The Graskop pub, a corrugated iron relic of the past, was our second home. I became particularly friendly with the Acme Manager, John Loseby, an ascetic Oxford-educated forester, Roland Jansson the Swedish engineer/sawdoctor, and Sverige Haukeborg the Norwegian general factotum. There were a couple of Jewish shopkeepers in Graskop and nearby Pilgrims Rest and one or two local families who became friends.



One of the shopkeepers in Pilgrims, Dredzen, had a son Chone, who became a life-long friend until his untimely death in 1998.

It was a strange life. Graskop was literally the end of the railway line and the area was wild. There was still big game, including elephants, a few miles down Kowyn's Pass. Roads were not tarred, and as this was a very high rainfall area – sometimes up to 80 inches in a year – often impassable. A car journey from Johannesburg over Mount Anderson, through Sabie, could and did take twelve hours and more. The train trip from Nelspruit to Graskop on that narrow gauge line took a long slow eight hours. It is today a one-hour drive.

There was of course considerable socialising with the Acme management and local society, headed by the Richardsons, mother and daughter. The Sabie Country Club was a meeting place but as I did not play golf, was not particularly attractive. I lived in a strange world where I was, on one level, a working and drinking companion, and on another the heir apparent to the company throne. Graskop was very much a company town and it was probably inevitable that I received a formal visit from the local Dopper predikant who asked me to mend my ways as I was a bad and seductive example for his usually obedient flock.

My flying activities had also expanded through my membership of the Durban Wings Club and my extended stays at the Richards Bay Hotel, which was a favourite week-end fly-in for the private pilot fraternity, all of whom appeared to be happy-go-lucky, hard-drinking and playing, and totally contemptuous of any normal rules of behaviour in the air or on the ground. One of these characters, somewhat older than most, was the African agent for Piper Aircraft. In those days all Pipers destined for Africa were crated in the U.S. and shipped to Pretoria, where they were assembled and flown to their ultimate destinations. Three Piper "Tripacers" had thus arrived, ordered by the Kenya Police Force for use as reconnaissance aircraft in the Mau-Mau revolt which was then in full swing. He needed three pilots, in addition to himself, one to be relief pilot. As the youngest and least experienced in the bar at Richards Bay at that moment, I was offered that job which involved a three week absence, paid accommodation in Nairobi, and a return fare. I accepted with alacrity, and somewhat surprisingly got Uncle to agree. I suspect that he had a strongly suppressed adventurous streak and was indulging in some vicarious excitement. We set off from Wonderboom airport outside of Pretoria on a casually planned eight-day meander to Kenya. The idea was to fly to Lourenço Marques, and then up the coast to Mombasa, and inland to Nairobi, stopping for overnight stays at friendly towns and villages, and never flying more than a few hours a day. The stop-overs

were riotous and the hangovers monumental. Beira, from this aspect, was particularly memorable. We stayed at the Grand Hotel. It had a wide, colonial-style verandah overlooking the harbour. At short intervals along this colonnaded verandah were hung small bird cages containing the proprietor's prize canaries. It was very very hot, such as Beira can be in high summer. Our four-man flight crew plus assorted local flying types, had reached a very happy state in the evening's activities. The canaries looked, to us, to be very hot, very bedraggled, and very unhappy. A unanimous decision was taken to improve their lot by giving each a cold shower, and then releasing them. This accomplished we settled down to serious partying which was rudely interrupted by an officer of the local police force – I believe a relative of the proprietor – who arrested us, and drove us to the local goal where we spent the night. It was not too bad, as the party continued, oiled by replenishments from a nearby bar, and augmented by most of the police force who were on duty. Our local flying friends were well connected and part of a police/army reserve!

We eventually arrived in Nairobi, delivered the aircraft to the police, and collapsed into the luxury of the Norfolk Hotel – all expenses paid.

Socially, I was immediately accepted in Nairobi homes and "The Club". Somewhat strangely I found that I was also persona grata with the black staff. I subsequently found that in my ignorance of Swahili I was greeting them with the word *Jomo* – Kenyatta's first name – instead of *Jambo*, the proper greeting.

The Mau-Mau revolt at that stage was a black-on-black civil war for ultimate control. The early end of colonial rule was assumed. In the three years before Kenyatta was released, very few white settlers and soldiers were killed, mostly by accident.

I was given a great farewell party, was flown to Mombasa and boarded the *Kampala*, a passenger ship on the Italy–South African run. The future Lady Peggy Gordon and her mother whom I knew from my visits to the Gifters in Pietersburg, were on board. Mother took one look at the very disreputable flying crowd which poured me onto the ship, and warned Peggy to have nothing to do with me. We often laugh together at this memory. We disembarked in Durban and a return to relative normalcy.

I returned to the Eastern Transvaal and Graskop, and being close to the Kruger Park, I often made weekend visits, sometimes joining Johannesburg friends. There were also hunting trips with Haukeborg – an avid hunter – and David Hull, widely versed in nature and an honorary game warden. I shot various animals and birds, but vowed that a wildebeest which gave me a long, lingering reproachful dying look, was to be my last victim. I have shot neither bird nor animal for nearly

50 years. Trout fishing in the mountain streams also began to re-capture my interest, as did walking and sightseeing. It was altogether a marvellous way for a bachelor in his mid-twenties to learn his trade.

There were also frequent and lengthy returns to Durban and shorter visits to Johannesburg where I was rapidly making a new circle of friends around Neil Herman and David Katzen. Their free life-style, across both colour and religious lines, was far removed from the constraints of the Durban community from which I was becoming more and more estranged. Generally speaking – more in Durban, but also in Johannesburg – this bush-dweller who occasionally descended into civilisation was regarded with amusement by his friends, and concern by those who had difficulty coming to terms with non-conformity. I confess to enjoying being different!

Johannesburg was of course a wilder and a more open town than it is today. The central business district was flourishing. The Anglo headquarters was the temple of wealth. The Carlton Hotel, on the corner of Eloff and Commissioner, was Mecca. Rivonia and Sandhurst were places in the country where one went to ride. Bryanston was beyond the pale. The Mediterranean Room at the Carlton, Spaghi's restaurant close by and Ciro's night club were the haunts of Johannesburg "society".

Into this society was injected at frequent intervals my Pietersburg brother-in-law, Cecil Gifter. Gifter was a character who almost defies description. He was raised in Pietersburg and played rugby for Northern Transvaal – an unheard feat for a Jewish boy. The story is told that on one memorable occasion of a rural rugby game, the captain of the opposing side asked him to point out the Jew – "*ons gaan hom opfok*". Cecil, totally fluent in Afrikaans, pointed out a team-mate. Van Rensburg still does not know why he had such a bruising game! On the outbreak of war he joined the cavalry, and is still a legend in army stories for being the only trooper who had a captain as his personal batman. He was even then a hard-drinking, roistering buccaneer.

The Government pulled him out of the army after a year and used him for negotiations on essential war minerals with the U.S.A. which necessitated a number of very hazardous sea voyages to America. After the war, he was introduced to Ruby, and promptly married her but this did nothing at all to alter his life-style or his appetites. Cecil took to me presumably because of my own break-away. I was flattered and entertained. He moved in a sort of Damon Runyan world, making and losing large fortunes, and spending money without thought. His suite at the Carlton, which he kept permanently, was awash with liquor, girls, friends, hangers-on. Ruby sat unhappily in Pietersburg bringing up their

two daughters. Gifter, once the owner of the fabled Phalaborwa, sadly but predictably died stroke-stricken and penniless, living on family charity. He was a buccaneer who would have been a soulmate and playmate of the Randlords. He was out of his time.

After some years of all of this, I returned semi-permanently to Durban, now to start seriously on my training as heir-apparent. This involved a deeper insight into such mysteries as general wholesaling, tea and coffee manufacturing and the clothing industry into which the family company had been disastrously inveigled. All this required a closer relationship with Uncle and longer and longer sojourns in his cramped, old fashioned office. It was becoming irksome, and this was heightened by his increasing age, well-known irascibility and his unshakeable belief that he was always right. There is no doubt that he was very clever, totally honourable, and a shrewd and successful business-man. He had great potential and intellectual capacity. It is sad that he, to the end, was parochial and was never able to expand his horizons further than Durban and its Jewish community to which he devoted his life. He had the mental equipment to have been anything he wanted to be, but he never wanted enough to take the necessary risks. The things that he did, he did superlatively – the various businesses, the organisation of the Jewish community, the establishment of the S.A. Lumber Millers' Association. A well-earned motto on a scroll presented to him by that organisation read "*Suaviter in modo, fortiter in re*". Freely translated: "pleasing and agreeable in manner, but strong in action".

I tried my best to conform, becoming an Executive Committee member of the Durban Jewish Club, front-of-house manager for Anne Freed's plays, a shul adviser to misguided youth (!), and even a Freemason, at the insistence of uncles and my father, all of whom were devoted to "the Craft". I passed through the necessary three degrees to attain the heights of a Master Mason. That was nearly 50 years ago and I have never again been into a Lodge to use all of the hallowed signs and secret rituals. I have finally resigned as a Master Mason of Lodge of Israel No. 3170 of Durban. I cannot really understand why I did not do this sooner. Perhaps it is the same visceral urge that keeps me a member of an orthodox congregation which I very rarely visit.

It was in this period that my overseas travelling began – professionally, for the company, and personally. I was beginning to feel the joys of true freedom and independence. I visited the U.S.A., Canada, Argentina, Brazil, Australia, New Zealand, Finland, Sweden, Norway and Japan in search of new machinery and techniques, and forestry ideas. I also travelled constantly in South Africa, and had acquired a company flat in

Sabie as my second home.

At this time I met a Johannesburger of my own age, Neil Herman, who became my close friend, which he is to this day. We had many riotous holidays together, the high point of which was a Mediterranean yacht cruise. The characters involved, apart from Neil and myself, were the late Ian Bloch, his girl-friend and subsequent wife, Cynthia Yudelman, "Tootie" Bloch and her architect future husband Archie Sadur. Ian was Captain and navigator out of respect for his brief stint in the S.A. Navy. The luxury cruiser was a 22 ft. elderly lady with sleeping accommodation in a bunked forward cabin for all except one, who alternated on a lilo on the cabin floor. Under full sail, we made about six knots. Under engine (when it worked) four or five. It was incredibly uncomfortable and great fun. We boarded at Fumacino, outside Rome, and sailed in very easy stages to our major ports-of-call – Capri, Ischia and Ponza. Neil and I both fell in love in Capri – he with an American and I with a German. In Ischia, I rescued him from the family of a taxi-driver who believed that he was to marry his daughter. Ponza was a continuous party, and most of the island came to wave farewell, with gifts of wine and cheese and fruit and a guitar serenade. It was a marvellous three weeks.

I had also earlier spent some time in Israel with an old school friend, Percy Cohen, who was becoming an accomplished social anthropologist. He subsequently became a renowned Professor of Sociology at the L.S.E. He died recently. As a practical exposure he headed a group of recent Yemenite immigrants in an afforestation programme. I joined him as the forestry expert. It was an extraordinary and exhilarating few weeks – uncomfortable, dry, searingly hot, thirsty, but a feeling of doing something worthwhile, both for the Yemenites and for the audacious new country.

Back in Graskop and Sabie, I was now heading a committee which was examining the future sawmilling policy for the company which had been recently merged with the forest holdings of Rand Mines to form a new public company, S.A. Forest Investments Ltd. The result of this very painstaking exercise was a recommendation to build South Africa's largest and most modern sawmill at Sabie. This was accepted, and I was placed in charge of its execution, with Roland Jansson as my technical and engineering chief. The mill was eventually built and lived up to its expectations. It still operates under the Global banner as a proud, if aging, major component of the local industry.

I was simultaneously becoming more embroiled in other aspects of the family business, and had been appointed as a Director of both Moshal Gevisser Holdings and of the timber company, Acme Timber Industries. I was energetic, imaginative and inexperienced! I did however bring a

number of investment opportunities to Uncle Sol. It is a sad measure of his conservatism that he progressively rejected my offerings of the Coca-Cola franchise for Natal, the sole Eveready battery manufacturing licence for South Africa, the South African distributorship for L'Oreal hair products and an opportunity to finance Raymond Ackerman who was looking for a partner to start Pick 'n Pay. ("What does he know about retailing?" said Uncle!). It was in this sort of experience, that the seeds of my ultimate departure were sown.



*Sol Moshal, circa 1970*

Sol's one recent new business adventure was, however, sadly turning into a disaster. The company had become the owner of "Celrose", a major manufacturer of women's clothing – Jonathan Logan dresses and Jantzen swimwear among other famous brands. I was never able to fathom how he had become involved, although he did have a secret weakness for glamour and a pretty girl. He was doubtless egged on by Morrie Prusoff, a recently acquired partner in the firm's new Johannesburg wholesaling venture, a delightful old-style Jewish horse-racing, farming, wholesaling washbuckler.

Whatever the background, Celrose was losing unheard of amounts of

money under the extravagant care of two fabled young characters in the “rag trade” – Aubrey Snider and Sidney Cherfas. A decision was taken to have a last attempt at resurrection, and then to close. I was to oversee this operation on the grounds of my forestry education and training in Sol’s office!

I transferred to Johannesburg, rented a thatched cottage in Sandton and moved to Celrose to face my first crisis. The Jantzen swimwear range was about to be shown. There were two very pretty house models, and one was visibly pregnant! A second crisis followed. Aubrey, ever the lover of an expansive gesture, had been to France a few months before on a buying trip. As was the accepted custom, he was successfully wined, dined and yachted, resulting in an order for a fabric of obsolete design that the French had been desperate to off-load. I discovered that we had enough of it for many seasons, even if every buyer was in dire need for it, which they decidedly were not. “Summer Breeze” is indelibly engraved on my consciousness. If it had a recognisable smell it would be classed with Morris’ old bones, and Riley’s formaldehyde. It was the death knell for Celrose.

I spent a horrid few months at Celrose in a totally foreign environment and in a position to supply only commonsense. I certainly had no expertise. It rapidly became apparent that in the rotten dress business, in that era, the only companies that made money were owner-operated, where the owner did the ripping off (of “cabbages”, the trade slang) for his own benefit and to the disadvantage of the Receiver of Revenue. I persuaded Uncle that we had to sell, and successfully negotiated the sale with the irascible, unpredictable, eccentric genius of Edgars, Sidney Press. What was critical to the negotiation was the fact that Press was crazy about trees and for many years had been President of the S.A. Tree Society of which I was a member. This apparently guaranteed my bona fides. Moshal Gevisser lost £600 000 on this foray into the unknown – an enormous amount for a medium-sized company in those years.

I returned to dividing my time between the sawmills and forests of the Eastern Transvaal and Moshal Gevisser & Partners, located on the corner of Market and Von Wielligh, the heart of “wholesale” Johannesburg. This time I shared an office with Morrie Prusoff, but more as an equal rather than an acolyte.

The reason for my presence was another problem that was insoluble at a distance. There were joint Managing Directors – Morrie Prusoff and Hans Adler. Morrie, as previously described, was a lovely character, and dog-like devoted to Uncle, who liked that sort of thing. Morrie was supported by an assorted cast of old-style characters who ran the “softs”

side of the business, which was Morrie's sphere of expertise. Ranged against him in open warfare was Hans Adler, a stiff, proper unbending German-Jewish refugee from an aristocratic, musical, atheist background, who through the awful German history had landed in a business selling hardware as a side interest to his main activity as Chairman of the Johannesburg Music Society. He disliked his occupation and hated Prusoff and all he stood for, openly and vociferously. These two Joint Managing Directors did not speak but passed rude notes to one another through the Chairman of management and staff meetings – me! I had no choice but to recommend the departure of Adler because of Prusoff's substantial shareholding and relationship with Sol. In reality neither was right for the business, which continued slowly to decline.

I established an Acme office in the Moshal Gevisser building, gave some assistance to Prusoff, but concentrated largely on timber matters, not only on the business side, but also in the affairs of the industry associations – S.A. Lumber Millers' Association and the Forest Owners' Association – of both of which I became an executive committee member and eventually Chairman. I badly needed a full-time secretary and appointed Alice Levy (subsequently Weil) who was a great help and who was with me for many years. She remains a good friend.

Business life was beginning to take a new turn. After numerous visits around the world, the massive Sabie mill plan had been approved and it was beginning to take shape on the ground, necessitating frequent and lengthy stays in my recently acquired flat in Sabie. The capital cost of this mill, and the necessity for security of log supplies and integrated management had made it increasingly evident both to the owners of the Acme sawmills, by then the premier sawmilling company in S.A., and of the forests, the massive old style Corner House/Rand Mines Group, managed by Gordon Richdale – a classic Rand Club British import – that an amalgamation of forest and sawmill was very desirable. Richdale and Sol struck up an unlikely and rather wary friendship.