

## DAVID BRUCE

'I went through hell. It took everything out of me to commit myself to doing it. Afterwards, I got this feeling that I was going to do it all along anyway. I was deeply afraid.'

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In July 1988, at the age of twenty-five, David Bruce was sentenced to six years' imprisonment for refusing to serve in the South African Defence Force, which he saw as defending a racist political system and being involved in what was essentially a civil war. He was released in April 1990 after the Appellate Division held that the Defence Act did not prescribe a mandatory sentence for conscientious objectors. He had served twenty months of his sentence.

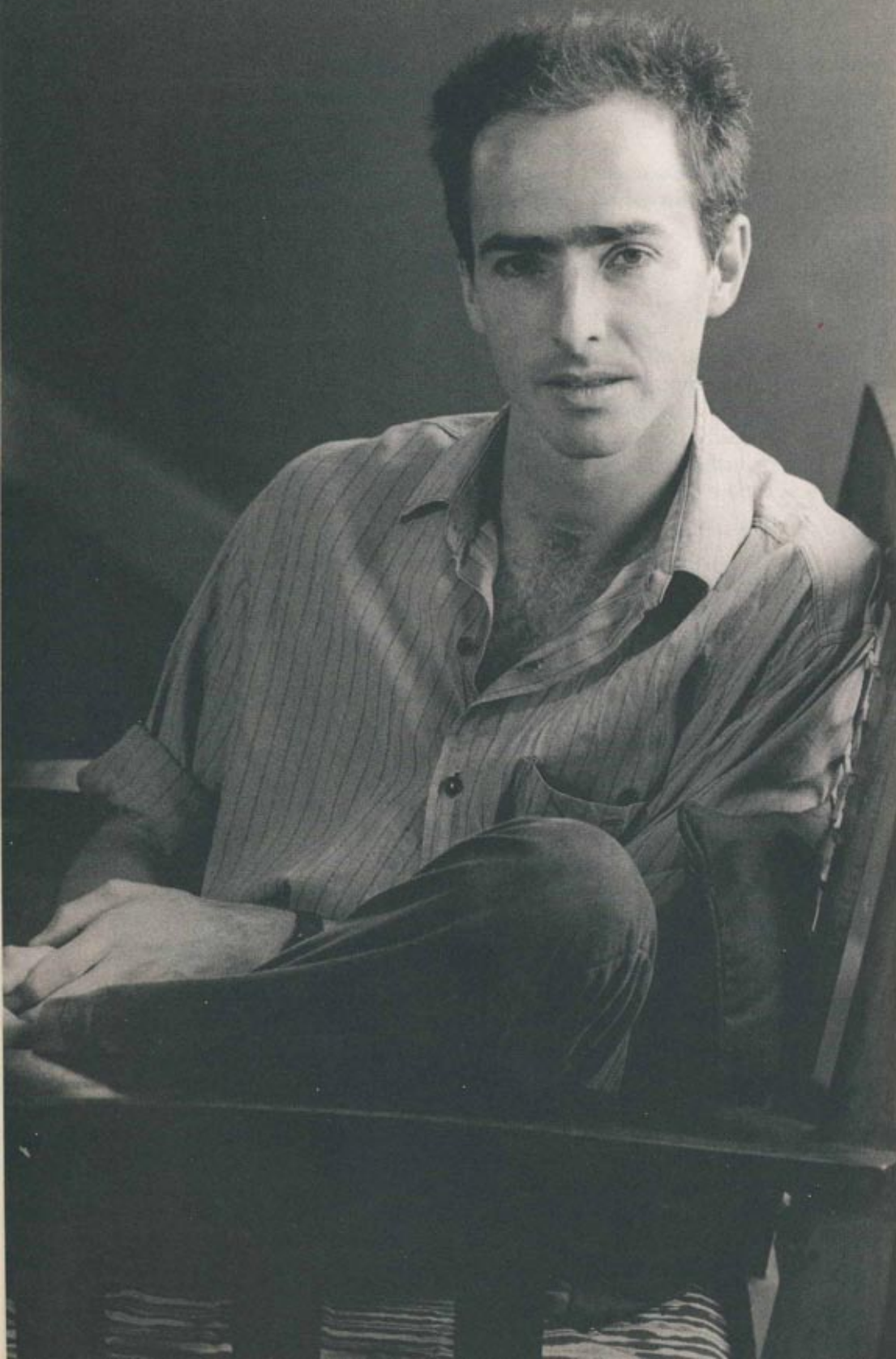
1987 was the year I decided to refuse to do military service. I could have got exemption that year, because I was still a student, but I decided to go ahead and refuse to do it.

On 5 August, I went to Sturrock Park and told them I wasn't prepared to do my service. After that it took almost a year for me to be convicted and sent to jail.

I didn't hear from the SADF for almost five months. In January 1988, they contacted my parents and asked me to come into military police headquarters. They asked me once again if I would do my service and I refused. They placed me under arrest. I was charged and released on my own recognisance. I went on trial on 19 July. On 25 July 1988 I was sentenced to six years' imprisonment.

At that time, the government didn't acknowledge 'political offenders', but they made a distinction between 'security offenders' and common criminals. Security offenders were kept in separate prisons from common criminals. Conscientious objectors weren't treated as security offenders. We were all placed in jails with ordinary criminals, and we were all kept in separate prisons. Conscientious objectors were also not allowed to receive remission or parole.

Fortunately, at the end of 1989, things started to change. Military service was cut in half. The State President announced that the sentences of conscientious objectors would be cut in half. My sentence was reduced from six to three years. Around January or February 1990, they announced that conscientious objectors were allowed to receive remission and parole like ordinary criminals. Potentially one could be released after serving as little as one third of one's sentence.



I could have been released almost immediately at that point. But then my appeal succeeded. The Appellate Division ordered that I return to the original sentencing court for re-sentencing. So, after spending twenty months in prison, I spent my last days in jail as an awaiting trial prisoner. I was released a few days later and eventually, in June, re-sentenced to the time I had already done.

**Interviewed by Julie Gordon**  
**10 January 1995**  
**Johannesburg**

*What motivated you to take the stand you took?*

I had a Jewish upbringing of sorts. Although both the primary and high schools I went to were predominantly Christian schools, my mother was an observant Reform Jew. Up till the age of thirteen I went to *cheyder* and I had my bar mitzvah.

Through my family and Jewish friends I learned about the Holocaust and I became strongly aware that Jewish people had suffered as a result of racism. After my bar mitzvah I hardly set foot in a synagogue. But I still had a strong sensitivity to anti-Semitism.

Unlike a lot of other South African Jews, my family equated the racism of the apartheid system with anti-Semitism. I saw the comparison between what happened to Jews in Nazi Germany and what was happening to blacks in South Africa. I worked for the Progressive Federal Party on a voluntary basis, once or twice, while I was at high school.

1981 was my last year at school. It was a big year for student activism. People like Sammy Adelman<sup>1</sup> were banned. When I went to university, I tried to emulate those people. I didn't have any sense of what I wanted to do academically. To some degree, my reason for going to university was to avoid the army.

*Are you a pacifist?*

No, I am not.

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1 Sammy Adelman was president of the Wits University SRC in 1980-81. He was banned in 1981 and went into exile.

*If there were conscription now, would you go to the army?*

It is hard to answer in the abstract. My one point of departure is that if I was living in the Warsaw Ghetto at the time of the uprising, I would have no problem taking up arms.

My actions were fundamentally political. I didn't only see it as a moral obligation, I saw it as something valuable. It was something of a gamble. To some extent I saw myself in relation to black youth of that time. Many of those people were picking up stones, throwing them at cossacks and getting shot. Compared to that, spending six years in jail wasn't such a great sacrifice.

Nelson Mandela was also a big influence. My parents used to get *The Observer* from England. I came across an article on Nelson Mandela. As it happened, my parents had known him in the fifties. Mandela spent twenty-eight years in prison. Six years was a small sacrifice.

*It was a courageous stand to take.*

Some people were getting involved in underground military activities. My impression was that avenue wasn't necessarily a worthwhile one to follow, because it often led to being caught. To some extent, the armed struggle was simply contributing to polarising things. One could achieve more by taking a non-violent stand. If there are avenues for non-violent resistance, and you can make more of an impact by taking those steps, then there is some kind of moral obligation to take that option.

Another reason was that I was, and probably still am, a very nervous character. I didn't see myself doing all those secretive things and maintaining my cool.

*How did your parents react to your decision?*

It actually brought our family together. My parents supported me. Their support made a difference to the whole thing. If they hadn't supported me, it would have been even more stressful. But it was a real strain for them.

*Was your mother a Holocaust survivor?*

My mother came to South Africa in 1939. Kristallnacht happened in late 1938. Around that time, her father left Germany to find a place where his family could join him. It took him the best part of a year. They ended up leaving Germany in the latter half of 1939. Twelve or thirteen members of my mother's broader family were killed in the Holocaust. I am conscious that it was my own family that suffered in the Holocaust.

*What was prison like?*

Prison has a whole system of categories: one, two, three and four. It is a control mechanism. I spent six months in category two and another six in category three. If your behaviour is good, you get promoted to category four. This means, for example, that you are allowed visits in the visiting yard. In categories two and three you have visits in the 'fish tank'. You are allowed more letters. You are also moved to a different section of the prison where the treatment of prisoners is much more lenient.

In categories two and three, we stayed in Delta section where they made it their job to make prisoners' lives a misery. For example, they conducted searches of the cells and inspections. You could get charged for not having your shoes polished properly. We stayed in dormitories, twenty-five to a room. In category four, at lock-up time, they would lock the gate at the end of the section. You were free to move around the section, you could watch TV. In the other categories, there is no TV. Once a month there is a video and that is a privilege. If you misbehave, the privilege is taken away.

*What was it like living with common criminals?*

There was a preoccupation outside with getting conscientious objectors classified as political prisoners but it wasn't a preoccupation which I shared. The important thing was to make the point that we shouldn't have been there in the first place.

Also, I didn't want to go and sit in Pretoria Central with a group of white political prisoners who saw things in exactly the same way as I did. I didn't want to be stuck with a bunch of leftists. Having been at university for six years, I felt that I would be wasting my time if I spent another six years with the same kind of people that I had been at university with.

I grew up as an incredibly introverted person. I am not a natural communicator. I came from a university culture, which is its own little world. In prison, I was with people who came from a very different culture.

There are different types of prisoners. There are those who live by crime in and out of prison, and white collar criminals who have defrauded their companies and so on. Generally, they are all people who act on the basis of self-interest. There was an absence of comprehension on the part of the people I was with. People would say: 'What's wrong with you? You can go to the army for two years, and now you are sitting here for six years. The army is *lekker*. I would rather spend six years in the army than one day in jail.' There were some prisoners whom I got on with better, but they weren't people from the world that I came from. In a way, prison was a life experience for me. I haven't travelled very much; it was my experience of seeing the world.

*Did you experience any anti-Semitism or other victimisation in prison?*

I experienced anti-Semitism at primary school and high school. But in prison there is this white, racist, Afrikaner culture. If someone calls you *Engelsman* or *Jood* it is often just a form of identification. There isn't necessarily the implication that you are subhuman. I had a deep fear of psychopaths. I believed that if I said the wrong thing to any of the people I was with, they might start foaming at the mouth and beating up on me. So I was afraid of expressing my political views.

People appreciated that I didn't need to be there. I was some kind of novelty to them. It was a big talking point. But people were decent to me. The vast majority of those people aren't preoccupied with politics. Your political views aren't going to determine how they see you, unlike myself at the time, whose view of people was determined by their political beliefs, often in a very narrow way.

*Are you still so politically motivated?*

In a way, I reject politics. To a certain extent, one can see politics as a game that is concerned with power. In that sense, I am anti-politics. In other senses, I am very political.

*Were you supported by the End Conscription Campaign?*

I wanted my action to be more than just morally correct, I wanted it to be worth while in terms of having an impact on the political situation. I understood that if it was going to be worth while, the greater the impact in news terms, the better. I knew that I was going to be sentenced to six years. Due to the fact that nobody had been sentenced to six years before me, I expected it to have a big impact. If I had gone to prison and there had been very little publicity, I would have had doubts about whether it was worth while.

One of the things that made it likely there would be an impact was that there was the organisational machinery of the End Conscription Campaign which would contribute to the publicity. During the period I was facing imprisonment, the ECC did campaign for me. I also had a support group of friends throughout the time I was in prison.

*What did the David Bruce support group do?*

In addition to organising visits, the major role the group played was to convey to me the support mail I started receiving from all over the world and locally. For example, Amnesty International adopted me as a prisoner of conscience. The support group replied to my mail and fed some of it through to me. I didn't have a problem with parts of my letters being censored. My letters weren't dealing with escape.

*Did you have any contact with other conscientious objectors?*

I visited Ivan Thoms in jail after he got sentenced, before I got sentenced. Charles Bester visited me in jail before he went to jail, so did Saul Batzofin. When the De Klerk era started, I felt strongly that things were going to change. I didn't believe that I had to stick it out to the very end. I wanted people to think about whether it was appropriate for us to consider going to the army — obviously a stupid question to broach with a group of people who are pacifists anyway.

But I was open at the time to the idea of going to the army. Through my lawyer, Kathy Satchwell, I tried to communicate with the other conscientious objectors who were all in different prisons, to suggest that we should meet to decide on this.

I suppose, in some senses, it wasn't a well thought out decision. The army was still a racist institution. But a lot of people I met in jail and elsewhere said that their first experience of living with black people was in the army. There are all these complexities to the world . . .

*Were you visited by any rabbis while in prison?*

I was visited by a few different rabbis. Rabbi Katz was the official rabbi appointed by the Jewish community in Pretoria to deal with the needs of Jewish prisoners in Pretoria Central. He visited us every week.

At first, Rabbi Katz was under the impression that his duty was to persuade me that I shouldn't stay in jail. He asked my parents why I didn't consider becoming a kosher chef in the army. This upset my parents. They didn't want him to undermine my resolve.

There wasn't much of a religious aspect to the visits. We chatted and sometimes he would pass messages to my parents. Sometimes Rabbi Assabi visited me. I appreciated his visits. He made personal visits to see me, whereas Rabbi Katz visited all the Jewish prisoners. On one occasion, I was visited by Chief Rabbi Cyril Harris.

*Why were you so quiet about your Judaism at university? Jewish colleagues involved in campus organisations with you say that they never knew you were Jewish.*

As I have said, I am not specifically spiritually committed to Judaism. I have been to synagogue perhaps a dozen times since my bar mitzvah. During my youth I developed a habit of concealing my Judaism. In primary school I was ashamed of being Jewish. I was the sole Jewish person in my class and I had an insecurity about it which was related to anti-Semitism. At university, I regarded myself as an agnostic.

*Did prison experiences make you more religious?*

When I was in jail, at one point I almost became a Christian. I read the New Testament and it had quite a big impact on me, but I had a major conflict of loyalty between Christianity and Judaism, and at the end of the day, didn't have enough of a commitment to commit myself to Christianity. So now I am a Buddhist, Christian, Jew. I can say that I believe in God. I pray. I respect religiousness.

*What do Buddhism and Christianity offer you that Judaism doesn't?*

To a large degree, I am irreligious. But I do believe that there is some God-like force in the world. Things hang together in some kind of way. From what I know about Buddhism, it is almost its asceticism and vagueness that appeals. Buddhism doesn't require that a person submit to a specific set of beliefs. I feel a loyalty to Judaism, but when I ask myself what I believe in, other than generally saying that I can feel that there is some kind of God, I just don't know.

*Now that conscription has been abolished, do you feel resentful that you spent all those years in prison?*

Not at all. The gamble worked out. My case was on the front page of the newspapers and made the international news which meant that it did have an impact. I could have sat in jail for six years and it would have been worth while. I compared it in my mind with armed attacks on major installations, and saw it as very successful.

We have been proved right by history. This is very reassuring. It was also good for me. I had been running away from making a decision about military service from as far back as standard eight. From that point on, I was in a permanent state of indecision. It had a major impact on my personality. If you have been running away from something for eight years and you finally confront it, if the effects aren't too destructive, it must be a positive thing. It enabled me to become another kind of person.

Today I am living with the repercussions of being a media hero for 'fifteen seconds'. What does this mean? Do I have to continue being a hero for the rest of my life? Is there some kind of normal life I should seek? I am still juggling with who I am.

*It is interesting that you describe yourself as a 'nervous person'. It was a very courageous stand for a nervous person to take.*

I went through hell. It took everything out of me to commit myself to doing it, and then I did it. Afterwards, I got this feeling that I was going to do it all along anyway. I was deeply afraid. I know that it was brave.



*Where did your courage come from?*

I grew up very aware of the experience of the Jewish people. I looked at it in moralistic terms from an early age. For me to be able to condemn what happened in Germany, I had to be able to say that in the same circumstances I wouldn't do the same thing.

*What do you think of the Jewish community's response to apartheid?*

I don't have a clear framework for judging people's behaviour. People can experience persecution and then be involved in a community persecuting others and convince themselves this is just the way things have to be. It says something about human beings, their limited ability to apply their own experience to their own conduct. There is a lack of self-awareness, understanding and honesty.



# LAURENCE NEILL NATHAN

'It is unbearably self-righteous and self-pitying to cry out when you are the victim of oppression, but to remain silent when other people are the victim of oppression.'

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Laurence Neill Nathan was born in Cape Town in 1959 to upper middle-class Jewish South African parents. He was involved with the End Conscription Campaign, where he held the position of national organiser from 1985–1986. Subsequently, he was consultant for the Institute for a Democratic Alternative for South Africa (IDASA) in 1989; senior researcher and co-ordinator of the Project on Peace and Security, Centre for Intergroup Studies in 1991–1992, and Executive Director of the Centre for Conflict Resolution from 1992 to the present.

Nathan holds a BBusSci/LLB from the University of Cape Town and an MPhil from the School of Peace Studies, Bradford University. He has published a number of books and articles on South Africa's security forces and has served on several security and defence advisory committees. He is presently taking part in the Cameron Commission of Inquiry into Armscor. Although Nathan participated in the End Conscription Campaign for political and not pacifist reasons, his personal philosophy is one of non-violence.

**Interviewed by Julie Gordon**  
**24 January 1995**  
**Johannesburg**

*Could you tell me something about your background? Were your parents politically involved?*

I grew up in Sea Point. I went to Weitzman Primary and then to SACS High School. My parents were liberals but not involved in politics. My grandparents weren't involved in politics. On my mother's side, they came from Lithuania and England and my father's parents also came from England. My parents weren't deeply religious, but I went to a Jewish primary school and we kept the Sabbath as Reform Jews would.

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*Left:*

*Laurence Neill Nathan (Photograph: Gisèle Wulfsohn)*

*Did your parents decide not to become politically active, or were they just not politically aware?*

They were typically uninformed, white, middle-class South Africans. I wasn't politically aware until I went to university. It was largely Nusas activities on campus in 1979 that spurred my political involvement.

*What was the turning point?*

A number of things. Nusas public meetings, pamphlets and other activities. It was a shock to read in Nusas pamphlets about the state of South Africa and the extent of social and economic inequality. That struck me more than the political oppression. Figures on housing and unemployment, disparities in education. It was a complete shock because until then I had not been aware of the impact of apartheid.

Listening to black speakers from political organisations and trade unions was also a real eye-opener because my experience of black people until then had been as servants. Now you had trade unionists 'socking' it to us. Their courage, integrity and clarity gave the lie to the notion of black people as inferior.

The other turning point was a trip I made overseas with a girlfriend in 1979/80. We went to Germany specifically to see a concentration camp. I found it a hugely alienating experience in the sense that it was difficult to relate to what had happened forty years ago. When I was there it all felt so cold and distant. You have a look at the ovens, and they are clean. The smell is absent. It had also just snowed. Outside it was in its own perverse way quite beautiful, with the stark contrast between the metal railings and the white snow.

There was a group of German businessmen who had taken the trouble to go to Dachau, but were having fun. They were eating in the memorial centre, joking. It seemed like the way you would picture tourists at Disneyworld.

On the way back I felt profoundly moved by what was happening in my own country. That was the turning point. I kept thinking: the Jewish community keeps the memory of the Holocaust alive so that 'it never happens again'. What is the 'it'? Surely the 'it' can't be limited to attempted extermination of Jews. The 'it' has surely to be that level of barbarity. That was what was happening in South Africa.

Just as we say in our families and our community, 'Why didn't the German people do anything, they must have known what was happening', the same could be said of white South Africans.

*Couldn't the same be said of white Jewish South Africans? Although they were keeping the memory of the Holocaust alive, they were not raising the issues of apartheid, certainly not in an organised way?*

There was complete acquiescence. When I was involved in Nusas and more specifically, the ECC, and sought to gain the support of the Jewish

community and rabbis in particular for conscientious objectors, there was little response.

Jewish friends of mine who were politically involved were all assimilated, non-religious, alienated from their community. They weren't doing what they were doing with a distinct Jewish identity.

It was always painfully evident at funerals in the black community or at marches that there were priests and imams, but where were the rabbis?

The overt and subliminal message throughout was the safe excuse: We daren't rock the boat. If we make waves in the sense of taking a stand against apartheid, then we become vulnerable to persecution.

Jews often acted with outrage that I should compare what happened here under apartheid with what happened in Nazi Germany. I want to maintain the comparison in a broad sense. I am not saying that the former regime attempted systematically to murder blacks by putting them in gas ovens. But in terms of a level of barbarity, in treating people as less than human and having utter disregard for them and their lives, I think a comparison can be drawn.

It was absurd for the Jewish community to say 'Apartheid is not as bad, therefore we didn't react', because we know they wouldn't have reacted even if it had been at the same level.

For that matter, where is the Jewish voice on Rwanda, on ethnic cleansing in Yugoslavia? The Jewish community is pretty much silent.

*How did you respond to the rabbis?*

I said that we had been at the receiving end of repression many times and we point fingers at people who stood by and did nothing. Well, that finger is now being pointed at us.

*Isn't the paranoia of the Jewish community in some senses legitimate, considering their history?*

They should have taken a stand. The Quakers, Anglicans and Catholics did. If you see injustice, you have to call it that, whatever the consequences.

*As someone uninvolved in Jewish life, who plays no part in perpetuating an ethnic identity, couldn't your words be disregarded as those of an 'assimilationist'?*

They could, but the challenge remains. They can categorise me in any way they like but I don't think their criticism detracts from my criticism.

*Do you think the Jews' history of oppression has made them more sensitive to social injustice?*

In this country, I can't see the evidence that the Holocaust has induced an acute sense of injustice where other people are the victims. The Jewish community lived with the fact of apartheid.

*You are not an observant Jew. Are your beliefs and activities connected in some way to your Jewish heritage?*

I can't recall any specific Jewish reference that caused me to think in a politically active way. But I am convinced that the memory of the Holocaust made me more conscious of injustice.

I can't remember a lecture, discussion or individual that made that connection. I made it somehow. The Holocaust was such a massive onslaught on the Jewish community, we live with it all the time.

I am not an observant Jew, I am not married to a Jew, I never go to synagogue, but if there is another persecution of Jews, I will be on the line. I am Jewish and that is that. That was a cumulative catalyst for my involvement.

*What kind of identity do you wish to bestow on your children?*

I don't have any children yet. It is not something we have thought about. However assimilated, my Jewishness is an integral part of my identity. But symbols don't have a lot of meaning for me. It is what they represent that is important or unimportant.

*What motivated you to get involved in the End Conscription Campaign?*

It seemed logical and obvious. I was involved in Nusas, I was SRC president in 1981/82. Here was a situation where white Nusas activists were going into the army. It was a complete contradiction. More broadly, it was iniquitous that white men, often against their will, were obliged to kill and be killed for apartheid. My opposition at that time wasn't born of pacifist conviction. It was a 'Just War' argument. This was not a just war, therefore we shouldn't be serving in the army.

From an activist's perspective, it was a great issue around which to mobilise the white community because conscription was the singular feature of apartheid that constituted a profound imposition on the white community. In every other respect, we benefited.

*Was the ECC's focus also on ending conscription of men into armies per se?*

The focus was on our specific situation. It wasn't a generic opposition to conscription, although we believed in a generic right to conscientious

objection based on the position of the United Nations, Amnesty International and Quakers. Our opposition was born of the role the defence force was playing inside and outside the country at the time.

In our situation, conscription was a total of four years, two years continuous national service and two years spread in the form of camps. It was a complete waste of time and the negative psychological effects were patently evident.

*Did you feel it would be more effective to mobilise around conscription than to get involved in underground military activities?*

I was quite clear then, and I am quite clear now, that I will not engage in violence. It is a personal choice.

It wasn't and still isn't a judgement against people who chose to take up arms to defend themselves. I was never opposed to Umkhonto we Sizwe and the ANC's armed struggle.

We saw ECC as a profoundly subversive campaign. We were challenging not simply a system of conscription, we were challenging the legitimacy of the state and its right to call people up. I think that is how the state viewed the campaign too.

*The ECC's political campaign was almost a passive resistance campaign. Was that a conscious decision?*

There were a large number of pacifists in the organisation. They were adamantly opposed to any form of violence. Many of us, who weren't pacifists, held that view for our own lives. We also wanted to be able to operate with some legitimacy in the white community. Engaging in acts of violence obviously would have undermined that completely. As far as we were concerned, we were a lawful organisation engaged in non-violent action.

*Were you detained in the crackdown on the ECC?*

After the first wave of ECC detentions, I went into hiding. I was in hiding for approximately eighteen months. Initially, I was in safe houses offered to us by supporters and sympathisers, and then I rented a flat under a false name for about six or seven months.

*Was it a nerve-racking experience?*

It wasn't actually. We were young and cocky. We knew that white activists, unless they were suspected of being involved in MK, would not get the kind of treatment the black activists would. I had to fear imprisonment, but I

wasn't frightened of being tortured or killed in detention the way black activists were. We were young and having a jol.

One of the fantastic aspects of ECC compared with certain other political organisations, was that we had a jol. We were socking it to the government and having a good time in the process. We had great media, great concerts, fun activities. Being in hiding, we had an adolescent sense of adventure!

*How did your parents cope with all this?*

Although they were not involved and didn't share my views completely, they were sympathetic and supportive except in so far as they were very concerned about my physical safety. The pressure was consistently to be involved in less dangerous activities. We didn't have any flaming rows. They always respected my views.

*Did they become more conscientised?*

I hope so.

*David Bruce said in an interview that in 1990 he felt the climate in the country was changing, and he wanted to get together with the other conscientious objectors to discuss doing national service. Would you have agreed with that decision?*

I am surprised to hear that. It was not a tenable option until we had a new government. The government was illegitimate, therefore conscription was illegitimate and the defence force was illegitimate.

*How did you avoid going to the army all those years?*

When I finished my degree, I registered for a master's at Bradford University in the United Kingdom. I wrote to the army from London saying that I had registered. Even though it was a correspondence master's — I spent a total of three days at Bradford — they wrote back a pro forma letter saying that I had exemption now that I was residing outside the country. I never informed them to the contrary.

*Would you support the reintroduction of conscription?*

Absolutely not. Firstly, because it is not strategically necessary. We have more soldiers than we need because of the integration of armies. One of the major priorities of the new defence force is to demobilise soldiers, rather than conscript them.

We face no external threat that is even remotely foreseeable. All our neighbouring states are allies and even if they weren't allies, none of them



have the military capacity to take on this country. They never did, they don't now, and they never will.

From an economic perspective, I think conscription is inefficient. Some people argue that it is less expensive than a permanent force on the grounds that you can pay conscripts less money than professional soldiers. That argument fails to take into account the fact that you are withdrawing young economically active men from the economy for long, inconvenient periods of time.

In our situation, even under the new government, conscription would mean a brain drain. White, middle-class kids leaving university are not going to spend years of their life in the army.

Conscription at this time would also be politically divisive. It would be opposed by the churches, the white middle class, possibly by political parties opposed to the ANC. It may be that Inkatha Freedom Party supporters or the right wing end up as conscientious objectors.

*What sort of role would you like to see the organised Jewish community play in the government of national unity?*

I would answer in both a prescriptive and a non-prescriptive way. I can't help feeling that all people ought to take a stand against injustice and oppression of whatever nature. The Jewish community has a special responsibility because of its history.

However, I also believe that at the end of the day, people must sort out these issues for themselves in terms of their own conscience. The obligation to get involved should come from within the community and from within individuals themselves.



# THE COLEMAN FAMILY

'... the security police were responsible for propelling the family, as a unit, into involvement with politics.'

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Max Coleman was born in 1926 and Audrey Coleman (nee Goldman) in 1932, both in Johannesburg. They married in 1953 and had four sons, Neil, Keith, Colin, and Brian. Partly because of the political activity of Neil and Keith, who were both detained and banned in the 1980s, the Colemans senior became politically active. They co-founded the Detainees' Parents Support Committee (DPSC). In direct proportion to the number of detentions, which increased drastically with the State of Emergency (imposed late 1985), the DPSC grew to be a national movement. Audrey became a spokesperson for detainees, especially the thousands of children who were being held in jail. She spoke at the UN, and in Europe and the US, informing decision-makers about the level of repression in South Africa. Audrey is currently a member of the provincial legislature of Gauteng. Max was briefly a Member of Parliament for the ANC, but resigned at the end of 1995 in order to become a Commissioner on the Human Rights Commission.

Neil Coleman, a UDF activist in the eighties, joined the trade union federation Cosatu in 1989. He worked as that organisation's National Publicity Officer, and is currently head of its Parliamentary Office. Keith Coleman, detained because of his involvement with a student newspaper *SASPU National*, ran an NGO called The Community Resource and Information Centre. He now works as a strategy consultant. Colin is head of the Public Finance Department of Standard Bank, while Brian, who lives in the USA, is a specialist in Operations Research.

**Interviewed by Jocelyn Hellig**

**2 April 1995**

**Johannesburg**

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*Left:*

*The Coleman family. From left to right: Colin, Chivas, Keith, Audrey, Max and Neil (Photograph: Gisèle Wulfsohn)*

*Of all the interviews in this book, this is the only one with an entire family of activists. How do you account for this?*

**CC:** The answer lies with the security police of the old apartheid regime. They were responsible for propelling the family, as a unit, into involvement with politics.

**MC:** Our really active involvement started with the detention of our twenty-one-year-old son Keith by the security police in 1981. I remember clearly, one morning in late October 1981, thirteen or fourteen hefty security policemen arrived at our door at about 5 o'clock asking where Keith was. This was the typical nightmare that one has about security police and it was the start of a real turnaround in our lives.

**AC:** Keith wasn't staying with us at the time, something the security police knew very well. They said they had already been to his place and they were just checking. When we managed to get in touch with Keith to tell him the security police were looking for him, we gave him the option of leaving the country, but he refused to do so. He said he had done nothing he was ashamed of. He was a South African and he was staying.

*Keith, what had you ostensibly been doing?*

**KC:** I co-edited a student newspaper called *SASPU National* (South African Student Press Union newspaper) with my friend Clive van Heerden. In addition to the role that students traditionally play in oppressive societies — being a step ahead, and more vocal and vociferous than others — we were trying to identify the nature of the Struggle and to understand it in order to strategise better. Although we were involved from a student base, we had one foot in the university and one foot in the mass uprising. *SASPU National* was reporting on the nature of the Struggle and articulating some of its history. We were a very vocal advocate of non-racial democracy. We wanted to see black, white and Indian mobilised into a political force, fighting for national objectives. So *SASPU National* was part of a broader effort. It was, in a sense, an organising tool which gave expression to political aspirations which weren't getting expression elsewhere — the commercial press wasn't performing that role. The security police didn't like what we were doing.

It wasn't just the newspaper, though. A group of people with whom I was associated set up training organisations that would provide resources to people who had none. This is something the security police knew, or they suspected. Of course we didn't admit it. We were also bringing in banned books — mostly to do with developing political strategy. We used to stand for hours photocopying anything that was thoughtful and insightful and gave perspective on what was happening in revolutions in other parts of the world. Anything the ANC said, at any point ever, was photostated. There

was just this incredible thirst for ideas — anything that would indicate the next step in bringing down the atrocious apartheid system. Eventually, the system found out.

The security police had a grander conspiracy theory than there was in reality. They believed that the Communist Party gave orders to the ANC, the ANC to white activists, and the white activists to the black activists. That was the crude way they thought — or at least some of them. I was seen as one of those white activists who was supposedly getting orders from outside the country and giving orders to the black activists. The security police had a fair amount of information on our activities.

There was a complex political game taking place. The security police and the nature of the spy network had become more sophisticated — we continually found spies trying to penetrate our ranks within the student movement. There were the brutes in the security services, but there were also the more sophisticated operators and they were playing a game with us and with the emerging progressive movement, which itself was becoming more sophisticated. In September 1981 they felt they had enough knowledge about a conspiracy. It wasn't really a conspiracy, there was a network of people, but it was a loose alliance. There wasn't that much ANC 'hidden hand' behind it and there wasn't that much illegal happening within it. The security forces swooped on about sixty people at various times. Their initial round was in September. They got me in October. They picked out a core group of activists and thought they had rounded up the 'conspiracy' which, to an extent, they had, though they weren't able to prove it. There were a few people who they tortured but who wouldn't talk. People were very brave. The security police didn't quite get the big treason trial that they wanted. And that was due primarily to the loyalty that people had towards one another and also, partly, to the fact that no conspiracy had in fact been created. So it wasn't simply that I landed in detention without knowing what had happened. They saw me as part of something... [But] the extent of what they put on to me, and what they expected to get out of me, was exaggerated.

*SASPU National* had become extremely popular, with a circulation of at least two hundred thousand. We printed between sixty and seventy thousand copies, and each copy passed through many hands in the townships. People began to buy it because it dealt with grass roots issues. The government of the time could not charge the editors because everything they said was true. They didn't want the newspaper to continue so they detained the editors, which is what they did to people who hadn't broken a law.

*What did you, as parents, do?*

**MC:** After the visit to our home of the security police, we went to Keith's flat and found that his co-editor had already been detained. Fifteen security police were in the flat looking for things. 'Why so many security police for two

kids?' I wondered. Keith later came to our house to discuss what to do. He didn't know whether to go on the run, to go underground, or to go along and offer himself up. Our decision was that Neil, Keith and I should go to the police together and confront them as to what this was all about. It is not possible to live life constantly on the run. I phoned the security police at John Vorster Square and made an appointment to come in. I was given the name of the interrogating officer. I then had this terrible task of taking my son in to talk to him and finding out what he wanted. He told us that the security police just needed to ask a few questions and that it shouldn't take long. We were told to leave Keith there and that he should be out in a day or two. Why, I asked, couldn't they come to the house and talk things through over a cup of tea? They replied that they didn't work that way. The few questions they had to ask him took five and a half months. We came to a brutal realisation of what was happening in the country.

*How did you feel?*

**AC:** I was extremely angry.

**MC:** We were absolutely horrified that suddenly our lives were being affected in this way. We felt that our privacy had been violated.

*Keith, how did you feel?*

**KC:** The day on which I was detained was a Sunday. John Vorster Square was quite deserted and very cold. There wasn't a sense that they — the police — were serving anybody. It was just a jail. The first question I was asked was, 'Are you Jewish?' I was asked in Afrikaans, '*Is jy 'n Jood?*' which sounds much harder and worse than the English. It was asked me by a man who was the size of a door — Captain Struwik — who was then promoted for his troubles, Major Struwik. He's probably now a colonel. He was possibly one of the most evil people I have ever met, and probably one of the most dangerous. He was certainly the largest person I have ever met. '*Is jy 'n Jood?*' he asked, and I said, 'What has it got to do with you and what does it matter?' — which was really the wrong thing to say. They knew they had pressed the button. From then on my nickname — when anyone wanted to talk to me — was '*die vokkin' Jood*' (the fucking Jew). For me — and I'm not particularly Jewish and I don't particularly identify with being Jewish — I was defined as Jewish whether I wanted to be or not. And I heard the major say, '*Bring daardie vokkin' Jood.*' 'Yes sir.' They did this partly to rile me. It's one of the games they play. Anything that gets under your skin, they do. But they were also anti-Semites. For them, it wasn't entirely a joke, although they used to joke quite a lot about it. There was another guy, Warrant Officer Prins, who was evil and just wanted to do me harm. I don't think he cared whether I went on trial or not, so long as he did me as much harm as possible. He took great pleasure in

riling me about being Jewish and, to an extent, I actually didn't mind. It was one of those things that you had to rise above . . . and not let it get to you.

*Apart from his intention to rile you, what lay behind the question?*

**KC:** I think it mattered to them — I think it is part of the conspiracy theory — that Jews are communists. I remember at that time there was one Jew who was in the National Party. He was my next door neighbour, Hoppenstein. He wasn't the only Jew in the National Party, but he was the only Jewish MP in it. I was very young and remember being horrified about this. I am sure that people like Struwik, from their side, must have been equally horrified. For a Jew to be a National Party MP was probably anathema. They were anti-Semitic. There was no question about it. But it was also a part of this conspiracy theory.

*Did you, as a family, know where Keith was and did you have any contact while he was in detention?*

**MC:** We knew he was at John Vorster Square and I went there every morning of the five and a half months, asking questions about where he was and what he was doing. There were other parents in a similar situation because of the country-wide swoop on activists. There was a group of about sixty in John Vorster Square. At the beginning, each family was acting in its own individual capacity, concerned about its own daughter or son, husband or wife. We then got together. Any demands were for all, not just for one. We thus co-founded the Detainees' Parents Support Committee (DPSC) with about twenty or thirty other parents, wives or husbands.

**AC:** Keith was in detention for five months in solitary confinement. He wasn't allowed pens, paper, books. It was then that Max and I went into a different gear. By that time Max had been very successful in business, we had a certain status and we realised — even though I had worked with Black Sash and had dealt with detainees — that when it happens to you, it is very different. Despite the influence we had, we were still impotent in the face of the laws of this country. We really couldn't do much for our son. We became founder members of the DPSC with David Webster, the Koornhofs, the De Beers, the Mashininis and others. We co-founded the DPSC because of our interest in Keith. But we soon realised that with so many people being detained, as impotent as we were, we were less impotent than the people from black communities. Our interest, therefore, broadened and even when Keith was released, we remained very active in the DPSC. After his release, he was banned for two years. He was allowed to go to university for study purposes only. He wasn't allowed to talk to more than one person at a time. If he was stopped in the corridor by two people, he was breaking his banning orders.

*Tell me about the activities of the DPSC.*

**AC:** We started pestering the authorities and demanding interviews with them. They tried to placate us by assuring us that the detainees were well cared for with good medical attention. But they would not allow us to see them because the law wouldn't allow it. If the detainees answered the questions satisfactorily, we were told, they would be released or charged. We started working our way up the hierarchy of the police and tried to secure all kinds of concessions — food parcels and clean clothing once a week. We didn't see Keith for a while. Then Neil Aggett, one of their number, died in detention on 7 February 1982. Once we heard this, we all congregated at John Vorster Square and demanded to see our relatives to satisfy ourselves that they were OK and in good health. If one of their number could commit suicide, as the security police maintained, what, we wondered, was the mental and physical state of the others? There was a bit of a public outcry at the time and we were all allowed to have interviews. We established this as a right even though it was contrary to the law. We could now see our family once every two to three weeks for half an hour. We were able to bring in a few items to try and make their lot a bit lighter. But we also realised that we must go well beyond the issue of simply demanding rights for detainees. We advanced to a rejection of the whole principle of detention without trial. We also mounted placard protests outside John Vorster Square once a week. Then we used to alternate it with protests outside the supreme court, which was much more high profile. There was a great deal of public sympathy both here and overseas. People overseas mounted protests in sympathy with ours — the same time and same day. We started making an impact as a pressure group. Having wrested certain concessions out of the local security branch, we went to Pretoria to see the national security police. We were trying to secure rights for all detainees. Through our resistance and by publicising what we were doing, DPSC groups started in Durban and Cape Town. It soon became a national movement.

*How did it operate?*

**AC:** It had a research component as well as an advice office component. Most of the counselling was originally done in the Black Sash office. But in 1985, because of the numbers of people being detained, it was decided that the DPSC must establish its own office, which it did — just before the Emergency. That was the time when thousands of people were detained en masse. The security police were going from home to home detaining people.

Our office was totally inundated with people. It was a privilege working for the DPSC because it was very much a community, black, grass roots organisation. Whereas the Black Sash, where I had worked earlier, was more middle-class white women, this was driven by the black communities. We



gave track suits, money, food parcels for people, and counselled the detainees and their families. We formed a panel of medical volunteers. As the detainees came out of detention, they went for a medical check-up. We had a panel of progressive social workers who assessed whether further counselling was necessary. We weren't only responding to the detainees' needs but exposing the issue of detention without trial, and it was that exposure that did the government a tremendous amount of damage. When they started detaining children, I knew the government had shot itself in the foot. One cannot justify the detention of children.

*Keith, how did Neil Aggett's death impact on you?*

**KC:** Just to put it into context, most people who I was detained with in John Vorster Square — and Neil was in John Vorster Square — were being tortured. I saw people literally being carried back to their cells. I heard people's stories because we had a communication system inside detention. Before I was detained, I had spoken to a lot of people who had been tortured. I knew about torture and all about interrogation techniques, so I was fairly prepared mentally for what was happening.

A very interesting thing happened to me. It's almost as though one switches off. One becomes cold and evaluative about what is going on in there. Obviously you are very angry and scared of dying in detention but, in a way, one switches off one's emotions. You cope with torture, stress and abuse on a minute to minute level by, in a sense, rising above it and cutting yourself off from it. So, when people were tortured, one asked how one could be most supportive rather than exclaiming, 'How terrible.' Because everything that goes on in there is terrible and one cannot let that worry one. I believe Neil did commit suicide. It was a forced suicide. He hanged himself. He was tortured so brutally. He told me, and another friend in prison, that he couldn't take much more. It was terribly sad. He was a couple of doors away from me and I saw him most days — through his torture — and now I feel more emotion talking about it than I perhaps did while in prison. It was devastating in a way that I cannot describe accurately. I knew it was devastating, but I wasn't devastated. I knew it was terrible, but I didn't feel terrible. I knew I should feel scared, but I didn't. I suppose one copes by not letting oneself feel the emotions that one would naturally feel. It's not a conscious process. It just happens. One's own survival instincts kick in. When Neil died, they came down and closed all the windows. There were little cracks in the windows, that you could look through. They made sure there were no cracks when they carried his body out. So I didn't see his body, which is maybe a good thing. But I saw the shadows of the people carrying him out and I knew what had happened. We all knew. I suppose I mourned in a way that was unemotional, but there was mourning there. And I remember seeing my folks — I think it was almost the next day, it was very soon afterwards — they were very

concerned and I remember trying to allay their fears, saying, 'Don't worry, it's OK.' In some way, I suppose, I was trying to convince myself that I was in control of the game that was happening there. Also, bear in mind Neil wasn't the only person who died there. Ernest Dipale, who was in detention, also died. It was going to happen and in a sense one prepared oneself for it. Death in detention was a fact of life, so to speak.

*Neil, what led to your detention?*

NC: I was the first in our family to embark on a path of political activism. I'd been involved with student politics post-76, and in the early eighties helped set up community-based detainees' support committees. I was also involved with JODAC.<sup>1</sup> The immediate circumstances of my detention were that in 1985, when a whole group of us were returning from Matthew Goniwe's funeral, we were informed that the first State of Emergency had been imposed. We knew that the security police would be waiting for us when we got back to Johannesburg, but we couldn't just abandon the other people who had travelled on the bus with us. Sure enough, when we got back, we were stopped by policemen armed with sub-machine guns and herded off to John Vorster Square. They selected the people they wanted and I was one of them. I spent four months in 'Sun City' — Diepkloof Prison — and when I came out I was banned or 'restricted' as they called it under the State of Emergency. I was prevented from continuing with my studies. I then became involved with the UDF, working from street corners. The whole period, starting in 1981 — and particularly in 1986 to 1989 — was very traumatic. I was in a constant state of tension and fear for my safety. In 1989 I joined Cosatu which, for me, was like coming out of a twilight zone and into civilisation. For the first time I could do ordinary things like use a telephone without fearing for my life. I worked for Cosatu from 1989 until the present.

*Why did you feel this sense of release? The Nationalist government was still in power.*

NC: The power of the trade union movement offered me more protection and allowed me to live in a more public place. Before that, I was hiding.

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1 The Johannesburg Democratic Action Committee, a white left grouping founded in the early eighties which later affiliated itself with the United Democratic Front.

*You say that Keith's detention is what propelled you, as a family, into political action.*

**CC:** Our family always had a liberal anti-apartheid ethos. We were what I would call 'broadly concerned'. My mother had been involved with the Black Sash. My brothers, Keith and Neil, had been involved in student politics. I, the youngest, went to Woodmead School and thought of myself as a sportsman and a scholar first. I was concerned about politics only in a secondary way, until the security police knocked on our door early that morning and woke us up to the brutal reality of what was going on in South Africa. It was now no longer just the theory about how people were being repressed and divided.

*It seems to me from what I have read that you had a very ordinary and quite affluent Jewish South African background. What was the extent of your political involvement before Keith's detention?*

**AC:** Max was politically active as a student. When we got married, making a living was really hard. Max, who was very much an academic, couldn't find a job in his field at first because everyone said he was too highly qualified. It was then that we discussed the possibility of leaving the country. Max didn't want to leave South Africa, so he took a job as a chemical engineer. He later went into a chemical and photographic business and, when I started to have my children at the age of twenty-three, I decided to devote myself to bringing them up. We were always very aware of, and against, apartheid. Max and I both belonged to the Congress of Democrats, but were not active members. I became politically active when our Colin started high school. I decided it was time, as a very privileged white, to put something back into the community and I joined the Black Sash. Although I was a voluntary worker, I committed myself to working there three times a week on specific days and times to make sure I stuck to it. I worked in the Advice Office and was an active member of the regional committee, holding various executive positions at different times.

*What was your parents' background, Max?*

**MC:** My father came from Lithuania, Kovno. But he went to Ireland at the age of one year and so he became an Irish citizen. My mother was born in Ireland. They left for South Africa in 1925 and I was born in 1926. Their attitude to black people was one of respect and I couldn't correlate that with what I was seeing every day. I had this great discomfort with apartheid as I saw it. Apartheid has been with us for a long time, long before 1948. I always say, 'The Nationalists didn't invent apartheid, they only perfected it.' It was in my student years that I became politically active and, thereafter, I went to London.

*Tell me something about your family background, particularly the Jewish aspect of it, Audrey.*

**AC:** My father was born in Johannesburg in 1889. His father came from Poland and his mother from England. They were very early pioneers. My father had a difficult, but interesting, life. By the time he was thirteen, he was out of school. He worked at many things — from a violinist in an orchestra, through having a pig farm to becoming a draughtsman for one of the first prestressed concrete buildings in Johannesburg. Eventually, he became the first agent for Singer sewing machines. He was rather an entrepreneur and ultimately became very successful. He started a string of dry-cleaning shops and eventually sold out to Advanced Laundries. He then went into a badge factory, First SA Badge. He was too old for the army when the Second World War broke out, and had a conscience about that. So when the war ended in 1945, he virtually gave his factory to an ex-serviceman. He didn't ask for goodwill [money] or anything.

My mother was from England and came from an observant Jewish family. My father's parents weren't especially religious. I cannot remember having a particularly religious background. My parents were traditional Jews, but in a very conventional way. They observed the High Holy Days. On Friday nights the family came together but we didn't really have a religious ceremony.

I was a *laatlammetjie* in the family. My nearest sister was eight years older than I. My mother was very much a northern suburbs housewife, although Max always describes her as being a frustrated woman — because she was, in fact, a very intelligent and capable person. She played her bridge and her rummy and I couldn't talk to her when I came home from school because she was busy with her friends and was not particularly interested in my schooling.

*What was the formative influence on your early political attitudes?*

**AC:** I had a brother, Gerald, one of four children. He was a typical northern suburbs spoilt boy and, when the war broke out, he joined up and was in the Signals Corps. He went to Italy where he happened to land in a group of very highly politicised white South Africans — Ivan Schermbrucker and people of his ilk. When Gerald returned, he was a new man. He is ten years older than I am and I always doted upon him. He was my influence in politics. I had always had a conscience. When he came back from the war, he got very involved in politics and eventually became chairperson of the Congress of Democrats in Cape Town. He was an architect. His friend, Ivan, gave me my first political book.

I was only twelve when Gerald came back from the war. There were torrid arguments in our house because my brother used to bring back Chinese and

Indian students and my mother complained that she had to sit and eat with these black people. Gerald was furious and there were many arguments about this in the family.

Gerald and Max were great friends — 'varsity friends — and then, when they completed their degrees, they shared a flat in London. Max was then twenty . . .

*So Audrey's brother Gerald had a profound influence on both of you?*

**MC:** Yes. I greatly admired him. He had a very good sense of political analysis and I would always discuss issues with him. When I returned from London in 1953, Audrey and I got married. After the bannings and State of Emergency in 1960 when everybody was lying low, we were involved with bringing up a family and making a living.

*At that time, then, you were politically dormant?*

**MC:** Yes, that would describe it. But we were critical and alarmed at what was going on. The eruption in 1976 confirmed our unease. Our sons had become involved in student politics, but to a far greater extent than I had ever been. In fact, the tail started wagging the dog at that stage and they started educating their parents.

*Your sons were the activists who were now influencing you?*

**MC:** I like to think that we influenced them in the general direction when they were very young. But thereafter, they made the running. They became really involved in mainstream politics. It was also a question of the historical period through which we were living. Audrey and I belonged to the time of the explosions, as I call them — the explosion of Sharpeville and then the explosion of Soweto in 1976. But as the tide advanced, and we came into the eighties, the whole nature of resistance and protest changed. And that was largely brought about by the attempts of the Nationalists to address the criticism of the outside world, criticism which was translating into isolation, particularly economic isolation, of South Africa. The Nats were anything but stupid and they realised that they had to do something about it. So they started evolving the idea of the tricameral parliament and attempted to accommodate the political aspirations of the different groups. But instead of achieving abatement of resistance, it was the opposite. While giving some small accommodation to the Indians and Coloureds, they simultaneously gave a clear message to the blacks that they would have no representation in central government in South Africa. For representation, they would have to go to

their homelands. This produced enormous anger. So the early eighties saw a squaring-off of positions. Our sons were directly involved in this process.

*What do you think it was that made your sons so outraged? Do you think there was a Jewish ethic that lay behind it?*

**MC:** I don't think so really. Because, let's face it, we were never a religious family and we didn't bring them up as religious Jews. I don't think there was a great discussion of religious ethic around the house. I think from quite an early age they were critical of the Jewish community, as Audrey and I were. Of all the communities in this country, the Jewish community is the one that should be most aware of injustices and should, as a group, be saying something about it. It was a disappointment that it never seemed to happen.

**CC:** I am not sure to what extent the Jewish tradition played a part in it. There is a proud history of the Jews against fascism in the Second World War and I am sure that that played a role in my development. We often spoke about it. My grandparents — on my mother's side — were quite involved in Judaism. This formed a background to our moral values in general.

*Keith, do you think there is anything in Judaism's ethical teaching that might have inspired you?*

**KC:** Do you really want me to answer that? Let me tell you that the very first time I read the Old Testament was in jail — because it was the only book I had for a long time — it and the New Testament. I was rather shocked at its contents. It seemed to promote division and violence — like the idea that Jews were obliged to kill off the Philistines.

*What about the fact that Judaism (in the Talmud, written when Jews were in a situation of political powerlessness) has subsequently interpreted these writings in a much gentler way?*

**KC:** I don't know much about other Jewish writings.

*I gather, Neil, that Judaism played little part in your own identity formation?*

**NC:** No, on the contrary, it did. That is the irony. Parts of Jewish culture were precisely the things that did. There are three elements: the religious side, which I'm not qualified to say very much about, the cultural and the historical. What is a Jew? It's a big question. For me — without getting into that debate — what was counterpoised was one's history — the history of

people who had come to South Africa — like my grandfather, my father's father, who was from Lithuania, who had experienced terrible oppression while he was in Russia. There was also the Second World War, the question of fascism, and the whole part of Jewish culture which actually incorporates a lot of *ubuntu*<sup>2</sup> — really a peasant and working-class culture in which humanist values are much emphasised. When I was very young, my grandfather gave me an old book of Jewish folklore. Its contents ranged from stories to jokes and it really appealed to me. It reflected the values I admired in Judaism — the struggle against oppression, and a consciousness about racism and injustice. This was very strongly contrasted with the way I saw the Jewish community behave in our country.

### *How did you see it?*

NC: Exactly the same as the rest of the white community — even worse, in my opinion. Because they were betraying values which their history and culture should have instilled in them. They, like the rest of the whites, closed their eyes to what was happening in South Africa.

The atrocities that were being perpetrated against their fellow South Africans bore a resemblance to what they themselves or their forefathers had experienced. They were doubly culpable in my eyes — and maybe this judgement is a bit too harsh — but that was the way I saw it. They used their Jewishness as an excuse not to engage in the South African situation. The double identity — the whole thing about 'We've got to watch our backs because of anti-Semitism' made it easy to assimilate into the dominant culture. But then to say 'Our real allegiance is not to South Africa, but to Israel' is, for me, completely abhorrent. That contradiction, between the values I admire in Jewish tradition and the way in which many Jews — not all, that is not fair — but many Jews, responded, particularly those in the more affluent section of society who have become so materialistic, alienated me from the Jewish community. They seemed to have thrown their values and ethics completely overboard. That was deepened by the fact that my family paid the price for standing up against the apartheid regime. The lack of *ubuntu* and solidarity that was shown to us — my parents were shunned and isolated — all of this reached a point where, for me, the Jewish community became more of an albatross than something to be proud of. I would certainly never pretend not to have a Jewish background, but I would not want to identify myself with the South African Jewish community in the particular shape that it has taken. That really was the genesis of my attitudes. It is not correct to say that Jewish culture and identity had no effect on me. It had a profound effect on me.

2 *Ubuntu* is an African term that denotes the inter-connectedness of all human beings, the promotion of human dignity and a sense of common belongingness. It fosters the appreciation of the humanity of everyone.

*Keith, tell me something about your Jewish identity.*

**KC:** My grandmother was not so much religious as traditional. I talk about her because she was a real matriarch, very strong. She kept Friday night, she celebrated the festivals, and my grandfather as well. They went to shul, and along with it came the Jewish culture, the food, the love, and with it, the absolute elevation of children to the status of gods. I felt Jewish. But my home wasn't. My parents weren't religious. So I had a lot of the Jewish culture without the religion. And I did have a bar mitzvah.

I went to King David<sup>3</sup> for a year and a half which was a very negative experience. I felt, from a very young age, part of a very multicultural society, very South African. I couldn't express it very well at that age, but I identified with the plight of black people in South Africa. I then went to a school which was basically homogeneous — 1 600 Jewish kids from very similar socio-economic backgrounds, very privileged, very obnoxious, very sure of themselves. Their behaviour was atrocious and I found it a very insular environment, very narrow, culturally, politically, socially. Anything that wasn't Jewish wasn't important. I came from a very different place, where breadth and diversity were important, as was exposure to other socio-economic groups and people and cultures. I was taught respect for other cultures and traditions rather than to sit on the commanding heights of my own tradition. It's strange, though, that a lot of progressive people did come out of King David, a lot of the student left. But at that stage of my life I was very unhappy and I asked to leave King David.

*What made you go there in the first place?*

**KC:** My parents.

*Why?*

**KC:** My older brother Brian, who now lives in the USA, went there, and enjoyed it. He was a very good tennis player and good at his academic studies and he enjoyed it there. For me, it was the wrong place. I really enjoyed the sport, but I didn't like the environment. I then went to Woodmead which was a much more liberal school and encouraged all those things which were valuable to me.

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3 See footnote on p161.



*It is quite clear that you all think that the presence of anti-Semitism and the Jewish historical experience obliges Jews to speak out against social injustice.*

**CC:** Jews have had more reason to be sensitive to the plight of the black people in South Africa. My premise is that they are not so much obliged as Jews, but as South Africans. As a privileged South African, I am aware of my Jewish background, but it is not a primary feature. It is more complementary. In my early teenage years, when I was in standard six, I was very concerned about the disparity between privilege and poverty in South Africa which seemed to be on racial lines. The country seemed to be propelled towards conflict — a conflict that it deserved, but one that I didn't want to inherit.

*Is it not a kind of inverse racism to expect Jews to be more sensitive than others?*

**AC:** No, I don't think we felt that it should be Jews only. We felt that all people should stand up.

**NC:** I am angry and disappointed at the Jewish community in South Africa. I really think it has missed a huge opportunity to assert its values and its culture in the South African context. It was this contrast between Jewish ethics and the actual life that South African Jews were living that alienated me from Judaism. I felt that there was more ritual than ethic. The content of the religion was disintegrating. I became, at an early age, very reluctant to go through with rituals with which I didn't feel comfortable, so I elected not to have a bar mitzvah.

*Was there no peer pressure on you to have a bar mitzvah, or did you not mix much with Jewish kids?*

**NC:** It was never a factor. I went to Woodmead school and the kids there were a very mixed bunch.

*Did you never miss not having gone through so important a rite of passage?*

**NC:** No. It made no difference to me. It had become so ritualised and bereft of its actual meaning. There was more concern about how big and fancy the ceremonies were and less about the actual content.

*How did your family respond?*

**NC:** The older generation, not my parents, were upset. When I announced my decision, my grandmother tried to send me on the typical Jewish guilt trip — 'You are going to give your grandmother a heart attack'. I also had the whole thing laid on me that I was going to miss out on all the presents. My

brother had had a bar mitzvah, so I knew what it involved. But I was very stubborn. While I didn't want to upset anyone, I said, 'This is what I am going to do.' It does seem like an obnoxious, precocious decision for a child of that age to take. But that's what happened. My parents didn't lay any great guilt trips on me.

They gave me the choice of whether I wanted to have a bar mitzvah or not. I was a rebellious child — the second oldest. I needed to be sure about what I was doing and why I was doing it.

*What part did your rabbi play in your decision?*

NC: That is a paradox. Rabbi Lampert was a rabbi who took quite a deliberate anti-apartheid position. I admired him as an ethical rabbi, and so did my family. But that wasn't enough to convince me that the whole ritual was legitimate. It all happened so many years ago, that I cannot recall all the details of his reaction. He told me that if I ever changed my mind, I could still have a bar mitzvah. My father had his bar mitzvah at the age of twenty-six.

*Neil, I gain the impression that Keith's feelings about the Jewish community are much more impassioned than yours are.*

NC: Maybe it's because he is closer to it. He's married to a Jewish woman. His family observes all the rituals. Maybe he is struggling with his Jewish identity more than I am.

*You seem to have opted out of the ritual aspects?*

NC: Yes, totally. My wife, who is of Italian origin, is much more attuned to that and she will say 'It's Paysach' and I really don't know any more what that means. What's Paysach? It's just not an issue for me.

*Audrey, you said a little earlier that your family were Jewish in a conventional sort of way. Did you feel Jewish? What do you mean by 'conventional'?*

AC: I was always very proud of being Jewish. I used to be hauled off to synagogue on the days my parents felt were necessary. But when I was twelve or thirteen, I had an experience that made an indelible impression on me. It was Yom Kippur and my mother slipped a slab of chocolate into the cubby hole of the car. She told me, 'If you feel hungry, just go out to the car and take a bit of chocolate.' I thought to myself, 'What hypocrisy this is. This is not for me', and I began to reject religion. I wasn't interested. I suppose one of my very negative qualities is being very — as my family say — black or white. I blamed my mother's interpretation of religion. In doing so, I rejected religion.

I wasn't analytical about it. It didn't mean enough to me to be analytical about it. I was, in any case, tending to become a non-believer. My brother, who had such an enormous influence on me, wasn't religious at all. I suppose if he had been more questioning of my reaction, I might have thought differently about it. He wasn't and I just went my way.

*You were only twelve, and it might have been your first time fasting. Perhaps your mother's reaction was simply concern for your physical well-being?*

**AC:** I felt that if you were genuinely religious, you wouldn't react like that because it would be against your belief. I just resented it. I started looking at the way Jewish people acted around their beliefs and customs and it became unacceptable. I had an aunt who was a very religious Jew. She was kosher . . . genuinely kosher. She wouldn't eat at my house. I can't accept it when people say they're kosher and go into a restaurant and eat prawns. I had problems with that sort of thing as a young kid. And that is why I distanced myself from religion. I always had the utmost respect for my aunt Hinde. She was a fabulous person.

She had a strict code of conduct and, for me, that is what life is about. She was a symbol for me of how a person who is genuinely religious should conduct herself. Another important development in my rejection of religion was that, when I first met Max, he was considered a very nice eligible Jewish boy. Max's father was Sam Coleman, who came from a highly religious family in Ireland. They were very Orthodox Jews. My father-in-law was the darling of that family, and was sent to Trinity to do medicine. There, he met a Catholic woman whom he fell in love with. He knew his parents would have nothing to do with her. She knew that her parents would have nothing to do with him. So they ran away. He gave up his medicine and they came to settle in South Africa.

*Was your father-in-law religious?*

**AC:** No, certainly not when I knew him and certainly not in a way that would have influenced him not to marry his wife. But he came from a very religious, very Orthodox family. Some of the members of his family, Bessie, Zalman and Leibl Feldman, had chosen to settle in South Africa so he followed them. When Max reached the age of thirteen, he learned for his bar mitzvah and my father-in-law asked him whether he wanted to celebrate it or not. He chose not to, so he didn't have his bar mitzvah.

We had known each other from the age of fourteen, and when Max came back from London having done his PhD in chemical engineering, he came to visit my mother to tell her that my brother was fine. He saw me at the door. I had, in the mean time, grown up and there was an immediate attraction. My

mother was absolutely thrilled that I was marrying Max Coleman. She had known him for years and thought he was the greatest guy. When we went in April to put our name down to be married at Wolmarans Street shul, I was asked by the rabbi about my parentage and I gave it. When Max was asked his parentage, he said that his mother's maiden name was Louise Wright. The rabbi put his pen down and asked, 'When was she converted?' Max had to say that she was never converted.<sup>4</sup> From that day on my husband was unacceptable to my mother. He was no longer the wonderful young man that she had viewed before. After all, what would the neighbours say? That made me very angry.

*How did you and Max get married?*

**AC:** Seeing that I was determined to marry Max, my mother accepted him. We married in a magistrate's office and our religious ceremony was six months later — a quiet wedding at Temple Israel in Hillbrow. Max, being a very caring person, was adamant that the family should never be split. In order to avoid family conflict, he agreed to have a bar mitzvah and a marriage in shul, both of which he did. The person my mother and father most wanted to see before they died, was Max. He looked after them all their lives and was fantastic to them.

That whole episode made me angry. If my mother had been a truly religious person, I would have understood her reaction. But, as it was, I found her response to the situation unacceptable.

*Getting back to the Jewish response to apartheid, did you ever think about the reasons why the Jewish community might have been reticent to speak out?*

**MC:** Yes, We debated it often over the years. Their sensitivity to injustice seems to have been overcome by their privileges. They became white South Africans rather than Jews who had been close to discrimination and persecution. Once the previous generation had settled down comfortably in South Africa, the Jewish community became accustomed to the way of life and accepted the division of the races very comfortably. Of course, they were on the right side of the fence and it was a comfortable life. Perhaps they didn't bother themselves about these philosophical questions.

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4 Because the *halacha* adopted, at a certain stage in its evolution, the position that Jewishness is conferred matrilineally, Max Coleman, whose mother was not Jewish, would not be considered Jewish by the Orthodox. The Conservative movement also follows the principle of matrilinear determination of Jewishness, but the Reform movement has accepted the principle that if a child publicly identifies with Jews and Judaism in an ongoing manner, then one Jewish parent — either the father or the mother — establishes the child's Jewishness.

*Did you think the Jewish community's reticence to speak out could have had anything to do with fear?*

**MC:** Absolutely. There was that aspect. I can remember being aware of anti-Semitism when I was a small boy.

**KC:** Isn't there a contradiction there? Why prop up a government that is anti-Semitic? It's an unholy alliance. It's like burying your head in the sand — pretending that something is that isn't. Does that sound familiar? There are certain parts of Germany that did that. People were forced to acknowledge that the National Party was racist because they couldn't deny it — they were so obviously anti-black. But there was some kind of pretence that this very deep racism fell short of Jews. Now, who were they kidding? Only themselves. It is confirmed by the very brutal way in which I was asked the first question '*Is jy 'n Jood?*' and it soon becomes '*Jou vokkin' Jood*'. The Hoppensteins of this world were oddities. The National Party played the Jewish people. There were certain businessmen who were very happy to be played. They were happy to pay to have a minister of defence round for supper. Sure!

*Max, how did your experience of anti-Semitism as a young child influence your feelings about black people in this country?*

**MC:** It gave me a certain identification with blacks as fellow persecuted. There was the fear element among Jews to be quiet, not to be seen, to keep a low profile, to lie low. It was also noticeable that there were a lot of individual Jews who were becoming involved in politics of protest. The Indian community was much more active, much more involved, than the Jews. But there again, they were not in the same position as whites. They were an underprivileged group. They had, perhaps, more to fight for.

*I have read about the harassment you suffered as a result of your DPSC activities. How much support did you receive from the wider community and specifically from the Jewish community?*

**MC:** I was a businessman at that time. My partner was also Jewish. Our business was growing. At its high point during the mid-eighties we employed about five hundred people. My activities started having an impact on business relationships. For example, my company used to get a certain contract from the government printing works. Many of my colleagues in the company were worried that what I was doing would militate against us getting that contract. At the personal level, among acquaintances and friends, there was a lot of sifting and sorting taking place. People thought us 'crazies'. They were worried that, as Jews, we would attract attention to the Jewish

community. I heard this reported by friends. We started to know who our real friends were.

**AC:** Here in South Africa people were indifferent to what was happening in the country. For example, the Union of Jewish Women never once asked me to come and speak. I was a total 'no no'. When I was overseas, however, I was asked by governments and organisations to speak. I remember taking one of my lifelong friends — a religious Jew — out for lunch. She was, at the time, assisting in welfare work and was a concerned human being. I said to her, during lunch: 'Do you know what is happening in this country?' and I explained to her how children were being thrown into prison. 'That's absolutely terrible,' she said, and then went on to talk about something else.

The response of my friends in the northern suburbs was one of the shocks of my life. Keith had grown up in their houses with their children and their response was, 'If he was involved in that sort of thing, he deserved what he got!' That, for me, was a great let-down. I was amazed that Jewish people in this country couldn't understand what was happening and that they could just sit back and do nothing. Keith has integrity, he's a highly intelligent young man, he was not a raving lunatic. They knew what sort of person he was. Even if they thought him radical. The lack of support from my peer group was a real shock to me.

There were sources that rallied — I got phone calls from people I had never heard of before — from people with broad Afrikaans accents who told us they were thinking of us. But other people stopped asking us for dinner and they stopped asking us questions. Where we were invited, they would talk about trivia but avoided asking about what was happening.

*Did you feel that the Jewish community as a whole let you down?*

**AC:** Oh absolutely. Right through the struggle period, the people who were always there when we needed them — at commemoration services or when we were trying to highlight something really bad like the violation of human rights — the people who came were the Catholics, the Methodist priests, the Desmond Tutus, the Beyers Naudés, people who were religious and had a strong sense of right and wrong. But we couldn't get the Jewish people to stand by us.

*Did you feel now, for the second time in your life, Audrey, that Judaism had let you down?*

**AC:** You know, a very close friend of mine won't, to this day, buy a German car. But she could never speak out. And I find that remarkable. I said to a friend of mine when Keith was in detention: 'Why don't you come to one of our protest meetings?' And she said 'What's the point? What do you think you will gain? Are you going to get anywhere?' I said to her, that if instead of

two hundred people being there, there were two thousand, it would make a difference. She just shrugged and that was that. Look, I'm sure that people were frightened and that they didn't want to stick their necks out. They didn't realise that the power was with them. My power was that I was white and I was who I was. I knew that I was less touchable than a black person from the townships. If I didn't speak out, who would?

But I don't think it was Judaism that made them indifferent. I think it was being South African, being very comfortable, and being very far away from the reality of what was happening.

The contrast often struck me when I returned from the detainee office, where it looked like a battleground — I'd have a child who had been tortured and brain damaged just lying in the office — leaving that office and going into Rosebank at about five in the afternoon to shop in the supermarket was like entering a different world. The contrast was so enormous. The racial groups in South Africa live so far away from one another that the whites — other than being informed by the media — had no idea of what was happening. At least in Cape Town one had to go past Athlone. In Johannesburg, problems were hidden. Unless one was faced with it, one could say one didn't know what was happening. When I spoke about it, people thought I was a raving radical. I don't think they even believed me, although quite a bit got into the newspapers — because we made sure it did. That was our mission. It was not really the welfare. That was just the bandaging. The press was important in highlighting what was happening. We wanted to root out the whole system. Some of the editors — a number of them Jewish — took risks.

*How much support did you get from the rabbinate?*

**MC:** We were never close to the rabbinate because we weren't shul-goers. Rabbi Lampert, a Reform rabbi, who went to Australia and Rabbi Ben Isaacson who went to Harare were quite outspoken.

*Rabbi Isaacson is on record as saying: 'Religious leaders who tolerated the shooting of children in silence had blood on their hands.' I guess you would agree with that statement?*

**MC:** Well, he certainly had a sense of the dramatic. His heart was in the right place, but he tended to be a bit over the top.

*Did you come into Rabbi Assabi's orbit at all?*

**MC:** No, Assabi came along a little bit later. But what I saw of him at an early stage, I quite liked. I think he has stuck his neck out and taken chances of losing his popularity.

*Yes, like when he invited Nelson Mandela to address his congregation at a Friday night service?*

**MC:** Yes, exactly.

*Audrey, did you feel let down by the rabbinate?*

**AC:** Yes, absolutely.

*Every single one of them?*

**AC:** Isn't it odd that here I was calling on Father Emmanuel Lafont, or Brother Jude or Emil Blaser, Beyers Naudé, Desmond Tutu, you name them?

*Did you try and make them aware of that?*

**AC:** Oh yes. I gave up.

*Did you contact the rabbis and say you wanted them to be behind you?*

**AC:** I spoke to one rabbi. I can't even tell you who he was. He told me that rabbis are there to study the Talmud and not to be active. He said that Judaism is a study and churchmen had a different philosophy about their role. My question was, if the churches were active in opposing the system, why was it that the rabbinate wasn't? I felt that the Jews — and whites in general — did not understand their power. We were powerful. We were part of the electorate. I said to them, 'You're a voter. It's very important what you think. The more voices there are with us, the better.' At that point one made other friends. One spent more time with people in the townships, for example. I was asked to speak once at a funeral at Carletonville in an enormous stadium. I was the only white woman there and I was looked after like gold. I walked from the stadium to the cemetery. You cannot imagine the respect I had there. Yet in my community, they don't respect me at all. I find that astonishing.

*And now?*

**AC:** I was invited for the first time by the Jewish Board of Deputies when I became a member of the Gauteng Provincial Legislature. They invited Andrew Feinstein, Leon Cohen, Sheila Weinberg and me — all the Jews of the Gauteng Provincial Legislature in fact — to come and speak to them. I said to them, 'It's interesting that now you ask me but you never asked me before.' Back in the eighties a cousin of mine was active in the Jewish Board of Deputies and we were at a wedding. He came up to me and said he had



heard that Keith was in detention. I said, 'Yes, and what are you going to do about it?' And he disappeared. I was very fond of him but I felt very let down.

*What is the extent of your ritual observance today?*

**AC:** My mother and, to an extent, my sister kept the traditions going. My Italian daughter-in-law who is Catholic said, 'You must keep Friday nights, even if it's just the tradition. The children should grow up with their Jewishness as well as their other side.' At the moment, when the Jacobsons, Keith's in-laws, have a yomtov [holiday] dinner, we go there as a family. One of these days I may start having it here for the grandchildren, so that they will grow up and know a little bit about our customs and traditions.

*I know of people who tried to pull strings to get their own children out of jail but didn't attempt to overthrow the system as you did. How do you feel about those people?*

**AC:** I fully sympathise with them. In fact, we had a particular example. One father came to see us and he was very angry. He felt that we had no right to protest the way we did because we didn't know what the security police would do to our son in detention. He would go and have coffee with them and shmuz with them. We didn't criticise him because that was his way of dealing with it. So it was fine. But, in the end, his son was badly tortured. And they never laid a finger on our son.

*Why?*

**MC:** When we took Keith to John Vorster Square, I said to the captain on duty, Captain Struwik, 'If anything happens to my son, I will hold you personally responsible.'

**AC:** Our strength was his protection. I am convinced of it. Keith said there were often times that the security police wanted to hit him. And they never touched him.

*Why do you think they didn't beat you, Keith?*

**KC:** There are several factors that I think contributed, not least of which was that I was white. For them to torture a white person a decision had to be taken on high. They tortured Neil Aggett because he was followed around by a policeman who had devoted years to proving that he was a communist and a major conspirator. This policeman convinced his superiors that Neil should be tortured. This is my belief. Neil suggested it to me, I had heard it from other sources, and it is what we put together afterwards when we were trying to explain these questions.

Another friend of mine, Auret van Heerden, was tortured very badly for three days. Auret was one of the people I was closest to in prison. He was the leader of the group that I had been in and was the Nusas president when I arrived at Wits. He was, to all intents and purposes, my mentor at that point. Despite the terrible torture he suffered, they didn't break him. He was so strong. If they had broken him, maybe he would have given them information that incriminated me, activities which maybe they thought I should be tortured for.

The third thing is that they knew that I was involved in stuff that was illegal, but they weren't sure of the extent of it. They needed to be more certain before they tortured me. Any contact I had with black people, they considered bad news, but under cover of the newspaper, I could legitimately have contact with anybody. So they weren't convinced that it was all that illegal.

There was a point, however, when they got information from someone else, and asked me to confirm it, and I lied, and gave contradictory information. They went back to the person they got it from, tested it out, came back to me and said, 'You're lying.' And I actually said, 'You're right.' I gave them another version, which was still a lie. And this happened three times. Eventually Captain Struwik, this monster, grabbed me by the shirt collar and said, 'Right, we are going to Benoni.' Benoni was the place where Auret was tortured and I did a quick calculation about the fact that they already had this information from somebody else, and they were about to torture me. If they did they might get other stuff. It wasn't worth being tortured over. So I confirmed it. Maybe it was part of a game and my calculation at that point was also part of the game. It's a very weird game. I'm just thinking how crazy it is sitting here and talking about it.

Finally, and most important, I had my parents out there, standing in front of John Vorster Square and saying, 'If you do anything to my child, we will cause trouble for you.' And they did cause trouble — the fact that they were so visible and so public. They were being given visits, and if those visits had been stopped it would have caused suspicion and more publicity. This basically meant that the police needed a really good reason to torture me, and they couldn't think of one. Left to Warrant Officer Prins and the Captain Struwiks of this world, they would have taken me apart with their bare hands if they could have. Torture is systematic. It's not 'beat up anyone at any time'. Decisions are taken to torture people — very rational ones — particularly when it comes to whites.

*Do you think that your parents' power lay in their economic position?*

**KC:** I think part of it is economic, but more important is one's status in society. This gives one certain power, particularly with the media. My parents could get access because they could write fluently and heart-

rendingly about their son's condition and about the plight of others. Most black parents can't write that fluently, can't make an appointment with the editors of newspapers. My father was a respected and successful businessman. He was not a known radical, or anything that could be defined as a 'crazy lefty'.

My parents' image couldn't be tarnished. So the security police couldn't play the usual game as they did with people who were disempowered. They had to take my parents seriously.

**NC:** My parents' socio-economic position possibly played a role. They were not rich when we first grew up. We had a very middle-class life style. My father's business was small. It expanded at a later stage. At school I felt pretty middle-class and modest. Later, when I became aware of the way the majority of the people in this country live, I came to realise that we were indeed very affluent. But what did or did not protect my parents is hard to say.

*Colin, you played a decisive role in the Consultative Business Movement. Tell me about it.*

**CC:** The movement against apartheid needed the involvement of a broad spectrum of society. The success of the movement depended on the extent that it was able to get support from a wide range of organisations, particularly from the so-called 'establishment' — those people who were benefiting from the system. The biggest challenge in the most repressive years, 1986 to 1987, when I was on the national executive of Nusas, was to break into elements of the white community and help them to eject South Africa from its course of confrontation. It was important to divide those people who had power away from the P W Botha regime. It was necessary to lobby the establishment. The UDF had entered into discussion with some business leaders who had accepted the need to talk to trade unions, civic organisations, UDF officials. They met for a weekend — the Broederstroom Encounter of 1988. At that meeting the UDF-Cosatu leaders had voiced their distrust of business, but they were prepared to enter into dialogue on the basis that (a) business committed itself to values and principles in support of justice in South Africa, and (b) that business would act in support of those principles. Thus, the CBM was formed. They were looking for an official who would be the first full-time person to help pull this idea into a reality, and I, who had finished my studies in that year, was approached. In discussion with Murphy Morobe, Mohammed Valli Moosa, Jay Naidoo, Eric Molobi and others, I agreed on an experimental six months basis to see if this organisation had any future. I joined full-time in January 1989. One could soon see it was an important organisation. Primarily because although it started small, the businessmen who gave it its backing — people like Murray Hofmeyr, Mike Sandler, Neil Chapman — were very senior in the business community. They had the clout to lend some credibility to the nascent movement. Very quickly

it gained a unique position. It was the vehicle through which business could come into contact with the emerging new breed of leadership which is now the cabinet and the government.

*Were there any Jewish businessmen involved?*

**CC:** Yes, there were — Leon Cohen from PG Bison was involved. So was Hylton Appelbaum of the Liberty Life Foundation, and I could probably think of some more. This was a movement of senior businessmen and it rapidly gained momentum — to the point that when Mandela was released from jail in February 1990, we were the first business group to host a meeting between the ANC and business people at the Carlton conference in May 1990. Mandela spoke to business for the first time. Very soon, the CBM became the movement that facilitated the Peace Accord and got development talks going with all groups. It was seen to be a non-partisan facilitator.

It facilitated the first meeting of Codesa and forged the National Economic Forum. I was personally involved in and facilitated the accord that brought Buthelezi into the elections.

*Do you feel that there is anything the Jewish community could do in terms of rebuilding South Africa?*

**AC:** People are so negative. You go to a northern suburbs lunch and everyone is complaining. They don't realise that we have been through a bloodless revolution. Instead of sitting and demanding, they must stand up as South Africans and say: 'We are part of South Africa and proud to be here! We are part of this new fantastic country, and we are going to start participating.' Instead of waiting for the government to do everything, they must be part of the movement. Businessmen? There are forums they can participate in. Professionals? There are forums they can participate in. Government is open today. Any standing committee there is, the public is welcome to be there. Any bill that comes up, the public is asked to come in with its criticisms. We have a wealth of knowledge and capability out there. It should be fed into the government.

**MC:** The question of how Jews can contribute was precisely the question the Cape Board of Deputies asked at a luncheon to which about six of us were invited some time after the elections in April 1994. The sentiment of people there seemed to be: 'Let's forget about the past. What can we do now?'

*Colin, what do you feel in terms of the future, with regard to the economy of the country?*

**CC:** It was clear, after the elections, that the role of the CBM had been fulfilled. We therefore facilitated the end of the CBM and the creation of its

successor, the National Business Initiative. I decided to join Standard Bank because I believe that the time for facilitation is largely over. Now, with the framework in place for democracy and reconstruction, the issue is the way in which institutions with power will use that power to give meaning and substance to reconstruction.

*How must they do this? Must they come together?*

CC: No, I don't think so. I think that institutions work according to competitive laws.

*Could you elaborate on the negative perception that Jews run the economy? People 'out there' seem to attribute to Jews more power than they actually have.*

CC: Although the Afrikaans community has a great deal of economic muscle, as do other sectors of the white community, the Jewish community commands more economic muscle than any other sector of comparable size. I think it's a positive thing if it is used properly. The criticism of the role of Jews is in so far as they have not used their entrepreneurship to the benefit of the broad spectrum of people. Obviously there is much misinformation about Jews and I'm not feeding negative perceptions. I'm saying there's tremendous opportunity.

NC: The question with regard to Jewish business is — should Jewish people separate themselves, should they be introspective and defensive and see what is in their own best interests, or should they engage in a more dynamic way with the broader South African identity? I don't think Jewish individuals should see their interests as being separate from those of other people in business — from other South Africans.

They should try to bring some of the Jewish values in Jewish history to bear on the current transformation of our society, and stop being so concerned about how people perceive Jews. Rather act and, through your actions, show people that you are a South African. Be part of a broader South Africanism. It is in this light that one should look at the issue of anti-Semitism in industrial disputes.

*One of the things that worries Jews is the fact that anti-Semitism has been up front in some recent strikes.*

MC: There is the odd outburst of anti-Semitism, but it's an aberration, not the pattern. The ANC is totally non-racial. It practises and proposes non-racialism. Its whole platform is based on non-racism. It is the basis of the whole democratic order in this country. Jews, like Indians, make handy scapegoats. We should move to a position where there is less need for scapegoats.

NC: There has only been one incident of anti-Semitism in industrial action that I have been aware of and that is the one at Highlands House, the Jewish aged home in Cape Town.

*What about the Pick 'n Pay strike in Cape Town that took place at about the same time?*

NC: I disagree that anti-Semitism was a central issue there. Raymond Ackerman gave, in my opinion, a classic example of how Jewish people should not behave. He used the Jewish question as a defence for himself. He raised it where it wasn't being raised by the union. It was a classic case of how to alienate the majority from the Jewish community. In the Highlands House strike you had the PAC and some ultra-left groupings in Cape Town whipping up anti-Semitic feeling, which one cannot deny is a reality and will continue to exist in some strata of the community. The regional leadership of Cosatu in the Western Cape acted very swiftly to bring it under control, called meetings, had disciplinary hearings, and distanced itself from this anti-Semitism. The action taken was not fully reflected by the press. It would have been easy for Cosatu to ride with those anti-Semitic sentiments. It wouldn't have cost them anything. I, on behalf of Cosatu head office, wrote a letter to the press outlining our opposition to this anti-Semitic conduct, explaining that the workers involved had been disciplined and that we are against racism of any sort. Anyway, the Jewish Board of Deputies contacted me after seeing the letter and said that they wanted to meet with us to discuss the issue. I said, 'Look, I don't want to meet with you.' The reason for not wanting to meet with them was that I didn't want to be treated as their Jewish contact in the trade union movement. And that, for me, was a typical Jewish way of relating — to try and speak to someone who is Jewish in the organisation.

OK, one can understand that maybe Cosatu is a strange sort of environment for them, and they wanted to contact someone who they think is familiar. But I wanted them to understand that I did not write that letter because I was Jewish. It was a matter of principle and it reflected our organisation's position. If it wasn't me, someone else would have written the letter. In fact, in retrospect, I was sorry I had written it. It should have been in someone else's name. So I encouraged our assistant general secretary to meet with the Jewish Board of Deputies to discuss the issues — just as we would meet with anyone else. Unfortunately the meeting has not yet taken place.

But, coming back to the Raymond Ackerman thing, I think he did Jewish people an enormous disservice. He took his own dispute with workers and then said he was being targeted because he was Jewish. He was claiming that certain workers or shop stewards — or whatever they were — were making statements about the fact that he was Jewish. That's irrelevant. If he had a problem, the way to go about it was to sit down with the union and say,

'Look, we've got our differences but racism and anti-Semitism have no place in the conduct of industrial disputes.' That would have been fine. But then to go publicly and say 'I'm being attacked because I'm a Jewish businessman' gives a weapon to whoever in the community wants to use anti-Semitism as a tool. I thought that that was a particularly inept way of handling things. That's the only time that the issue has ever come up. There is no occasion in my entire experience, either in the trade union movement or the UDF or the democratic movement that I can remember, where the fact that I'm Jewish — something I have never hidden, or displayed, or boasted about — it's just there — has ever been an issue.

*You are saying then that Jews need to be less defensive and more outgoing?*

**KC:** I think that the apartheid ethos of this country and the Jewish experience of anti-Semitism have tended to encourage Jews to build walls, as the chosen people, around themselves. Jewish communities do things for others and integrate with other communities from a Jewish base. So it's the Jewish Board of Deputies that makes representations. I can think of a number of Jewish educational groups who define themselves as Jewish first and educational second. I think that's a shame. The combination of a laager mentality, together with apartheid, together with the history of what has happened to Jews, together with the real anti-Semitism that does exist, has meant that the Jewish community has become too insular and has lost a lot of its potential.

**NC:** I think Jews can still play an important role in South Africa but have to come to grips with the fact that this is their country and that there are perceptions out there about them which they have assisted in creating. You can't play the victim all the time. There is a window of opportunity for the Jewish community for the next year or so to change perceptions of them.

*Audrey, in the last sentence of your interview with Diana Russel,<sup>5</sup> you seemed very pessimistic. You said: 'These kids are definitely not going to want that [negotiation]. They cannot experience what they are experiencing now and choose a peaceful solution. I don't know what will happen when these children become the future leaders.' How do you feel about that comment now?*

**AC:** Now we are facing the brutalisation of these children. What is normality to a child in the townships who walks out of its front door and sees a dead body and doesn't react? What is normality to a little kid of four who sees its parents hacked to death in front of it? We, in our homes, make sure that our children are secure, that they have the right environment, that they don't hear

5 Diana E H Russel, *Lives of courage: Women for a new South Africa*. New York: Basic Books, 1989, p 90.

their parents arguing. The normality of the children of the townships was war, and a war of infinite brutality. This is why you get people hijacked and shot dead. Because life is cheap. I'm not saying it is right. It is terrible and sentences should be tougher. But you have to deal with the root cause. The destabilisation of 1991 to 1993 did more to effect the brutalisation of the black community than anything else. Suddenly, blacks were fighting blacks which they had never done before. Up till then, the struggle was a very clear one. You knew who your enemy was — the apartheid system — and you knew you were going to overturn it by peaceful means. The ANC only resorted to sabotage of soft targets as a very last phase of the Struggle.

*In your interview with Diana Russel you didn't mention that you were Jewish. Is there any reason for that?*

**AC:** I might have. But she might not have put it in. Of course I would have told her I was Jewish. I don't know whether I mentioned this to you, but there was a lot of anger directed against me because once I was part of a [political] meeting that took place on Yom Kippur, and I didn't remember it was Yom Kippur. That was typical [of the focus] of the Jewish community.

*Would you say your stand was a courageous one and, if so, where did that courage come from?*

**MC:** Anyone else in similar circumstances with a reasonably similar political outlook would have done the same. You find yourself in a situation. You are swept along with it and try to manage it. The most important thing we learned was to work as a group. Don't work as an individual. Consult. That's what I always say to the Jewish community. Consult. It is a wonderful word.

**AC:** At the time you are involved, I don't think you really worry about yourself very much. You become aware. You would be stupid if you didn't. We were never involved in anything illegal. We were always up front and that is where we believed our power lay. Max and I tended to be a bit confrontational. We, for example, had a lot of difficulty shaking hands with the security police. It was so different when Keith came out of detention. He was walking with a security policeman, talking and laughing. When I expressed my surprise, he said: 'Mom, he's a human being. He might be misguided. He might have the wrong values. But he's a person and one therefore cannot sit in judgement on him. He comes from a different background with a different philosophy.' I thought that was amazing. This response was not at all unusual from detainees. They were so mature about their repression.



*Do you think that that is what many blacks are feeling, because there seems to be so little bitterness?*

**AC:** It was incredible. When I saw all these tortured people, people who had had members of their family assassinated, there was an understanding of what it was about and they were not bitter. So many were killed. Everybody must know what happened.

*You are all obviously very optimistic about South Africa?*

**MC:** Africa was left in a shambles by the colonial powers. Africans had a culture and a settled subsistence. But the continent was devastated — brother was divided from brother and sister from sister. Others were just flung together and expected to be a nation. I don't go along with the idea that blacks can't govern themselves. I am tremendously confident about South Africa. It has tremendous resources and at the top of those resources are the human resources. There are some wonderful black people. We have a lot to learn, us whites, about democracy. I have learned more about democracy in the last ten years than I could ever have hoped to have done. It has been a wonderful experience.

# THE GREAT DREAM

and the great dream of Me or China, or you and a  
phantom Russia . . .

O mother  
what have I left out  
O mother  
what have I forgotten  
O mother  
farewell  
with a long black shoe  
farewell  
with Communist Party and a broken stocking  
farewell

*Extract from 'Kaddish', in the collection Kaddish and Other  
Poems by Allen Ginsberg, 1961*

Where there is no vision, the people perish

*Proverbs 29, 18*

באין חזון יפרע העם  
משלי כט, יח