

## FORWARD TO SQUARE ONE

*Vic Finkelstein*

Prepared as a contribution for a book concerned with the history of Jews  
in Natal, South Africa during the 'apartheid' period

### **I arrive**

I first saw the Johannesburg light of day in January 1938. We immediately disagreed about the weather and I was assaulted with a bout of diphtheria. My oldest brother, Ian, had died before I was born and the family did not think much of *that* place. As soon as I discovered how to crawl I managed to convince my parents that I was ready to move on. We came to sunny Durban. This is my chosen home; where I've always wanted to live.

We moved to a flat near Point Road. Of this I remember next to nothing – the setting was far too miserable for my tastes and my infantile tantrums were rewarded with a move to Newton Place in the Berea. Here the Finkelstein's – my parents Fanny and Abraham, older brother Ronnie and I – settled down very amicably.

In those early days of my life I did not see much of my father who was a travelling salesman in ... what I never quite discovered. When he returned his absence, however, was always appeased with a small gift for my brother and I – a pleasurable experience I have tried to emulate when as an adult I had to be away from my own children. As the war years came to an end my father became a grocery shop owner in Point Road and the family saw much more of each other. This change in my father's life brought with it a stable and happy childhood in the changing cul-de-sac where we lived.

Newton Place (originally Kelvin Place) was a dead-end lane laid with sand and stone which became wonderfully muddy when it rained – good for mud fights amongst a horde of children who lived and played in this quiet area off busy Moore Road. At the end of the lane was the remnants of a farm with a single story corrugated iron house. It was heavily surrounded by a dense haphazard growth of fruit trees and a flock of chickens that would run wildly about making a huge racket when one had been chosen for the next meal. Here we could expect to be chased away if we were caught climbing the mulberry and mango trees for the fruit or the mulberry leaves for our silk worms. I can still hear the irritating early morning cock-a-doodle-doo when I least wanted to get up for school.

Flat 2 Kelmor Court was up 3 flights of stairs in a three story block of flats and was sandwiched between several similar flats leading to the farm house. For us kids it was, to the daily irritation to some of the residents, a large, safe and noisy playground. Here it was that a small scruffy white dog wandered in one day and joined our ball games. We seemed to get on very well and he decided to stay for the rest of his life. Jock, I called him, and we went everywhere together when I came home from school. I used to explore Durban on my bicycle with Jock chasing after as fast as his little legs would carry him.

### **Primary education**

As far as I was concerned I attended school far too early. In fact, looking back on the experience, I would have preferred to have missed this life's encounter altogether. Tree Tops nursery school, where I started a life-long resistance against regimentation, had us sitting neatly behind small tables heavily painted in glossy green which we scratched off while we played with toys or struggled to read.

Somehow I graduated to Durban Preparatory High School (DPHS) where regimentation continued in earnest. Here, summer or winter, we were corseted in uniform and endlessly threatened with an array of punishments if we dared deviate from the prescribed 'norm'. Here it was that I learnt

teachers string words together in a minefield full of dangers designed to explode childhood innocence. 'Kat' is not spelt the way logic dictates is a lesson I've never forgotten after a vindictive teacher sent me down to the lower class to be corrected. Such was the misery of the place that one brave deviant even raised a metal bar to defend himself when the teacher persisted with his brand of physical and mental torture. That words can be fun if their etymology is introduced as an adventure into the bizarre had to wait until I was at university and followed my own deviant path.

I suffered DPHS particularly having had to follow Ronnie who, every teacher drummed into me, was an outstanding student – but then, I worshipped him anyway. That aside, my lasting lesson from primary education is that warm milk stacked in the sun for our morning break makes me nauseous.

Weekends were a relief from educational torture and I enjoyed dressing up for *Shul* where I could meet friends. Here it was that Sam Ernst regularly delivered Saturday morning sermons. Launched with fervour I learnt from him that Jews had been slaves in Egypt 2000 years ago and I was imbued with passionate repugnance against injustice. Such was our abhorrence of human oppression that eternity could never expunge this lesson. There, you have it, it was not Marx after all who had corrupted us into opposing apartheid later in life but the memory of Sam Ernst's sermons!

After *Shul* we would wonder through town and make arrangements for the remaining weekend – Sunday morning on the beach and tennis at the Durban Jewish club in the afternoon.

The weekends, too, meant Habonim meetings. I relished the lifelong friendships nourished at this time, the sense of identity and above all the yearly camps. The smell of a hot canvas tent in the burning East London summer sun while I lay inside and struggled to think of something to write to my parents in the obligatory postcard still lingers on. This was real education.

If I suffered DPHS then Durban High School (DHS) was prolonged torture. Here regimentation was cultivated with consummated expertise. Uniformed in blazers and ties we were herded by an extra rank of prefects as well as teachers. DHS coercion ensured Machiavellian countermeasures and I gladly joined my classmates in subverting learning whenever possible. This is the singular skill I am truly grateful to have inherited from DHS. My only pleasure was the art class; my passion sadly tempered by the bullying teacher. Relief came at lunch time particularly when I joined my Jewish friends at the tea room where we messed about and befooled the teachers.

It was at DHS in 1954 that one day I decided I should succeed at something. Looking around the sports field after school I spied the unattended pole-vaulting equipment and visualised a sporting career ahead.

## **Special education**

My hoped-for future as a pole-vaulting champion was short lived. I tried a capriole when vaulting would have been more appropriate with the pole. So it was that I broke my neck, left my familiar world behind and re-entered as a 'disabled person'.

At Addington Hospital I can still vividly remember the forlorn faces gathered around my bed. Now I was 'person with a disability' and would bear a stigma as surely as those Jewish slaves in ancient Egypt had borne their mark of inferiority. I was paralysed, never to walk again, 'wheelchair-bound', life's ambitions had ended and the *joie de vivre* was no more. So it seemed to all. Except Mr Cyril Kaplan, the orthopaedic surgeon, who thankfully decided differently and the Durban Jewish community provided funds to ship me off to Stoke Mandeville Hospital in England.

Rehabilitation was stretched to fill a year even though the latter months were endlessly unfilled. But I did acquire some virtuosity needed for living – *tolerance*, from occupational therapy basket making; *perseverance*, from mindless physiotherapy 'walking'; *composure*, from forced

participation in the Stoke Mandeville games (where I ‘represented’ South Africa); *shameless recidivism*, from getting uproariously drunk in the South African style on the female ward at my girlfriend’s birthday party; *curiosity*, from seeing snow for the first time; and *respect*, from being bewildered by British culture. So it was that I learnt ‘life’ away from school is the best educator.

## **Secondary education**

Back to Durban after a year and my newly acquired British accomplishments were sorely needed in adjusting: to an impracticable home up 17 steps, re-entering inaccessible DHS after all my classmates had moved on, facing regimentation following a year free from educational restraints, making new friends despite isolation in the classroom during lesson breaks, and lonely weekends. Nevertheless I was inspired by the continuing friendship of former friends despite their changing lives.

It was time to move on and disregarding poor academic accomplishments Jewish benefactors encouraged university and I was offered a bursary. So it was that my lifelong interest in art was translated into an architectural prospect. It turned out this was not an appropriate choice. Planning staircases which I could never use with materials I had no chance of handling was no design pabulum. Architectural inspiration was starved yet further by daily mountaineering up several flights of stairs and inaccessible toilet aversion. However, architectural school was where I got to know Brian Bernstein. He was a gem of a man and undoubtedly helped make the impossible tolerable.

Before I left University of Natal Durban, however, there was one additional contest that I fought and won. I had always preferred the company of my dog exploring the exoteric environment. Books, I regards as esoteric, too intellectual for my taste. Now, to my lasting bewilderment, I suddenly obtained and wrestled with ancient Greek and German philosophy as well as classic British, American, French and Russian authors. In these books I was allowed entry into an accessible world.

Facing an uncertain future I met up with Cyril Kaplan once again and discussed what to do. Cyril was contemplating the need for a Workmen’s Rehabilitation Centre in Durban and we discussed the absence of psychological counselling at Stoke Mandeville Hospital which had left me ill-informed about an appropriate career. He handed over eye-opening literature from the USA which illustrated the rehabilitation model he wanted to set up. It was agreed that I should continue at university but now following an arts degree majoring in psychology with a possible future career in rehabilitation.

## **Further education**

So minded I left Durban for Pietermaritzburg where I took up residence in the barely accessible university students hostel. Leaving entrapment at home up the flight of stairs promised fearsome liberation. One of the first barriers I encountered in this new academic environment, however, was the hostility of the psychology professor. She questioned my ability to access aspects of the course but my ambition persisted and I immediately took to the subject. I have since learnt that such objections are nearly always rooted in ignorance and prejudice.

As I settled down the new university began to cleanse intellectual constipation. Despite periods of loneliness and access frustration I made new friends and debated challenging opinions. With pressing questions about the morality of apartheid came questions about all forms of prejudice. Could Pavlov, Marx, Engels and Lenin really have promoted such infantile concepts presented by some lecturers in their names? I had to know and turned to their own writings. Then there were other lecturers and fellow students who argued a mosaic of different ideas. Down the toilet I gladly flushed many stereotypes cultivated by South African institutionalised racism.

It was not long before I joined the Congress of Democrats (COD, the White member organisation in the 'Congress Alliance') but as the various resistance movements were banned our relationship to the ANC became blurred. Living in Pietermaritzburg had the curious advantage of enabling us to share both Durban and Johannesburg anti-apartheid perspectives and activities. On the other hand the political disagreements exemplified between Roly Arenstein in Durban and Bram Fischer in Johannesburg were often confusing to us. As the underground movement's activities increased in the early 1960s We provided support to a group which was active in the field. This was led by Ronnie Kasrils who later became a Government Minister in the post-apartheid State. The rest of this group were African and Indian from Natal. The whole group was arrested except Ronnie who managed to escape and we hid him until we were able to drive him to Johannesburg where he was assisted out of the country. Eleanor, his partner was also arrested but feigned a mental break-down and was incarcerated in a mental hospital in Pietermaritzburg where we learnt of her presence. She too escaped and we took her to Swaziland (if I remember correctly) from where she was flown into exile.

It is noteworthy that out of our Pietermaritzburg COD group Saul Bastomsky, a university lecturer, escaped to Australia. Tom Sharpe (a UK citizen and later author of several books and TV films about SA based on experiences in our group) was deported. Four members managed to flee just before police came looking for them. David Ernst, myself and Jeffery Rudin were eventually arrested (the latter changed sides and became a travelling State witness in our and other trials).

In 1963 I graduated with a BA(Hons) having majored in Psychology and Political Science. Of this experience I have little more to say: I enjoyed the psychology course but missed the enthusiasm that Professor Rooks brought to his class on Hebrew and its historical context. He stimulated an interest in unravelling dynamic social relations of the past which school years had troubled to weave into a shroud for burying critical discussion. Sadly, Political Science was suffocated in an absence of analytical thought.

With my 'bachelor' degrees safely locked away I then moved to Johannesburg on the next stage in pursuing my rehabilitation career: an MA in psychology at the University of the Witwatersrand. Here I was entrapped in an access difficult house owned by an avaricious couple who provided minimal assistance and cheap meals at high cost which was covered by the extended bursary. I needed to get away and moved to a hotel which was emotionally more satisfactory although somewhat less accessible. Here at least I could meet the changing flow of guests in the evening when I socialised. On the whole I met little of the familiar prejudice in this environment but sharing a breakfast table with a fellow guest one day proved enlightening. Full of admiration with the way I coped so cheerfully despite being disabled his attitude somersaulted when I claimed my cheerfulness was because I was having a permanent holiday sponging off people like him whereas he had to earn his money. He never spoke to me again!

I had chosen a research project on psychological aspects of disability for my Masters degree. This involved interviews with disabled people in the community; so I was spared having to fight my way into the environmentally hostile university. While the people I saw all lived in reasonably accessible accommodation arranging transport through a very helpful 'Cripple Care' society always involved stressful dicing with their and my schedules. Nevertheless I did enjoy the home visits and learnt a great deal from disabled people's experiences and thoughts on the subject. Some of these friendships continued for many years. I made an effort to include Black disabled people, there being a large number who were victims of crime, but my stunted language, cultural ignorance and access problems were barriers I felt unable to deal with at the time.

My research topic proved more difficult than presumed. The problem was deciding a conceptual framework for rooting the interviews, literature search and final analysis. The dominant medical approach to disability was inappropriate both from my inclination as well as the psychology

department where I was registered. The very limited psychology literature assumed pathological responses to impairment and located these within psychoanalytic theories involving 'adjustment'. This literature was almost exclusively from the USA largely, I suppose, due to the undue negative influence of Dr Guttman at Stoke Mandeville Hospital who presumed 'sport for the disabled' addressed psychological problems perfectly adequately. The only extensive literature focussed on mental handicap (learning disability) which at the time was not appropriate for my research. Due to my limited access to transport the field work was slow and I barely managed to accumulate sufficient data for analysis.

Staying in the university residence in Pietermaritzburg had greatly improved my personal confidence and ability to cope with the universal social and physical environment that was hostile to disabled people. In inaccessible Johannesburg I continued to develop but with no independent transport I remained 'housebound' and socially inhibited. I did, however, maintain stimulating ANC contacts.

## **Higher education**

In 1965 I moved into a flat with my cousin. This greatly increased personal confidence and my ability to organise activities more to my own tastes. With the anti-apartheid movement severely damaged by draconian State pressure in the 1960s my flat was home to the little political activity I was able to muster. When Nelson Mandela was arrested together with much of the resistance movement's leadership while organising the 'underground' Bram Fischer responded by also going into hiding. Once again I found myself in a supporting role for clandestine activity. Despite Bram's consummate performance as a lawyer he lacked the necessary chicanery to maintain a false identity for any length of time and his supporters were hard pressed keeping him to the agreed secrecy. Inadequate disguises, the need to maintain contact with known activists who were being arrested one by one meant his support increasingly devolved onto us.

With the departure of people before they could be arrested their books were relocated into wooden crates stored in my bedroom cupboard. There never was any hope of this literature being opened again by a receptive audience but the Jewish awe of books instilled in me made it impossible to abandon them. So it was that when the security police came after me, following Bram's capture, the banned cornucopia was opened by semi-literate yahoos with absolute glee.

It was late in the evening in April 1966 when the door shook with loud banging. I instantly guessed that this could only be the security police. I was with friends who had been sharing a pleasant evening and we all turned pale and wide-eyed. There was nothing for it but to open the door before they broke it down. For me there never was any hope of escape. It was my turn to join what many South Africans regarded at that time as the greatest of apartheid's universities, the state prison. I fully expected to be taught a lesson by the real professors of racism, the police torturers.

I started to open the door but it was shoved into my face. Three or four large men strutted into the room. Swanepoel was instantly recognisable. A large bull-like man, his photograph had appeared often enough in the press during political trials when accused after accused described their experiences under his hands. He looked me up and down sneering as the others wandered off to see who, and what, else was in the flat. I tried to ask who he was and what he wanted but Swanepoel just laughed. He never did identify himself or any of the others. Suddenly there was a commotion from the bedroom where the others had been poking about in cupboards, under the beds and wherever. They had discovered the banned literature. Swanepoel went off to see what had been found and for a moment I was left alone with my friends not knowing whether we would meet again. When the police returned my friends were allowed to leave.

Alone with the police I waited while they started making an inventory of what they had found. After some time they decided to give this up, perhaps finding copying some book titles beyond

their wisdom, and left the task to the next shift. I was told to get ready and then rapidly shoved to their car and driven away. By now it was early morning when we arrived at the interrogation building in Pretoria. I was hastily pulled up the front stairs in my wheelchair and, laughing in glee, they sped dangerously along a corridor, down more stairs and into the basement. So it was that I was interned under the notorious '180 day detention laws.'

I was in a small windowless room, or so it seemed until I noticed the steel shutter closing off what might once have been a little window. The hefty door was slammed shut and there was little helpless me surrounded by three glaring giants! After a moment of silent intimidation Swanepoel spoke, *'Well Victor, are you going to talk?'*. I looked at him and managed blurt, *'What do you want me to say?'*. He went red with anger and grabbed my shirt pulling me upright from my wheelchair. He began talking loud and fast, *'You better start talking and fast. You think you're smart. Everyone talks when they come here. People much stronger than you all talked and you will too .....*, and so on for five minutes. *'Make it easy for yourself'* he continued, *'We don't want to hurt you. You will talk and if you don't do it now you'll talk later. By then you'll be sorry you were ever born. When we're finished with you, you will be crawl ....'* he was pointing to the floor when he suddenly hesitated. Somehow what he was about to say, and no doubt had said a hundred times to his able-bodied victims, didn't seem the right thing to say to me, *'you'll, you'll be walking out of here'* he finished triumphantly, having found the appropriate words at the last moment for his ultimate threat.

No sooner had he finished this rant, and I had repeated my innocence of anything conspiratorial, then they flung open the door and rushed off gaily pushing me at speed. Up stairs this time until we entered an office. Here two interrogators settled down to begin firing questions. In teams of two for two hourly shifts this continued over an increasingly confused five or six days without a break. So it was, whenever I started dosing off, there would be shouting and water thrown at me. A 'confession' was needed and they began constructing this regardless of what I said. Frustrated with the distortions one pair of twins were making out of my replies I refused to say anything further and glanced at my watch to see when the next shift was due. This drove one interrogator into a frenzy and he tore my watch off my wrist. He sneered at me relishing his success. A sullen peace descended for a moment only to be broken by the loud chimes of the outside clock tower sounding the quarter hours...

Anti-Semitism was never far away and I was frequently asked why so many Jews were active in the anti-apartheid movement. The highlight of this intimidation was their contemptuous reference to Percy Yuter, the Transvaal state prosecutor responsible for deciding whether I was to be put on trial: *"He thinks he's safe but one day we'll get him too"*. I guess they had more respect for their Jewish opponents than their Jewish colleagues!

As the days and nights of non-stop interrogation came to an end it became clear that I was regarded as an evil invalid who had got involved with political 'extremists' as a compensation for disability. General van der Berg, head of the secret police, popped in to see for himself how the interrogation was progressing with the crippled leader of the underground – the stereotype maintained I couldn't be anything less! Before I was transferred from security police to prison authorities I was taken off to Pretoria Local Prison where I was allowed to wash and catch a glimpse of another anxious ANC member being dragged into jail.

With the five or six day inquisition behind me I was now stuffed into a car for a long journey which I learnt later had ended in Vereeniging. The only interruption was at a petrol station where, having informed my guards I would defecate in the car if they didn't stop, I was allowed to struggle into an inaccessible toilet. It was dark by the time we arrived at my new place of internment. Here I was issued with a prison card announcing that I was being imprisoned for the "misdad" of "sabotasië". The ceremonies over I was then pushed into a tiny cell and left facing a high barred window, out of

which I could only see the sky. I was squeezed between the brick wall on my left and on the right a bed with a bedpan thoughtfully on top. Behind me was a solid wooden door shutting out any view through the cell's grille door. I could move forward and back a little alongside the bed but there was no room to turn.

The light was never turned off and with no reading or writing material I either had to stare at the wall, a bit of sky, daydream or reclaim lost sleep on the bed. Peaceful isolation!!! After several disorientated days I was moved into a larger cell with a seatless toilet, high window and a second window too high for me but facing the corridor through which passing prisoners could stare at the dangerous politico. Here it was that I received the first of many parcels supplied by the network of anti-apartheid prisoner supporters. I now had personal toiletries, sweetmeats, a tin of condensed milk without an opener and packs of cigarettes: but nothing to read. In the absence of any reading matter I passed the time etching drawings on the silver cigarette paper with my comb. These could be cleared with my fingernail for another go. Days passed interrupted only by half hour in the morning and afternoon sitting alone in the small courtyard.

Then, without warning I was brought before a Magistrate and reminded that 180-day detainees were supposed to have this protection. Not expecting much as an 'enemy of the state' I didn't complain about my treatment until he asked if I had reading material. It was pleasantly surprising to see his anger about my total isolation. Shortly after his departure I was handed a Bible and American paperback Western both in Afrikaans. As a luxury, before the Magistrate's next visit, I was allowed to wash in a real bathtub. Fired by this experience I decided to do something about my situation and began cutting back on my food with the hope that this would force either release or a trial. I thought, whatever else, the apartheid state wouldn't want international criticism for a dead white 'cripple' while in detention.

After a few weeks of losing weight I was moved to Pretoria Central Jail hospital where I was ensconced in yet another tiny cell with outer wooden and inner grille doors. Curiously the solid door was always left open (due to an obscure regulation, I was told, when the cell was occupied) and I was able to talk surreptitiously with passing prisoners on the way to the nearby pharmacy. From these contacts I learnt that there were quite a number of political prisoners here who had been moved from Pretoria Local Jail to make space for detainees arrested at the same time as myself. An old friend, Costa Gazedes, popped up one day and I threw him a note, written on toilet paper, which he missed and it bounced off down the corridor while he brazenly avoided the warders and ran after it. Baruch Hirson, I knew from his trial before I was arrested, was unwell and had been imprisoned in a hospital ward next to my cell. We were just able to communicate through our adjacent barred doors. At that time I was receiving more cigarettes in my sympathy parcels than I could ever hope to smoke and Baruch, denied this privilege at the time, welcomed mine – in this instance thrown to him successfully.

Being able to see and talk to a few comrades made me forget to continue limiting my food consumption and I regained my appetite. A censorious view was taken of my increased *joie de vivre* and I was suddenly shunted off to total isolation once again but this time in Pretoria Local Jail where I was now settled in for what remained of the 180-day detention. Apart from the intermittent crashing of steel doors, slamming bolts and the 'clonk clonk' of heavy keys turning double locks all was silent during the day. But... at night there was a cacophony of shouting, whistling and wall-banging as political detainees broke through their isolation.

My cell was like a post office whistling and tapping away messages on the different walls to people some of whom I knew but most were only names that I'd heard. Bram Fischer occupied the cell above me on the second floor and we comforted each other with messages. He was completely isolated from other prisoners and not allowed newspapers. On entry to Pretoria Local, however, I suddenly received my daily copy from the support network. So every evening I copied out the

political and other interesting news in tiny writing on sheets of toilet paper which I folded into a small square. The next day during my half-hour exercise period I concealed this in a crack in the toilet wall, alongside all the other messages that everyone was posting, and Bram collected his mail when he came down to exercise after my turn. Unfortunately he was caught collecting his post and we were shunted into different cells. We never communicated again.

Half-hour exercise in the morning and afternoon was one of the few prisoner's rights that I was still allowed and insisted on having. So twice a day a black prisoner would collect me and push me round and round the courtyard (after I had been to the toilet and posted my mail). He frequently encouraged me to make a statement to the security police and, tired of his exhortation, one day I said that I was fed up being in jail and ready to talk. Not to my surprise Colonel Aucamp appeared the next day expecting to hear my confession! He was visibly angry when I had nothing to offer but I used his visit to request, as I had done before, access to my university research materials. I felt my isolation was a splendid opportunity for uninterrupted academic work. It was, of course, pure vindictiveness which denied me this right.

My cell door clanged open one morning and I was told to get ready for another move. 180 days were nearly over and I knew I must be charged, released or released and re-arrested. When they returned I was pushed to a waiting car. David Ernst, securely handcuffed, joined me a moment later and we were driven off at speed. David and I had communicated when one of our frequent moves placed us in adjacent cells and I had learnt that he was badly beaten. It wasn't difficult to guess that we were going to be charged. When we arrived at the Johannesburg Supreme Court we were joined by Roly Arenstein and expected a *Suppression of Communism Act* indictment.

The three of us were then driven to the Johannesburg Fort where we were locked up together in a large cell built into the outer wall. A small barred window at ground level looked into a pathway between us and the main prison. For the next few days we had a great opportunity to get to know each other in a way that Roly's banning had frustrated previously. At this point it seemed fairly clear that the State was focused on Roly's conviction and that David and I were appended to his trial to ensure this. As a freely acknowledged Marxist and opponent of apartheid Roly had evaded several attempts to convict and imprison him. The State's problem was that he had publicly broken with the *South African Communist Party* (SACP) because of disagreement about their interpretation of the revolutionary way forward. As I understand it Roly argued that first SA had to become a democracy and *then* change into a socialist state. The SACP disagreed with this two stage revolution, maintaining that change could be rolled into one revolution. While it was a crime to pursue illegal activities to overthrow SA capitalism and replace this with a Socialist State it could not be illegal to work for a democracy in place of apartheid. In our trial there was now an opportunity to judge Roly's activities illegal if it could be shown that he was working with Bram Fischer in the SACP underground.

We were incarcerated in the Fort wall for a week or two before being moved. During this time we would witness the daily intake of chained African pass and petty apartheid offenders being marched off passed our cell window towards their compounds, to the tune of warder shouts and baton blows. On Friday night there was a regular huge intake of these arrests. A small prison wing, with about six cages, was vacated for our custody and it is difficult to know whether the move was motivated by the need to stop us seeing the inhuman arrests or just to make things harder for us to prepare for the trial.

Having been refused bail we were now 'awaiting trial' prisoners and allowed to mix with others during the exercise periods. During these breaks I'd sit in the sun chatting to fellow prisoners who befriended me. Curiously I seemed to have a knack of seeking the company of big men who were protective and I was never made to feel inferior as a disabled person. The 'Duke's' bodyguard would beguile me with stories about the Johannesburg gangster scene and the man who made news

running wildly down Johannesburg town centre randomly firing his revolver when his girlfriend dumped him gave me lessons about guns. David exercised with other prisoners and Roly was consulted by prisoners about their trials. A queue would form and Roly would walk to the end of the exercise yard and back giving advice to the hapless culprit and then the next 'client' would take his turn!

During this period we were allowed visits from distressed family, although I think they were greatly reassured by our resilience over the past months. The Rabbi's visit was also a welcome break, which many found surprising for 'hardened communists'. His sympathy for our opposition to apartheid and criticism of those who betrayed the movement by becoming compliant State witnesses was refreshing. Then there were lengthy meetings with our lawyers; Misters Lamy and Bizos, and Advocate Zwarenstein who laboured to no avail – after about a month in court we were convicted.

Roly was handed a five year sentence, David got three years and I received eighteen months (with fifteen suspended because of being a 'cripple'). Thus ended our contacts, for we were separated when Roly and David were dispatched back to the Pretoria jails and I was relocated in the Fort hospital for a few weeks while the authorities decided where I should spend my time doing 'hard labour'. This was in fact only a large cell with about four beds where prisoners were held for short periods. Here I spent several terrifying nights cowering with other prisoners while a sleepless and very disturbed inmate walked about all night threatening us with mayhem.

So it was almost a relief to find that I was on the way back to Vereeniging jail. But I felt that if I must be locked away I should at least have the right to 'suffer' with my comrades and so I stopped eating again, this time more earnestly. The message was taken and I was transferred back to Pretoria Central Jail where I was 'bed-ridden' for the remainder of my incarceration. Here a murderer, who insisted on showing me photographs of his mutilated victim from his trial, tenderly cared to my toiletry and meal-time needs. Unfortunately for me white political prisoners were now all back at the Pretoria Local Jail so I never did get to meet them in person.

As a newly convicted prisoner I was not allowed reading material and cigarettes, etc. This, I thought, would be an excellent incentive to stop smoking. Unfortunately everyone was sympathetic to my plight and I was inundated with more prison grade cigarettes than I could ever hope to smoke. A special luxury was to be given a few 'proper' cigarettes by a blind prisoner who left each day for guide dog training and smuggled in various treats on his return to jail. He would enter the locked ward making a show of taping away with his white cane in the evening. One day he returned without his cane: '*I can see*' he said grinning as he gathered his belongings. His scheme for an early release on a long sentence had been exposed!

Having 'served' my sentence I was released and went to live with my brother and sister-in-law in their flat in Johannesburg. My aim now was to complete my MA as soon as possible and then move to the UK where I hoped I would, at last, be able to pursue my chosen career working as a psychologist with disabled people. Before leaving South Africa as a political refugee, however, I was given one final and lasting lesson about the meaning of 'disability'. I was served with a five year banning order which limited my 'right' to unrestricted socialising, travel, education and employment. But, as every disabled person knows, as a social group we are denied these 'rights' anyway!

It took quite a while to get back into a study mood and not wanting to imperil friends or relatives I avoided social contacts. I did, however, feel the need for a some study respite and when my brother was invited to a Pesach dinner with our relatives we assumed that I too was invited. As my banning did not allow attendance at gatherings of more than two people I had to request the magistrate's permission! Sadly, when our relatives heard this they insisted their invitation did not

included me; excusing this disgraceful behaviour with reference to their business's government contracts.

I had a final task to complete before returning to Durban and saying goodbye to my parents. My political books and literature – these had been carted away by the police when I was arrested. The banned publications had special meaning for me and I wanted them back. So I went to the security police offices in Johannesburg and was directed to a room chock-a-block full with books and crates of literature. With several of my former interrogators and some publicly acknowledged police spies looking on at this mad 'cripple' (no one had ever done this before) I set about packing what I wanted to take away. There was no way of my detecting what had been removed from my flat so I packed as much as I could get into a taxi.

Once my MA had been secured I left South Africa on an '*exit permit*' with a letter from the British embassy that I would be allowed entry into the UK.

### **Emancipated education!**

My first task on arrival in Britain in 1968 was making contact with the ANC and reporting my experiences. This re-established my membership and gave access to the South African exile community. Activity in the Anti-Apartheid movement (AAM) quickly followed with many new friends. Amongst my earliest contacts was Elizabeth Lewin, the daughter of retired Witwatersrand Professor Julius and Eleanor Lewin. She worked as a physiotherapist and assisted me in making contact with services for disabled people in the UK. The family had moved to Britain when their public opposition to apartheid was drawing increasing police attention. When Nelson Mandela was 'underground' he had been secretly photographed and interviewed in their house. Six months later Liz and I were married at the *South Place Ethical Society* with close family and Sir Robert and Lady Birley present. The marriage was followed by a grand party with ANC exiles and AAM members.

Arriving in Britain was a new beginning. For the first time since I became disabled Liz helped me appreciate that it was possible to live a completely independent life. With her encouragement I started attending meetings of disabled people's organisations. At one of these meetings I met Paul and Judy Hunt who were leading activists in the disabled people's movement. Talking to them was a revolution in thinking and suddenly the segregation imposed on black South Africans by apartheid and the universal segregation imposed on disabled people seemed the same. Paul proposed setting up a radical organisation and I happily joined in forming the *Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation* (UPIAS). Members of this new group shared common experiences of systematic segregation and prejudice, and we all believed in campaigning for an integrated society. Like most people I had started with a negative perception and understanding of disabled people and now, amongst my new-found friends, I began a process of reworking my disability-related prejudices.

Our first task was to redefine the meaning of 'disability'. This involved lengthy discussion which culminated in definitions which I first drafted. In this definition we firstly made a distinction between the physical impairment and the social situation, called 'disability', of people with impairments. We therefore defined *impairment* as lacking part of or all of a limb, or having a defective limb, organ or mechanism of the body; and *disability* as the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organisation which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities. Physical disability is therefore a particular form of social oppression.

To disseminate this interpretation to a wider audience I wrote a popular cartoon series for the *Link* television programme broadcast on Sunday mornings. Using the language and experience of apartheid I invented a story about an apartheid-like segregated village where disabled people

control all aspects of society. They then design the social and physical environment exclusively for themselves. Ceiling and door heights, for example, are built to suit people who use wheelchairs. Consequently ambulant non-disabled people continually bang their heads against the inaccessible environment, become socially dysfunctional and are denied access into employment, public transport, education, housing, etc. – they become disabled! The story ends with alliance building for a different kind of society where everyone can participate as an equal citizen.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s I was involved with a wide range of people in different local and national disability organisations. I helped set up the *British Council of Organisations of Disabled People* (BCODP) and was its first chair. This is the national representative body of all disabled people in the UK. In 1981 I represented Britain at the first World Congress of the newly established *Disabled People's International* (DPI) in Singapore and was elected onto the World Council as one of the five European region's representatives. In this role I came to enjoy the company of very many disabled people at meetings around the world. Clearly, there was a growing sense of identity emerging amongst the community of disabled people. Back in the UK I tried to give this kinship an organisational home and helped found the first disability arts and culture organisation. Festivals 'celebrating disability' are now a regular feature of life in Britain.

My work in the disability organisations and anti-apartheid movement led to demonstrations outside the Stoke Mandeville games which the SA disabled sports team regularly attended. We set up a *Disabled People Against Apartheid* organisation and campaigned for the exclusion of SA in line with the international sports boycott. Pro-apartheid racists argued that the boycott should not apply to 'tragic but brave cripples'! However, our campaigns were successful and SA was eventually suspended.

Disability-related activity occupied much of my time but I still had not obtained employment in this field. When I left South Africa I understood that I would have to complete an internship in the National Health Service (NHS) before I could work independently as a clinical psychologist with disabled people. Ideally I should have pursued this at Stoke Mandeville Hospital and I wrote to Dr Guttman with this in mind. But sadly, in contrast to the very positive replies I received from the USA, Guttman sent a terse response to my enquiry which not only repeated his silly notion that sport was the answer to disabled people's problems but adding that I should not have got involved in the anti-apartheid struggle for liberation (this from a man who was a refugee from Nazi Germany!).

I had no choice, then, but to find a post, after many job applications, in the psychiatric field. Here I worked for a number of years on the usual career ladder until I was a Senior Psychologist based in a psychiatric unit at a general hospital. Since there was still no prospect of working with disabled people via this route I decided to shift over to the educational psychology profession where my interests might be realised in special education. This change, however, meant I first had to qualify as a teacher. I found a suitable college prepared to admit me (there were *no* disabled people being registered for secondary school teacher training courses at that time) but I now discovered that a student grant was not automatic. As a disabled person I had to get approval from a female senior schools inspector and a doctor! Both queried my suitability purely on the grounds that I was a disabled person. The schools inspector was particularly adamant saying that she disapproved of disabled teachers working with disabled pupils because we could get *too* involved. This argument became unsustainable when I pointed out that on this logic women shouldn't teach female students! Apart from professional prejudice and access barriers in finding schools for my placements there never were problems in becoming a school teacher.

I had hardly started my probationary year after qualifying when fortune set me upon a path far better paved for travel towards my goal than the irregular road I had hitherto travelled. The Open University (OU) had been established a few years before as a correspondence university despite

much academic scepticism. In addition to the usual faculties a small continuing education programme had been started and Dr Vida Carver managed to secure backing for a professional updating course aimed at service providers working with disabled people in the community. The course had just been made and tutors were being recruited. In contrast to my previous experiences Vida went out of her way to ensure maximum involvement of disabled people both in the course preparation and presentation stages. There were, of course at that time, a dearth of suitably qualified disabled people and she warmly welcomed my recruitment to the course team.

The OU course, *The Handicapped Person in the Community*, was I believe the world's first course in disability studies. It was clearly different to existing medical and rehabilitation courses and in an important way provided 'establishment legitimacy' to the emancipatory goals increasingly advocated by disabled activists. Within a short time I became the course chair and for the next 20 years I was responsible for maintenance, yearly updating and chairing the various course teams producing new versions. With over 8,000 students during my university tenure the course provided a nation-wide platform for questioning stereotypes, understanding civil rights issues and exploring new approaches to community based services. What I think was particularly invigorating was arriving at a location in my life's travels where career and political aspirations did not point in different directions. Work for the OU and disability organisations involved extensive travel in the UK and internationally and although not a natural author I cultivated writing skills in order to engage the disability and professional service providers with the new ideas.

I have been blessed with an exceptional wife, who tragically died ten years ago from cancer, and two wonderful daughters, Anna and Rebecca, who provide endless pleasure as their personal and professional careers unfold. Notwithstanding my fair share of afflictions caused by a spinal injury, cancer of the throat and a recent stroke all my life I have continued making my little contribution to the well-being of humanity and I still maintain this outlook in my retirement years.

Lessons from the SA liberation struggle, the anti-apartheid campaigns in the UK, the national and international disability emancipatory struggles and my academic contributions all seem to add up to a life-long affirmation of human tenacity in pursuing justice and social rights. I trace this abhorrence of social oppression, in part at least, to the values inculcated in my childhood experiences in Durban. When I went pole-vaulting at Durban High School in 1954 I left behind one destiny and moved instead 'forward to square one' and began living another more fulfilling, more rewarding and more human lifestyle than I could ever have predicted.