PRIVATE LIVES, PUBLIC SELVES: REFLECTIONS OF A JEWISH SOUTH AFRICAN

Homeland is a psychological space which is separate from, yet inextricably connected to, geographical space. In these reflections, I tell parts of my grandfather's story, and those of my own, to show that homeland is a multi-layered term incorporating aspects such as my Jewish ancestral past and the country of my birth, South Africa. These stories serve to introduce my presentation of a person I helped, who profoundly affected my ability to deal with the trauma of dislocation. He allowed me into his private world of emotional torment and led us both towards the discovery of a "homeland" within.

By
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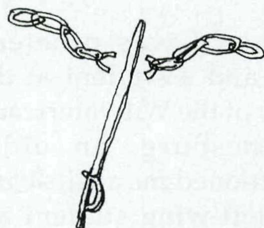


I was born in 1961, in South Africa, the country where my grandfather found freedom. In 1990, I left South Africa for the United States in search of freedom. For my grandfather and me, freedom meant different things. My grandfather left Neuenstadt, East Prussia, to escape from waves of anti-Semitic pogroms and to evade conscription in an army where Jews were used exclusively as cannon fodder. He arrived in South Africa in 1912, by way of Brighton, England, where he had served for a year as a butcher's apprentice and had learned to speak English.

Unlike my grandfather, who left his country in order to avoid conscription, I reluctantly chose conscription in order to stay in my country. My only other option would have been to emigrate, as so many of my friends did. I subsequently left South Africa to escape the psychological effects of two years enforced service in the South African Military. This brutal army of White men, which had been designed to maintain and protect the political system of apartheid, had so stripped me of my identity that leaving seemed to be the only way of recovering my sense of self.

Both narratives—my grandfather's and mine—are equally relevant to my clinical practice, as they are embodied in me, incarnated as memories, and expressed through my interactions. It is not possible for me to present *one* coherent narrative which will constitute my reflection of "loss of homeland." Homeland is a psychological space which is separate from, yet inextricably connected to, geographical place. By telling parts of my grandfather's story and those of my own, I hope to show that homeland is a multi-layered term, incorporating aspects such as my ancestral past, the country of my birth and the country in which I have settled. Each layer provides a different vantage point for the recognition of the multitude of identities which constitute who I am, hence, a multitude of narratives that can be told. I have chosen specific stories which I hope will serve the case narrative which follows.

Thirteen years after his arrival in South Africa, with limited financial resources and only two years of formal education in a yeshiva (in East Prussia), my

grandfather was able to establish a general store on the slopes of the Village Deep Gold Mines, which was situated on the outskirts of Eastern Johannesburg. A sign above the large entrance to what we called "grandpa's shop" had the following painted words, long faded by the sun, but nonetheless legible:

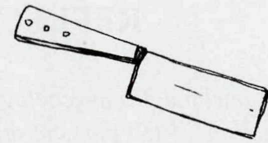
NATIVE SHOP
Proprietor M. Nossel
Established 1925.

The store consisted of a butchery, an "eating house," a section for general goods such as candy and cigarettes, all of which occupied one large space, and a separate section for haberdashery (items for men such as hats, shoes, suits, and handkerchiefs). My grandfather ran the butchery and eating house. His customers were Black "migrant" workers—"natives" who received special permits to work on the gold mines. They came from many different regions of South Africa and spoke a variety of languages, including Xhosa, and Zulu, South and North Sotho, all of which my grandfather learned to speak. The mineworkers called my grandfather *Makosi* (a term of deference, referring to *elders*) because of his particular skill at breaking up fights, which occurred especially on pay day when the miners drank *skokjaan*, a powerfully intoxicating drink made from fermented pineapple skins.

I didn't spend very much time at my grandfather's store, except to run inside to tell him that we were waiting for him. It would be on Saturday afternoons that my father and I would drive to the store to pick him up and take him to our house in the suburbs. I remember hurrying into the shop holding my nose to block the strange, musty smell of cow-dung floors and the stench of offal stew which boiled in a large cauldron in the kitchen behind the butchery. I remember rows of mineworkers sitting at long, stainless steel tables, bent over tin plates, eating, drinking and talking loudly in languages I could not understand. After peering into the glass counters of chewing gum and candy, I'd run back to the air-conditioned Mercedes-Benz and wait for grandpa to come out, while listening to *Forces Favourites* and news reports of the war in Angola, which were broadcast every hour on *Highveld Radio*.

When we arrived at our house, my grandmother would often pry ticks (from the animal carcasses) off my grandfather's head. "I wish you'd leave that filthy place," she'd say. "I'm surprised the health inspector doesn't shut the place down." She had long hoped that my grandfather would leave "the mines" and follow other upwardly mobile immigrant Jews who had set up business in the city center.

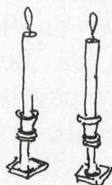
In 1976, consternation and violence spread across South Africa. In the two months following the Soweto eruption, some eighty Black communities experienced civil strife. My family, who were becoming increasingly worried about my grandfather's safety, persuaded him to sell his store. At age 84 and almost blind, he was still



chopping carcasses on a fifty-year-old butcher's block. In all those fifty years, he had never been harmed nor robbed, except by his British-born business partners who operated the haberdashery section and periodically stole money from the cash register. My grandfather never returned to Neuenstadt, which is currently in Lithuania. He is buried in Johannesburg.

When I was nineteen years old and a student at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, an older cousin cautioned me against any political, left-wing student activities. "Remember," she said with a sense of foreboding which was as old as my consciousness of being Jewish, "as Jews we are second class citizens in this country. We can't afford to make trouble for ourselves. We are lucky to have it so good. We must be as inconspicuous as possible." Our Judaism was a private matter presided over by my grandfather and father. It was not for demonstration in the secular (largely Protestant Christian) public, where the major points of differentiation between people were skin color and language. Judaism was imparted at the private Jewish day school where I received my entire pre-university education

and learned to read and write Hebrew. It was celebrated at the Friday night dinner table, where my mother lit candles and my father recited blessings, and it was remembered, during the solemn holiday of Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) and Yom Hashoah, the day in which the Nazi Holocaust is commemorated. These were private rituals, observed in our home, or amongst other Jews in the synagogue.



I was unexpectedly forced to confront my public Jewish identity in 1988 when as an able- bodied White man I entered the South African Defense Force. After ten years of deferments, during which time I had qualified as a clinical psychologist and had set up practice, I yielded to the pressure of the "call up papers" which had relentlessly followed me since age 15. In the moment that I arrived at the military railway terminus and saw the scores of young White men who were soon to become South Africa's soldiers, I realized that my life was to change irrevocably. And in the twenty-seven hour train ride from Cape Town to boot camp in Potchefstroom, it did.

I was surrounded by eighteen year-old recruits reeking of cigarettes and fear. I was in the proverbial bad dream from which I feared I would never awake. The boot camp was a continuation of the nightmare. In the very first hour I was yelled at by complete strangers, who issued contradictory instructions to go this way then that. And the words were in Afrikaans, the language that had conjugated apartheid, the language that I, as an English speaking citizen, had been compelled to learn as a "second language" since elementary school. My attempts to be inconspicuous were betrayed by two strong statements of protest that were more visceral than they were conscious, in that my body simply refused to do them: I could not march nor fire the rifle that had been issued to me. Despite these assertions of individuality, these expressions of resistance, I nonetheless feared that I would be stripped of everything that was private, my memories, my history, my use of my own body. I was convinced that the officials would be able to eavesdrop on my secrets, if I thought them too loudly, so I tried to hide. But it was not possible to hide. One of my secrets was already out that I was a Jew. I had been identified in the first hour as they called out the seventeen Jewish names in a camp of four hundred and sent us to a separate dining mess, where we were served Kosher food. Despite my determination to be insignificant, a private identity had been exposed and was suddenly public.

While there were no overtly belligerent responses from the boot camp officers towards the Jews, I was always aware of their hostility, which was often times expressed in ostensibly legitimate actions. For instance, since we Jews had our Sabbath on Saturdays, we were ordered to clean the toilets on Sundays when the bulk of National servicemen had the day off. We were the only group to be singled out for such duties. However, the hostility was finally realized as an incident one evening, when three of my fellow Jewish conscripts and I were returning bulky food trays from our dining mess to the camp kitchen. It was dark along a particular corridor, and we were unable to see one of the training lieutenants walking towards us. In the process, one of us accidentally brushed against him, also failing to stand to attention. The lieutenant's response was instantaneous: "Fucking Jews!" he bellowed. "I hate the fucking Jews!" He spoke in English, though we all would have understood those words in Afrikaans.

One of the Jewish servicemen, Sam, a lawyer trained at Cambridge University in England, strongly objected to the lieutenant's outburst and told me that he was taking the matter further to "higher authorities" at Army headquarters in Pretoria. He made a formal complaint to the Commanding Officer, and sought the guidance of his father, a well known Cape Town attorney. While I agreed in principle with Sam's actions, I did not overtly support them. I was afraid of becoming too conspicuous. I anxiously awaited what I was convinced would be a sudden vindictive retaliation—the mobilization of the forces against us, all the

forces of hate and power, a deadly combination especially for us Jews. But there was no retaliation. Sam's father had influence in the government. And within a few days, the lieutenant apologized to the Jewish servicemen, a fact that was quickly established throughout the camp. It was nonetheless an uneasy resolution as the hatred went underground and was delivered in whispers and hateful glances.

In 1990, three months after my discharge from the South African Defense Force, I left South Africa. It was forty- five days after Nelson Mandela's release from Pollsmoor Prison. Mandela's liberation promised a country in which personal and political freedoms would finally be possible. Though this was a moment I had dreamed of, I was nonetheless driven by a compulsion to escape, and to distance myself from my military experience. It was a compulsion I could not fully comprehend. I did not turn to look at the faces of my father, mother, and brother as I walked through the international departure gates at Jan Smuts Airport in Johannesburg. I was determined not to feel anything. Like a somnambulist, I undertook the move to America.

I had been led to New York by a series of coincidences. By a stroke of good luck, I managed to procure a job as a caseworker at a diagnostic treatment center for adolescents. Most of the clients were "minorities" who had been remanded by the courts on account of problems such as truancy, violence, and drug selling. The job was a means to an end, I told myself, as I girded myself against any experiences that might have evoked my own emotions. At first it seemed that the work at the clinic would suit my needs. The adolescents seemed angry, sullen, and distant. And I was removed, preoccupied by artistic pursuits and titillated by the myriad distractions that New York City offered. I was not moved by the stories I would hear during case presentations, stories of rape, violence, abandonment, and suicide. Emotionally, I was numb, asleep. I longed for home, assuaging the pain by assiduously following the articles about South Africa that appeared on a daily basis in *The New York Times.* On the 20th of June, the day of my 29th birthday, I participated in the ticker tape parade that welcomed Nelson Mandela to New York. It was like a dream in which the present and past were peculiarly merged in a place which was utterly foreign, yet felt familiar in a way I could not name. I was awakened from my dream about one year after my arrival by an adolescent male I shall call Ben.

Before I ever met Ben, I learned that he was a 14-year-old African-American who hated White people. I learned that he'd been brought to the family court by his mother, Ms. Green, after he had assaulted her lover, John, who was Italian-American. Ben's antagonism towards John had been developing into threats of murder. I learned that Ben had been suspended from his school for being in possession of a knife. I learned that he had a history of violent behavior at school. One report was that he had pushed down an elderly female school teacher. Ben had been referred for a psychiatric assessment as a result.

Ben resided with his mother in a nearby city housing project. Also in the house was Ruth, a 3 year-old little girl who was the product of Ms. Green's relationship with John. From the report of the court liaison, I learned that Ms. Green had divorced Ben's father, Tom, on account of his affairs with other women. Tom had subsequently become addicted to crack. For three years, Tom had episodically presented himself at Ms. Green's residence, begging for food and shelter. I learned that one such visit had resulted in a conflict in which Tom had slapped Ms. Green and spat in Ben's face.

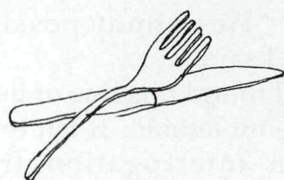
I had never met Ben, but I was filled with trepidation at the prospect of meeting him. I feared his response to the fact that I was a White male. Moreover, I feared his discovery that I was a South African. I had been in the custom of revealing my national origin to my clients. But in Ben's case I hesitated because I was afraid of the possible violence of his response.

The person I feared was constructed from the data I had received with an admixture of fantasy. When I first saw him in the diagnostic center dining room, the actual Ben was sitting alone. He was a robust, well developed youngster, with a handsome face and shaved head. His coat was still on, and

he was leaning back in his chair with his legs stretched out in front of him. Staring straight ahead in a blank gaze he said loudly, with obvious restraint: "I'm not eating anything here. I'm not talking. I hate White people. And I hate the Black ass dicks who work here. Acting like slaves."

Ben was assigned to me as it was determined that he needed a male worker. To my surprise he willingly followed me to my office, but upon entering, was immediately belligerent. He complained about the Black staff: "What's the matter with these people? Can't they see they're being used by the White man?"

I asked what he meant. "They were slaves," he said, "now they treat their own people like slaves. No one bosses me around, tells me what to do."



I asked Ben if he was actually complaining about the clinic routine. Grudgingly, he agreed, then changed his mind: "You don't understand, it's a Black thing."

"Is that because I'm White?" I asked.

"Yeah, what do you know about us Blacks, with your big houses and your big cars and your good lives?"

I told Ben that neither of us could ignore the fact that his skin was Black and mine was White. I told him that apart from the color of his skin, there were many things about his life I would be unable to understand, and that it would be his job to help me understand. I made it clear that trying to understand him was going to be my job. I agreed that we came from different backgrounds and had different life experiences.

"In fact," I said, "I come from South Africa."

He was interested in this revelation. "You mean the jungle?"

"Yes, the jungle," I said. "But not only that..." I asked if he knew anything else about South Africa. He shared some knowledge about apartheid.

"America's the same," he said, almost reassuringly. He wanted to return to the conversation about the jungle. He said life in the projects was like life in the jungle: "You've got to be violent in a high crime area or you'll get your ass kicked." Ben told me of his "addiction to fighting." He related the events that had preceded his admission to the diagnostic center. He said it was all John's fault. They had an argument over a game. This developed into a physical altercation in which Ben had struck John. Ms. Green had called the police to intercede.

Once reminded of this event, Ben launched into a tirade: "I hate John. He's an Italian. They eat like pigs. They're lazy bums. They can't get good jobs. They mess things up for decent Americans." Although Ben seemed to be filled with rage, his voice was moderate and his tone fairly neutral, considering his words. Although I was satisfied that we had established something of a rapport, I was unnerved by this first meeting with him. I questioned the possibility of his being psychotic and was eager to obtain his past psychiatric records. Since Ms Green had not signed our information release form, I phoned and asked her if she would come to the center. She was unable, and I decided to drive to her residence. I was accompanied by Ben and a milieu counselor who drove the van.

Ben was reluctant to accompany us, but entered the van nonetheless. After a few moments of driving, he said to me: "You know something, you're crazy to trust me. You should put handcuffs on me. I'm dangerous. I could do anything. You don't know us Blacks," he said. "Violence is our religion." I was very concerned that Ben's warnings were not in vain. I tried to calm him. I assured him we would be returning to the center. "You just want to see the way us Blacks live," he said. "You expect us to be civil to you. You take us, change our names. You give us slave jobs. Put drugs into us. Put us on public assistance. Make us live like pigs."

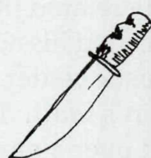
As we approached the housing projects, Ben warned us: "If anything happens to you, I'm not going to do anything. This place is violent. You're coming at your own risk. It's not

for people like you." He told us he was embarrassed to be seen with Whites. My impulse at that point was to return immediately to the center. I was frightened by Ben's threats and by his warnings. I was frightened by the ferocity of his words. I felt that the situation was out of my control and that it could easily become violent. I was walking as I was having these thoughts, though, following Ben up the pathway to the building entrance. I'd never been into these projects before, though I'd passed them many times on the bus. But I'd never imagined going inside. They were rather like the Black townships outside Johannesburg, which seemed remote but were actually close by. Places into which I never ventured. Places which contained different lives.

The lobby and elevators were liberally sprayed with graffiti. There was a strong stench of urine. Ben said, "See how us Blacks live?" and he escorted us to his mother's apartment. He did not greet his mother as he entered. The apartment was sparsely furnished. Ms. Green showed me gashes in the walls and doors, the results of Ben's rages. She showed me a television set with a smashed screen and a frying pan bent out of shape. She told me that John had left when he learned that Ben was coming. "He was afraid Ben would get violent again."

Ben accused his mother of putting John's needs before those of her children. He accused his mother of "getting rid" of him by placing him in the diagnostic center. "I had to leave. Why not your stupid Italian?" At this, Ms. Green began to cry. She said she had raised her children to live together with all races. Ben responded with anger: "That's what she does. She cries. She wants me to feel sorry for her." Again, Ben seemed to be in a rage. He lifted a chair from the floor and held it above his head: "I'm cruel," he said. "I like to fight. It's territorial. It's a war thing." At that point, I urged Ben to return to the van. On his way out the door, he warned his mother not to visit. He warned her to get a bodyguard for John: "I'll be back to get him."

On the journey back to the center, Ben spoke spontaneously of his roots. He said his mother was a Black Puerto Rican. His father was from Georgia, directly "from the slave boats." He said he couldn't trace his roots properly, because his people were stolen. He spoke of indigenous Americans being tortured and killed, of the injustice of White domination. Then



he said something I had not anticipated. He said something about Jews. The Jews, he declared, had deserved to die. Hitler was his hero. And he was sorry that Hitler had not been successful in killing all the Jews.

I had been prepared to account for being White. I had been prepared to account for being South African. However, I was not prepared for this. I attempted a neutral tone. I told him Jews had been oppressed and had been forced to leave their homes. They had been humiliated and murdered. I compared the experience of the Jews to that of Black people in America.

"But the Jews deserved it," was Ben's reply. We drove the rest of the way in silence.

Upon my return to the center, I rushed to the office of my supervisor, an African-American man. I related the events of the home visit, including Ben's comments about the Jews. He asked me if I told Ben that I was Jewish. I said I had not.

"Do you think he knows?"

"I don't think so."

"What if he does?"

"He cannot possibly know," I said.

I found this line of questioning intolerable. It felt to me like an interrogation from whose answers I could not escape. I was a Jew whether or not I identified myself as such. By attacking the Jews, Ben had attacked me. He had plundered my heritage. He had violated the memory of my grandfather, to whose survival I owed my own life. He had desecrated the legacy of my grandfather's siblings who remained in Europe and had perished in Nazi concentration camps. For the moment in time that he applauded

Hitler, Ben had become the persecutor, the oppressor. He had become the object of my fear. He had become my boot camp lieutenant.

My supervisor suggested that by succumbing to my fears of Ben, I might be communicating an inability to contain his rage, his fear and whatever it was that had engendered his identification with the violently omnipotent. He suggested that I tell Ben not only of my heritage but also of my reaction to his comments in the van. While this suggestion made sense to me, it contradicted my preconceived ideas of therapy ideas about self disclosure, about distance, about power.

Nonetheless, I asked Ben into my office and told him just how upset I'd been by what he'd said about the Jews. I told him I was Jewish. Ben was startled that his words had affected me so deeply, and admitted that he "didn't even know anything about Jews." We spoke about the power of words, about their capacity to harm and their ability to repair what has been broken. This made sense to Ben. He began to come to my office daily, revealing to me the painful details of his private life. He recognized that his hatred had more to do with feelings about individuals than with racial prejudice. Beneath the surface of his angry public persona was profound private suffering. Ben described the pain of "losing" his father to crack and the anger of learning of his mother's relationship with John only after she was pregnant with his child. He recounted the hurt of not really knowing where he came from.

These were Ben's private stories. By the telling them he allowed me to enter his profound experience of isolation, of displacement, and of fear. For both of us, it was an experience of shame and terror, of feeling ancient wounds inscribed in lost homelands and remembered in our bodies and in our interactions with each other. Thus did Ben also lead me to the frightening awareness of my own dislocation from my past, from my self. He bore witness to my claiming of my Jewish identity, unlocking my fear, making it possible for me to publicly declare my most fiercely guarded secret—my identity as a gay man. In this foreign country, so far from the place where I was born, I was thus led by an unexpected guide through homelands within homelands, and finally to a new homeland within.

On June 26, 1995, four years after meeting Ben, something decisive happened to my identity as a gay man. I participated in an international march on the United Nations, whose purpose was to affirm the human rights of gays and lesbians worldwide, and to demand that the United Nations provide protection for gays and lesbians who are the victims of human rights violations. Among the sixty countries represented was South Africa, once again part of the world after a thirty-four year exile from the community of nations. Together with at least a hundred other gay and lesbian South Africans, I marched behind the new flag of the free South Africa, behind a banner whose bold words read: *Gays and lesbians for the New South Africa.* I finally marched for my country. I marched for the past that had been forgotten. I marched for the memory of my grandfather who found freedom in life, and for his brothers and sisters who never did. I marched for the mineworkers whose faces I had never seen, for the people who lived and died for the liberation of South Africa. I marched for the gays and lesbians in South Africa, for the new South African constitution which outlaws discrimination on the basis of race, religion, gender, and sexual orientation. In the streets of Manhattan, amidst the jubilant cheering of thousands of witnesses, ten thousand miles away from homeland, I found a home in which I was free to claim—without fear—the many identities which constitute who I am: White, Jewish, Gay, South African, resident alien... □

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