

Whence I come from.

Episode 1.

THE PAST BURDENING THE PRESENT: BITTER ROOTS.

The 'wall of silence' that has been erected over many years and that weighs heavily on the families of the victims and on the oppressors is almost impossible to break down because the descendants, the second and even the third generations, continue to hand down the myths current in the family, thus becoming 'accomplices' of the older generation.

Paraphrased from Israeli psychologist Dan Bar-On.

"An open bread-roll with dead missionary and chopped onion. And two cups of coffee" my aged mother said, in German, to the young neatly dressed Black waiter in Café Treff. Without a moment's hesitation he heads to the kitchen. It is 2009 in an eatery in Sam Nujoma Avenue, until recently known as Kaiser Wilhelm Strasse. I was born here in Swakopmund in 1945, a coastal village in a country that has changed name three times over the past one hundred years. It was colonised as German South West Africa (1884 – 1915), then became South West Africa under colonial and apartheid South African rule and finally attained majority rule in 1990¹ and now is Namibia. At Café Treff old habits die hard and my mother is pleased to have given me a bit of the taste of the past. With a pleasing smile the waiter arrives with the *brötchen* sliced in half, with steak tartare, a raw egg yolk, chopped onion, pepper and salt. In my childhood it was common practice in German establishments to serve 'dead missionary'. No one knew why or how this name slipped into *Süd-Wester Deutsch*. In our family past there are at least a dozen missionaries but this tongue-in-cheek description never caused offence. What it meant or symbolised to eat our forebears, was left un-said.

We stroll home. Mutti, as we called our mother, is ninety-three, her arm tucked under mine. We slowly shuffle back to the Lions Home for the Aged. On our way she points to a house and says "that is where Mrs Hitler stays". This time I am jolted but I also hear irony in her voice. Mrs Hitler I ask? Well that's not her name but your sister and I call her that after a recent incident. "We bumped into Frau Leineweber" an old acquaintance in a village where people know each other since childhood. "She asked me if I had applied for my Aryan passport yet?". My mother: what is that? What for? Frau Leineweber, as though it's self-evident: You should apply you know. My sister interjects: that won't work - we have a Black grandmother. Frau Leineweber retorts without a flicker of doubt, "You should not admit to that, don't talk about it".

I page back in my diary. In January 2008 I also visited Mutti. On a Sunday afternoon we are invited by Karin Arends, born Schuster, for afternoon coffee and cake with *Schlagsahne* (whipped cream). The words "*entschuldige, aber diese Scheissk.....*" (pardon me, but these bloody K...s) is used frequently. The word 'pardon' seems to be said out of deference to me. In this environment I know that family and friends felt sorry for my parents because of my political engagement at the other end of the political spectrum. I stopped countering their derisive vocabulary long ago. This generation is beyond redemption. Instead I encourage the conversation and ask questions. I want to tap into their knowledge of both the German and the apartheid past. And it pours out. Karin says: yes, my father served in the Nazi army and he was high up in the Nazi party in Berlin. My grandfather was a career soldier who believed army and politics should not mix. At the end of the war grandpa said to my dad: leave, get out of Germany, after all the crap you have caused (*die Scheisse die Ihr hier gemacht habt*); they will come after you. He emigrated to SWA. Karin says she later challenged her fathers convenient amnesia when he denied that he was ever a Nazi. She reveals that her parents personally knew Hermann Göring and that

¹ Kaiser Wilhelm was imperial regent when Germany embarked on its disastrous colonial conquests during the last quarter of the 19th century. Sam Nujoma was the first President after Namibia attained independence from foreign rule in 1990. Nujoma was also the long-serving president of the main liberation movement, the South West African People's Party, SWAPO.

her parents, out of loyalty to Göring called her Karin, the name of a country estate (*Gut*) Göring had appropriated from someone.

Back at home, in an effort to assert the world I live in, I read Mutti a chapter I wrote about Oliver Tambo, contained in a book on his life. He was the leader of the African National Congress, the liberation movement I had joined and worked for. Mutti knows he was a Black man and she knows that I know that she called liberation fighters terrorists. Because of her children, Mutti made many adaptations, but as she got older I saw lapses in what I thought she had internalized through my siblings and myself. After my tribute to Oliver Tambo she asks: "did I not take a secret parcel for you from abroad to someone in South Africa once?" And then adds: "you know when I was young I once had to take some secret Nazi papers for Opa (my grandfather) from Swakopmund to Windhoek – it was in the 1930's". I shudder at the incongruity.

The next morning at breakfast Mutti says it is probably good that Vati – the way we addressed our father - did not live to see the changes that came with liberation in Namibia and South Africa. And she adds: he was not a friend of the K... (kein Kaffernfreund).

My diary entry a year earlier (16 January 2007), when visiting Mutti, I recorded her saying: Under Hitler everyone got jobs and everything was so positive, "*aber die Sache mit den Juden, das war verkehrt, Aber davon hatten wir ja nichts gewusst*" (but this matter with the Jews, that was wrong, but after all, we did not know anything about this). Mutti says that Vati saw National Socialism as the means for poor people to get jobs and regain dignity. A few days later a neighbour in the old age home tells me that she joined the *Bund Deutscher Mädchen* (women's wing of the Hitler Youth). She explains that in 1935-1936 she got eighteen months of free training in Germany. She learnt cooking, dressmaking and secretarial skills. She adds: The problem with Hitler was that his mother worked for Jews who exploited her.

As I commit these words to paper I feel discomfort and embarrassment. Is committing these recollections to paper disloyal to my parents? Does it mean I don't love them or that I reject their love. I think not but readers may judge me differently. I want to separate myself from the past, but I equally seek to embrace my parents. I wish I am not an amalgam of such contradictions². And I tell truth because I believe I must try to build bridges toward those wronged by nazism and by apartheid.

The first-ever democratic elections were held in Namibia in March 1990. In the run-up to this my mother visited us, in exile, in London. I told her I knew the Swapo President and that he knew I had family in Namibia. I had spoken to him about the race attitudes of the white population and their emphatic opposition to black majority rule. He urged me to tell my mother that SWAPO was not anti-white and, would I convey his personal greetings to her and would she consider voting for SWAPO in the upcoming elections. I was there for the independence celebrations and my mother told me that she put her cross in favour of SWAPO, mainly out of deference to her children. She begged me however, not tell any of her friends.

² My father died in 1972, my mother nearly 100 years old, died in 2015.

After Germany's defeat in 1945, many Germans engaged in what they called *Bewältigung der Vergangenheit*, broadly translated as confronting the atrocities committed in their name and thereby dealing with complicity and collective guilt³. *Wiedergutmachung* became another new word in the German language – making good for what *you* have broken. No such injunction or demand ever arose for the White population in this former German outpost. They don't feel *defeated*, instead, like most Whites in South Africa, they feel that they are party to a negotiated settlement, thus no reason to recant, to say sorry or accept any guilt. Racism of all continues to flourish here and countless conversations are laced with prejudice. Today it is no longer overt anti-Semitism; in fact the Jews of Israel are much admired. Instead hostility or disdain is directed at Blacks, Muslims, communists and gender equality. Otherness remains the motivation of the old white generation. It asserts their identity which in turn affirms their feeling of superiority.



A photo taken ca. 1924 at the Kramersdorf home of the Jatow family in Swakopmund.

Left to right:

David, the oshiVambo-speaking servant, who worked for the family for decades. Frieda and Hermann Jatow, my grandparents. In front of Hermann the children Ruth, an unknown playmate, and Hermann Männe Jr. At the back their children Horst and Ilse with my mother Eva in front.

David's son Lucas, worked for my parents ca. 1945 until 1949, after which we moved to Johannesburg

I met Lucas around 2005. He came to greet my mother. He was a dapper old man, spending his retirement in the north, Ovamboland. Without hesitation my mother bid him to sit at the lounge table where she served him and me coffee and biscuits.

See below.

³ The German Duden lexicon defines *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* as "public debate within a country on a problematic period of its recent history—in Germany on National Socialism, in particular"^{[3][4]}—where "problematic" refers to traumatic events that raise sensitive questions of collective culpability. In Germany, and originally, the term refers to embarrassment about and often remorse for Germans' complicity in the war crimes of the Wehrmacht, Holocaust, and related events of the early and mid-20th century, including World War II. In this sense, the word can refer to the psychological process of denazification. With the accession into the current Federal Republic of Germany of the German Democratic Republic in the reunification of 1990 and the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* can also refer to coming to terms with the excesses and human rights abuses associated with that former one-party state.



“Old David (top picture) used to say, things were much better under German rule. When they punished us they gave us a beating and it was over. When the English (meaning South Africans) came we were charged, had to appear in court, pay a fine or go to jail”, my mother says on another occasion. Incongruous words intended somehow to mitigate the memory of former German colonial rule.

Fast forward to 2017. We are on the road from Cape Town to Swakopmund, to scatter the ashes of my sister in the Namib Desert. Halfway on this three-day trip I have a pre-dinner drink in the bar of the only hotel in Grünau. The owner and two patrons have their eyes fixed on the TV screen. Commentators are discussing the latest rugby defeats suffered by the South African team. These heavy men identify with South African rugby. The owner is quick to offer his analyses: If they would take politics out of rugby, South African rugby would return to glory. The others voice their agreement. Being looked upon as white myself, they assume my complicity in the actual meaning of what is being said: If teams were chosen without Black players, South Africa would become champions once more. Then my cousin and wife enter to join me at the bar. An uneasy silence descends. My blood cousins are Damara and the shade of their skin colour gives them away. The rugby fraternity watch the rest of the game in silence. Your racial feelings are only expressed when you are amongst your own. There lies a long road ahead.

Under the palm trees in Swakopmund, down by the beach, inter-locking pavers are being laid to create neat pathways. (Black) municipal workers are hard at work laying the pavers. A wry smile: “That’s Ovambo Lego”. The message is clear and affirms itself amongst the whites each day: ‘we are cleverer than them; they can’t do what we are capable of doing’. It’s a way of life. Everyday produces its new crop of race related belittlements. The divisions between black and white remain absolute. And, there is no fear that those who are the object of this denigration might get to hear this racist bunk.

There is a profusion of German language publications in Namibia. In one book an anecdote is repeated and voiced to any European visitor who cares to engage: A farmer one day shows his Black farm hands the framed black silhouette cut’s, dating from a former age in Germany. He points to the framed *Scherenschnitte* (Silhouette profiles are cut from black paper and then mounted on a white background) hanging on the wall in his dining room and explains that they represent his parents and grandparents. It is said that all gasped in amazement and then the senior farm-hand says: Oh dear, and all of them Black!

Despite my social distance from that world today not a day passes without me being reminded that reminded that I come from here and that this was part of the formative years of my life. First socially and then politically I turned my back on this past. Until I was twenty, German was my first and Afrikaans, my second language. Today I converse in English with my brother. My mother thought it shameful when she detected that my

Schriftdeutsch had become less than perfect. Rejection of that *Weltanschauung* and the values I was taught did not happen overnight. I discover testing myself to this day to be sure that prejudice is not left in some hidden corner in my head. Maybe that is as good as it gets. It might also explain why, once I started on my journey, that I could not stop in the middle; I felt compelled to cross the spectrum to the other side. Racism, injustice and inequality are not countered by extricating myself from its tentacles and then do nothing about it – somewhere in the middle. My natural choice was to stand up against it – all my life. But I continue to look for reasons, for explanations and even for mitigations that created then, and to this day creates worlds such as the one I came from. I want to get beyond the trite narrative that some are instinctively, even genetically, evil or predisposed to be on the sinful side of history.



That's me watering nasturtiums and sunflowers, ca. 1947 in the yard behind our rented house in Swakopmund. A high wooden fence prevented the hot desert sand from destroying the little plant life then existing in this desert town.

We moved to Johannesburg when I was four years old but every summer holiday we drove back to Swakopmund. We built sand castles on the beach and once won a prize for the most elaborate structure. We prided ourselves with a Christmas tree made from the leafless white thorn bush with candles burning on its bare twigs. We visited Vlodskabaken, an hour's drive north, where white people erected shacks in their desire to experience the 'old days' or getting back to nature. There we ate freshly smoked catfish, a delicacy second to none. Further north we went to the seal colony at Cape Cross in the midst of which stood a replica of a cross erected in 1486 by the Portuguese seafarer Diego Cao, long before the Cape or Namibia were colonized. On these holidays to Swakopmund, we being the visitors who had driven for four days to get here, somehow felt superior. We represented the big city – and looking down on the locals provided odd satisfaction.

In Swakopmund my father met up with his mates of old. They celebrated and drank in the less salubrious hotels of the town, *Hotel Zum Grünen Kranz* and the *Europahof*. These run-down Inns were remnants of a previous era where closing time was unheard of. My father could drink! He believed life was there to have a party. There was an occasion when he returned from a New Year's Eve celebration on the morning of the second of January. We kids felt unease when, on our way to the beach, we caught a glimpse through the pub's swing-doors where drunk men remonstrated and sang *lieder* probably sung in the *Bierkeller* in Munich in the 1930s. Vati expressed some pride that he could outlast the others at the bar counter. He was famous for calling the barman and calling 'for a round' for everyone there. He had debts at several hotels. We never owned a car or a house.

My father had a scar on his forehead caused when he and a friend, after a long night out, drove their Willy's Jeep into a lamppost in front of the Post Office. They blamed it on the heavy Swakopmund fog. The manual switchgear for the wiper at the top of the passenger screen had caused an injury that caused the scar. Alcohol was his downfall. He died after several heart attacks, not yet 58. When I rushed to be at his funeral a cold front between us had prevailed for several years. Unfinished business. Can I make peace with my father?

In the early 1970s my parents returned to SWA/Namibia. My brother and I were at Witwatersrand University by now. I had the privilege of having a state scholarship. My brother Immo and I regularly motored from Johannesburg to Swakopmund, initially by getting lifts with others, but then in my own car. Because of the chronic lack of money at home I worked as a barman from school days to university time. I bought a 1958 Borgward Isabella for R320.00. It's front fender was badly dented but with the car jack between chassis and the indentation could, albeit roughly, be reversed. We drove the fifteen hundred kilometre journey through the Kalahari and then Namib deserts at night, to keep the engine from over-heating. Once in Swakopmund I

got more work as a waiter or barman. To double my income I also delivered bread for *Bäckerei Putensen*, the later Café Treff.



Swakopmund (ca. 1948)

My brother Immo and me, both donning Tirolese felt hats made by my mother, at the beach in
