

Hassim Seedat Interview by Pdraig O'Malley

14 DEC 2003: SEEDAT, HASSIM

POM It's a pleasure to meet you. Just before we start something about yourself, where you grew up, your parents, your own personal background so that I can put you in a perspective.

HS I'll give you a short background. It'll save a lot of time. I was not in school with Mac, I was born in 1930, Mac was born in 1935. Mac, therefore, was five years my junior and he was in school with a brother of mine in Newcastle.

POM Did you grow up in the same road, on Boundary Road?

HS Yes. We were not in Boundary Road but Newcastle itself was such a small place that we knew everyone simply because of our school connections and family relationships and so on. Now Mac's father was a gentleman by the name of N R Maharaj.

That was the father. He was a big man physically. I remember seeing him at the place that you visited in Newcastle. In the later part of his life he was a big man physically. I recall that he was always seated because he had gone a bit rotund and his ankles were not bearing the strain of his weight. A very flamboyant person.

POM Was he a figure? Was he well known?

HS He was well known for several things. Among other things he was a great gambler.

POM He did the horses.

HS Yes, yes, and he was a repository of the knowledge of all the horse racing. We have a very famous horse race here in Durban called the July Handicap and old NR used to have extensive records of horses that ran and when July came along people used to go to his shop to get bets. He was well known and popular to that extent.

Mac was actually a son of the second marriage. They had two mothers, the first mother died.

POM Let's keep on the father first. The father was a gambler. He didn't have money but he gambled.

HS Well I suppose when we talk about gambling you gamble in the amounts that you can afford.

POM But he would lay out the odds for the community?

HS Everyone came to him for advice: what is the best bet. He was the advisor. There is one very interesting story which needs to be confirmed when you get to Newcastle, and this story I heard a long time ago, as I said it's subject to confirmation. He was a great gambler, a gambler in a sense that he met his friends and they used to play cards.

Mac is not on the scene at all at this stage. Now the old man apparently had got into a session of gambling with a circus owner who had come to town. At that particular stage you can image we're talking about 60 years ago, 50 or 60 years ago in a little small town and I suppose it happens in

Ireland, you hear the beating of drums and suddenly we find ourselves, you know the circus is in town and everybody runs to the circus and the children all rush to it and so on. I suppose it's not unusual that the circus owner himself is a bit of a gambler. So once they met under whatever circumstances, they got down in the evening to gamble. Apparently the circus owner was bled dry so he said, "Well you know I have got no money but I'll put my circus up for the next bet." And Maharaj won the circus. So I understand Maharaj went around with the circus for a short while and said that, "This was not what I was born for", and sold all the animals. Please confirm this because sometimes memories play tricks. But I am quite certain that I heard this story. Now whether the chap who was telling the story was speaking the truth, I couldn't say.

But let's start this way, let me just give you a proper introduction to Newcastle. Newcastle is a mining town, coal mining town. When the first indentured Indians arrived in this country in 1860 the mines had not opened up in northern Natal and other parts of the country. When discovery of coal was made in northern Natal they required labour and the indentured Indians were then taken to Newcastle to the coal mines. The agreement between the British government and the South African government at that time in terms of the indentured labour laws was that they were to be farm hands and labourers on the farms, they could be waiters, could be domestic servants and so on, but there was a prohibition on employing the indentured Indians in the mines themselves. Somehow or other the protector of Indian immigrants, the mine owners, they ignored those regulations as a consequence of which two trainloads of Indians were taken to the Newcastle mines. And if I'm not mistaken NR's father was one of them who was taken to the mines in Newcastle. But, as I said, you will establish that, whether his father was a miner.

So we need to weave in the whole question of the indentured Indians and so on because if you want to look at Mac's life we must accept the adventurous nature of the people who had come in as indentured Indians. To leave their country to come across the sea, come to South Africa, is itself a very adventurous move. So one needs to grasp that very sharply in order to understand the antecedents of Maharaj and myself. We were not indentured Indians but the people who were put into the mines at that particular time.

POM Then were you passenger?

HS Yes, we were passenger Indians. We only came in the 1880s, 1890s.

POM What was Mac's?

HS Mac's would have been there I think in the 1870s.

POM Yes, but they would have been passenger, not indentured?

HS No the indentured system carried on until 1915.

POM Yes, but this is very important because 

HS That needs to be ascertained. I'm giving a general background of the Indian community as to how they landed themselves.

POM Then you were passenger in your background. Mac's background, given its place in the caste system, he would be more likely to be 

HS I want you to just cast your mind back. The possibility, if you get to Newcastle, to find out from the people who you are interviewing, whether Mac's grandfather was an indentured Indian or a passenger Indian, I think that's important to find out. But there's another alternative. The other alternative is that the Indians built the railways from Durban to Newcastle and onwards so there's a possibility that his father may have been an indentured Indian, brought to Newcastle in the employment of the railway people.

POM That's his grandfather.

HS That's his grandfather we're talking about, so that needs to be sorted out. But I think it is important that we try to establish Mac's antecedents in order to place him within a larger 

POM When I ask Mac where he comes from I find a certain form of denial. He always says, "I'm black. I'm a black South African." And he denies, he does deny, his Indian background by glossing over it, whereas Shantee goes into it in beautiful detail. I just want you to keep that in mind because one of the things that fascinates me is the question of identity. Where do people of Indian origin regard their identity as coming from? From India or South Africa? But there was no South Africa that existed. The question is what we call identity politics. But I'm branching off. I want to confine you to where did you come from, where did you grow up?

HS I grew up in Newcastle, I was born there. My family came there as traders in the beginning. When they got to Newcastle in the late 1880s, early 1890s, they were just one of three shops, merchants, that used to trade there. I've got quite a lot of extensive material on that aspect of it but that is not relevant.

Now I would then put Mac, as I said we need to be careful, we don't want to make a wrong identification as to whether his grandfather was an indentured Indian or not but the possibility is that he was, and if we accept that possibility that his great-grandfather was an indentured Indian then obviously he would have been employed either as a railway worker or as a miner. Now as we said a little earlier, the mines themselves in Newcastle and the Indians themselves played a major role in Gandhi's final political campaign in this country so one needs to go back to 1914, that this man Mac Maharaj doesn't just come out of a vacuum, that he is firmly embedded in a society that was active and conscious of their political selves and so on. So one needs to understand that aspect of it. That's what I'm talking about.

POM Let me ask you the question. Why would Mac gloss over that completely and say that he came from an apolitical background where  ?

HS Well I suppose he's not conscious of that, or he's not aware of the activities that took place. What I am saying is that he was not conscious of that. If we relate it and use it as a thread as I am doing now, he will possibly admit that, hey, wait a minute, we were active. The fact is that he may not be aware of that background or, alternatively, he wants to deny that background. I don't know. We will only discover after we read your book.

So that briefly is Mac's background there. You will be seeing his relatives, his brothers and so on, and you may be able to gather the intimate details of his life and background. My association with him, as I said, began when he was about to leave for England and so was I. I had matriculated and I wanted to become a lawyer.

POM Now were you in the same school?

HS Yes, St Oswalds.

POM Now he says he was the first matriculant from St Oswalds.

HS That's right. We went up to standard eight only at that stage and we came to Durban to matriculate. Just after us I think there were two other periods but at the time that Mac had reached his standard eight the nines and tens had come in. So that is correct, Mac was in fact the first batch of Indian matriculants from St Oswalds.

POM Do you remember him at school?

HS I remember seeing him as my brother's friend, my brother who is younger than me. This is another brother by the name of Kallie. Newcastle has a large Seedat family incidentally and we all grew up in Newcastle. It has a very large family too here in Durban. But my brother and Mac were in the same class and although I never spoke to him as such and I saw him play soccer or whatever the case may be, but they were together with their friends. There was a difference, as I said, of about five years between us. Now that is the Mac of Newcastle.

I had matriculated, then I took up a course in teaching and I started teaching for a few years and then decided that that was not for me and that I would go and become a lawyer. The universities at that time, you are well aware of that we had no admission to law at that particular stage, we need not go into that, and I then decided to go to London to join one of the Inns of Court, which I did.

POM Now Mac says, just to go over this, Mac says in university law was not open but the Registrar or whomever said that if you get five pupils together who want to study law then they would open law.

HS Yes, they would give tuition but not with the whites themselves. We'd have a little class.

POM And that he got five people together and that he was the only one of the five who passed all the examinations so they closed down the examination and said, "Tough luck, we told you five people and Mac, if you passed it really makes no difference."

HS I had no quarrel with that. I think every exam he wrote he passed. He was quite brilliant academically, no problem about that. I can only tell you who Mac was in terms of my association with him and my experience with him. I will have to relate our relationship in order to draw conclusions whereafter and what my impressions of him were, or whatever impression he has of me. We then found ourselves in Tottenham at 28 Downhills Park Road. We --myself and my cousin Tony Seedat -- took a ship to England, Southampton, the Cape Town Castle. That would be around 1957/58.

We then had a flat in Downhills Park Road, 28 Downhills Park Road, and we found ourselves together, that was myself, Mac, Nandha Naidoo (who you met) and Tony Seedat. Then subsequently two years later we had Kader Asmal with us, this is the chap who is now the Minister of Education for his sins. Anyway, he was there. At that particular time my experience of Mac was that he, unlike what Phyllis Naidoo says, that himself and Nandha Naidoo used to go to some cafeterias or

something like that. That is not correct. Actually Mac taught in schools because he had a BA and so on so he was ♦ what do they call these teachers?

POM Substitute.

HS Substitute teachers. They've got another name for it. So what we used to do is we used to go to the Central London Bureau where the teachers were and they would say, "Right, buzz off here, you go there and you go there." And Mac used to teach there, I used to teach there. Nandha Naidoo, I'm not very sure, but Nandha Naidoo is a bit of a timid chap and I don't think he was able to stand the small hooligans there.

POM When you met him as a person, who was Mac back then?

HS You see at that particular stage I found Mac to be completely in control of himself. He had gone through his university days in Durban and so on and he always appeared to be self-confident. We were a little withdrawn, this is a new country, how do we get around.

POM Where did he get that from?

HS He got it from here. For example, Phyllis Naidoo mentions this, that when he came from Newcastle to Durban to join the university and so on, very quickly he was able to assert his authority on everybody.

When I talked to my brother about Mac, he always was the top of the class. OK? There's nobody who could stand for him and he got this characteristic from his father because his father was a powerful person, people respected him. So he got that and I think it is easy to then conclude that his personality, strong personality, comes from his father.

For example, just to illustrate this point, the loss of his eye for example, here is an athletic meeting at Currie's Fountain, athletic meeting at Currie's Fountain. He gets into a scrap with somebody over a political argument I understand it was, and three chaps beat him up and he loses his eye by the stab of the athletic boot which had spikes. That's how he loses his eye. And he makes light of it, he didn't ♦ in my conversations with him, or possibly in your conversations with him, it was just an incident. There was nothing about it. I can't even remember thereafter there being a criminal trial or a hooaha about it and so on and things like that. It's part of life, part of life, growing up, get into a scrap, fight it out. No. Well having known him and so on it didn't surprise me that he got into a scrap and lost his eye.

HS He has extreme self-confidence. Take the Ngcuka case, for example, he went forward and he said, "You know, I'm going to prove to you that you're a spy." And he blew it simply because he felt threatened. His wife was being threatened. That's exactly what he did. That fits into his character completely. Here's a man, he was prepared to go to the top. He went to Mbeki and said, "I'm going ahead."

POM When he was in London he must have been an intolerable person to live with.

HS Absolutely. Well intolerable was that mercifully we only saw one another in the evening because he went to studies and I was studying and so on so we only met really to sit together and

talk over the weekends or when we had innumerable seminars with the Communist Party at that particular stage.

POM When you say 'mercifully', what do you mean by mercifully?

HS Well because there was nothing in common between us, if I may put it that way.

POM Why?

HS Simply because whenever an argument or anything took place he took a stand and we took a stand and that was it.

POM Who is we?

HS Myself, Nandha and Tony.

POM So it was three against one?

HS Well we argued and so on and he was quite adamant about it. Of course there was a lot of acceptance of views, Marxist theology, Marxist philosophies and so on, of course we were there. But as to exactly how we were going to bring about the change in the country and so on and things like that, we were all students.

POM So was he more radical?

HS Extremely. We had our penny's worth.

POM Why would he have been  again I want to find, again you're putting yourself right in the middle of when he would have been in Durban at the University of Natal for 'non-European' students and then you meeting up in London. What would account for his radicalism since he came from the most unradical background?

HS His radicalism developed in Durban at that university that we are talking about.

POM Because?

HS There was intense political debate at that time, the question of prejudice, the question of not even being allowed in the white section of the university and so on. Phyllis Naidoo is the right person who can really talk to you about the question of his radicalisation at that very, very important period of his life. Rebel, radical, radical to London, Communist Party.

POM When you remember, how do you remember Mac? You said he was intolerable. I think Leanne said to me that he said that people didn't like him. Mac wasn't liked.

HS He wasn't liked because he was assertive. He brooked no dissension. He was right all the time.

POM Why do you think that he - ?

HS As I say, this is his personality, this is his strong personality. My view, one must understand this, that his fearlessness and his thought process at that particular time, his assessment at that time together in discussions with people, his political comrades and so on, gave him that amount of

strength to talk openly without any prevarication or anything at all. When I say he is disliked, he was disliked not as a person but simply because of his fighting. He was right, he'd say, "I'm right, you see." So we said, "OK, you're right, you're right, that's the end of the matter." But that doesn't detract from the fact that once he had made up his mind and he had said that he was right, he was now prepared to go to the end for those views that he held and that I find to be the most important characteristic of his personality. If once he had made up his mind that this is the part I'm going to take nothing would get him side-tracked. If you take a look at his political career, his activities in Africa, the ANC camps in Africa for example -

You will find that nowhere in any forum, any forum whatsoever, Mac would now take the lead. For example, if you take the Vula operation who else was there to take on this incredibly brave task of coming back into the country to start an insurrection up once again? Was there anybody in the African community? Was there anybody in the white community? And once he became an intelligence officer in Lusaka when the ANC camps were there and so on, he was heavily involved with the certification of those people who left South Africa to join the ANC.

POM Now when you say that, do you mean the people who came from South Africa into Zambia and they would be interrogated? Now how do you know that?

HS He was one of the intelligence officers.

POM How do you know that?

HS This man is a Dr. Freddy Reddy in Oslo. You haven't heard of him? Now Freddy Reddy is a psychologist, he's based in Norway and during the ANC camps in Lusaka and other places in Africa and so on, he spent two to three months a year attending to those ANC cadres who had psychological problems. So he used to go and attend these camps and he will be able to tell you more about Mac than I can in relation to his activities in Africa.

POM Where is the doctor now?

HS I will give you his e-mail. He would be worth visiting. I have got some of his writings here but I'm not happy with the way he deals with the African situation and I've asked him to expand on that. He's quite a fascinating character. This Freddy Reddy came from Durban. I don't know whether he met Mac here in Durban, it's highly unlikely, but he was employed in the King Edward Hospital at that time as a person who removes the cadavers from the various places. I don't know what you call them. He then decided to leave the country and he trekked, he hitch-hiked part of Africa and he then landed up in London at the time. He tells us the fascinating story of him going to Speakers Corner and listening to the Communist Party, Hyde Park.

HS We all were there together. So after he had heard he waited until the time the speaker went off. He went up to the speaker and he said, "You know, I come from South Africa and I want to join the Communist Party. Who do I see?" So apparently the chap said, "Go to this address." I hear a tap at the door and this young chap is there. "What do you want?" "You're Mr Seedat?" I said, "Yes." "Is Mac Maharaj here?" he says. "Yes." "Well, I've been asked to see you. I want to join the Communist Party." That's our introduction to the man. The Norwegian Party was giving scholarships, so he then went off to Oslo to study and he became a psychiatrist. He has got a fascinating story and he will tell

you about his experiences with Mac when he came down, when Freddy came down to make assessment of the soldiers.

Our relationship with Mac, as I said, is a relationship like all students living together. It may be tempestuous at times, very friendly most of the time. When one has to cook to feed the others and one person doesn't cook, the others ♦ There was one room and three of us shared it. That is where we settled down and that is where we started having our meetings and attending Vella Pillay's soirees and so on and so on and things like that and Max Joffe's place and you know the Joffes were there and so on and things like that.

That wasn't for long. I think it was about six months, four months or so. A shortish period. We were just looking around for something suitable. When we got there we didn't know anyone. There was a friend or two who were there before us but they were very helpful and they sort of said ♦

I think Mac found us. We were there, myself and Tony were there and Mac then found us. Then Nandha Naidoo I think also came in. I remember a scene in the Newcastle station, I was leaving having said farewell to my family before I boarded the ship, and Mac was at the railway station and we got to talking and he gave us a short, sharp lecture on socialism while I was leaning out of the train. You know what he said to me which I will never forget? He said, "You know, when we get into power we're going to nationalise the railways." And I said, "Damn fine, except that the railways belong to the state." I thought that was funny. I still remember that. Lovely, hey? Absolutely lovely!

Then of course you see Mac, apart from his assertive attitude and so on and his sometimes high pitched laugh, which is not a laugh really, it's just I think relief of tension on his part if I may just say that, was that after he had his glass eye put in if you look at him carefully you find that that glass eye staring at you is very disconcerting. So he then assumed this character of whether he's looking at you or he's not looking at you, he appeared to be ephemeral, this person looking at you with this glass eye, blind eye.

We settled down, fine. He then ♦ Tim who he fell in love with here in Durban then followed him and she got a position as a nurse.

POM Did you know her?

HS Very well. She was from Durban. Remember that I only got into Durban after I had come back from England. I was in Newcastle all the time. That is where Mac was obviously. But then Mac and Tim they married. I'm now going to show you some photographs which nobody has seen except Tim and Tim only saw them a few months ago when I persuaded her to come across and have a look at them. As you will recall they were very much younger. Let me just relate the sequence of these photographs for you. Kodak, black and white.

Briefly I'll just relate the sequence of this. You met this gentleman, you recognise him? That's Nandha Naidoo. That's Tony Seedat grooming Nandha. That's Tony grooming me. OK. What is the occasion? The occasion is the wedding day of Maharaj and Tim. There's Tony coming into our flat with a parcel in his hand and that parcel of course contains the wedding cake. Then we wait patiently for the married couple to come along, they had gone to the Registry Office to get married. So here they arrive.

HS The two of them. This is a passer-by. There's him and his wife coming in. They give him a hoorah and a cheer. Smile, smile please.

POM Look at the waistcoat.

HS Yes. He says, smile please, smile, smile. And there they give us a smile. Then we start the dinner, whatever you call it, the wedding dinner and here they are cutting the cake. And there the bride, portrait of the bride is taken. London, 28 Downhills Park Road.

POM Was he a leader? What stands out about him? Let me ask you a funny question, I've asked it of Nandha, I asked him the same question: if tomorrow Mac dropped dead and you were invited to speak from the heart what would you say? From the heart, not the head, from the heart what would you say?

HS I have unbounded admiration for his courage and what he did for the country.

POM But where did that come from?

HS I don't know. I know the man and I know his single-mindedness. If he did something he wants to bring it to its conclusion. You know it's amazing if you read the treatment that he was given by the Security Branch and so on to the extent that when they battered him around. Phyllis and them were prepared to believe that he will not be able to get children as a consequence of them having beaten him up around the groin and the penis and things like that. And they were as surprised as anybody else when he eventually had children from his second wife. The only time I saw his second wife was in hospital, unconscious in Lusaka.

HS I was there. We were meeting the ANC at that time and myself, Joe Slovo and one other person, and Joe said, "Let's go and have a look at Zarina." And Mac wasn't there then I think.

POM No, he was here.

HS So we rushed off to the hospital and there was this woman Zarina, we just tiptoed out quietly. That's the only time I've seen her.

POM Now Mac, I gather, like if I gather, pick up on things, he had a love/hate relationship with Joe. Did they?

HS That's not surprising. Who had a love relationship with Mac?

POM Who had a love relationship with Mac? Well obviously Zarina did. Tim loved him.

HS You know what surprises me is that Tim and Mac could have actually fallen in love because to me they were two people of the same sort of character, Tim is a hard woman, Mac is a hard man, and they got along. Tim is an extremely hard woman. Nobody is ever going to get along with Mac.

HS This is Mac's letter to me from Robben Island.

POM Can you read it to me? Read it into the tape. Please.

HS You read it.

POM All those people who were under colonial rule always learnt ❖

HS You see, Mac says in his Reflections in Prison, in that book of his where he introduces, he says that the first thing that they learnt in Robben Island was to be able to write in as small handwriting as possible in order that they could fill in the one page that was given to them to write letters to people outside Robben Island. I also have copies of letters of Nelson Mandela which were written to us in my office, tiny, tiny handwriting. I have to look at it very closely.

HS He's the one, yes. He's the one. Now this is a very personal letter but a very, very interesting letter. It's dated 16 April 1968, it is from Robben Island and Mac's number was 9/65, that was his number. It is written on foolscap paper, very closely handwritten and you will now read it to us. It's quite fascinating.

POM Did this get through the censors?

HS Yes. You will see the signature.

LS It's been censored but there's nothing that's been removed.

HS By this time they knew exactly what would be censored and what would not be so they avoided any problem.

"Dear Hassim, I have been very heartened by your ready response to my request via Tim. Unfortunately, I have to ration my letters. I hope, therefore, that Themba and Evie will understand why, at least for the present, I am unable to write to them. In any event I have certain problems in relation to which I want, if possible, to enlist your aid. I trust that you will treat this aspect of my letter in strict confidence.

"Since Tim's visit in January I have been very worried about her health. In fact I have been so disturbed that I sought permission in writing from the prison authorities to send her some cash from the funds that she sent for my current year's studies, etc., in order to pressure her into seeing a specialist and sending me a copy of his report. I am still hoping to pursue the matter with the Prison Department as I am hard put to understand their refusal."

"Recent indications are that her health is much improved, but you know Tim, she would certainly try to allay my anxiety and would prefer to stoically endure privations to ensure that I am adequately provided with funds. I feel also that it is all too easy to neglect her health until it is too late. This is all (the handwriting is really small) so I understand her difficulties are due to mental rather than physical factors.

"The effects of detention, her present lonely hermit-like life due to our enforced separation and all the burdens that she has had to shoulder on her own since my arrest can easily have a cumulative effect that would seriously impair her health. Since my arrest she has not managed to settle down. Her circle of friends are all scattered and I gather that she leads a pretty lonely life. I feel she must break out of her hermit life and build a stable circle of friends.

It is here that I want to enlist your aid in asking you and your wife to find a way to draw her closer to you. I have not had the pleasure of meeting your wife but from what Tim tells me I gather that the prospects are there for a stable friendship between her and Tim. This may all sound simple but I

know it is not an easy thing to do. Friendships don't just sprout up like that overnight. Besides Tim has been in a defensive frame of mind since my arrest, very wary of charity and all that. I hope, therefore, that you will do all you can in this regard.

"Secondly, I have a more easily met request to make, one that (unsure of the word) at the same time not put Tim's guard up. I normally write all my letters via Tim and I am sure she will be wondering why I have chosen to write direct to you. May 17th is our anniversary and May 27th is her birthday. Would you be so kind as to buy a small token gift for her on my behalf? The surprise element should be enough to make her understand why I have written direct to you. I have in my mind a cheap Penguin book that would do very well as a present, namely, *Scarlet and Black* by Stendahl or something similar. Please give it to her as a combined anniversary/birthday gift from me. Sorry to impose on you in this fashion.

That I have been moved to write to you in relation to the above matters is indication enough of the degree of my anxiety. One does not and cannot foresee all the consequences of one's actions. I have no cause for regret. It would, however, be a source of much pain to me if the consequences were such as to induce the impairment of Tim's health. She has shown a degree of courage that few can measure and has stood by me and without complaining accepted both before and after my arrest a mode of existence that can hardly be the envy of any woman.

"What can I tell you about myself? Perhaps I can best explain prison and what it has meant to me by means of an analogy which you, being something of an artist, will readily grasp. Prison is like a miniature, be it a painting, a sculpture or even a Coca-Cola bottle. In a miniature all the lesser details of the other disappear through a process of reduction until the main contours are all that are left. In philosophy a similar process is utilised in order to understand the phenomena, method of abstraction. In either case this method enables a comprehension of the quintessence of the object phenomena, the essential qualities emerge in sharp relief, and prison I find is a miniature of the society within which it exists.

But prison has meant more than this to me. It allows me to detach myself from the press and heat of events. This confined effect has been to enrich and deepen my optimism but I hasten to add that this is the optimism of a case-hardened realist and not an idealist. Idealists, of course, will find the atmosphere conducive to wild flights of imagination. I guess I was made to come to prison. I have neither lost nor gained weight. I reckon I remain the same in spirit, perhaps more optimistic and certainly the wiser.

"What of yourself and your wife? Do you still maintain an interest in painting? I hope you have seen John Burgess' book on Picasso as a painter, Penguin. If you haven't, do obtain a copy. You will find it stimulating.

"Do you still keep in touch with Raji's monthly notes, etc? I have taken up so much space that I have little left to ask of the many friends that I should like to hear of.

My very best regards to your Dad, Uncle and Kallie. The same goes for Evie, Themba. Does he remain the eligible bachelor who played brinkmanship with marriage? And others. Do you hear from Steve, etc? Is your sister in  with you and how far is your wife with her studies? God damn it, what is her name? When you reply I hope you will find the space to tell me about them. Oh yes, also give

my regards to Radi and her husband. Please head your reply, 'Reply to letter in lieu of March 1968 visit.' As to Evie and Themba's query as to why I don't want to write, well I'd like it and hope to create the opportunity one day. In the meantime rest assured that I do often think of you folks.

"Well, old chap, there is little else to say for now. Tim can tell you all about my progress and problems about studies, etc. Prison is no easy place to live in. I keep chafing at my inactivity. I always want to be up and about and hate routine. I always feel like a robot, but never fear, I always am searching and finding ways to pinch myself to make sure I am alive and not an automaton.

"Please write soon and at length. I all but anxiously await to hear from you.

Fondest regards, Mac."

HS That's the character of him. If you reproduce that in full you've got it.

POM It's code.

HS So it's decoded.

POM Can you remember?

HS Now as you will notice I corresponded with him and I think that there was an interchange of at least three to four letters. I can't lay my hands on the others, to my eternal regret. But I have a sneaking suspicion that they are somewhere in this library. As you will notice, under the table there are boxes and boxes of papers. It's only after I spoke to you that I looked around to say I'd better find it and I just found the one letter. And the photographs I had actually taken to my chambers and I asked Tim to come and have a look at it. One would have anticipated that if somebody said to you, "I have got your wedding photographs here. Would you like to come to see it?" And before I could put the phone down the person will be there. One would imagine that. She wasn't interested. It's only on the third occasion that I reminded her, I said, "Tim, you know I've got those photographs." "Oh yes, yes, I forgot, I'll come and have a look."

POM Do you know who Mac is? If you look back and you've known him from when you were in your 20s and now he's approaching 70.

HS We may possibly get a glimpse of the answer or just a hint of the answer in his letter to me when he says that prison life, although it is boring and so on, things like that, he's enjoying it. So what? Whatever the situation is as long as you accept it you must live with it. Nowhere does he show any sense of sorrow or hurt.

To say what have these people done? They've thrown me in jail. What he is saying to me is please don't fret about me, I'm quite well, although my liberty is restricted somewhat I'm settling down quite well and so on. Give my wife Stendahl's book and so on.

HS Before I forget, I think the Robben Island experience  you come to the conclusion, which I have come to, is that much of the prisoners' well-being, much of the prisoners' well-being, mental and otherwise, if it was not for Mac with all sorts of tricks that he went, Robben Island would not have been the same.

Everybody was listless, what the hell to do, we're going to die in jail. He goes and gets them to write essays. I want it next day, I want to smuggle it out. He gets Mandela to write that damn book. Mandela would have never written it. OK? So if you want to hear about Robben Island and the success of Robben Island in engendering all the time the power and the moral authority and so on, Mac was the man. Even Kathy Kathrada, for example, you've met him, you've spoken to him and so on, he's a soft soul. Those are the best words I can describe. He's a soft soul. He didn't strike me as a man of great initiative and so on at all from my conversation with him. But if you look at Mac, he told Mandela, "You do this, you do that. I'll do this, I'll do that. Let's get educated." You see what he says? "What the hell are you doing? Come on, study." Orders the Economists, now the communists are making money out of that. "Read it, let's have a debate. Let's go ahead. Life hasn't come to an end."

No we didn't have one. Well you know what we do, we scrounge around for food at the Inns and so on. We had India House for instance.

POM Did you look out for girls? No girl friends?

HS Girl friends over the weekend. All the weekend we had girl friends. All we did was during the day when I was at the Inns of Court or whatever the case may be, fortunately there was India House there and my eternal thanks to them because they gave you a nice meal for about a shilling. But it was cheap. The students used to go there and we should love it. And of course we ate enough that we could let supper pass by. We lived a very frugal life. If you have a look in the photographs you will get a sense of our living standards and things like that. Damn it, we couldn't afford to go to a barber. Damn it, we couldn't even set up a table for the wedding thing. We've got a milk bottle we stuck flowers in. Just having a look at these. And coup de grâce, the wedding cake, it's an ordinary sponge cake. Look at it. The cheapest on the market. Look at it! And who the hell's typewriter is that?

HS Then of course we get this bumptious bastard who came in, a chap by the name of Kader Asmal, the Minister of Education, and he scrounged on us for at least a year and a half, the bastard. Bumptious. I must tell you this about Kader. I come home one evening, tired and so on, now Kader had no girl friends at all. He was shy, shy, and if a girl looked at him he would look down. That was the type of chap. Now we suddenly find that Kader, who is now in the London School of Economics doing his LLB or something like that, unusually he came home a little later than usual. What's happening to this chap? Must be something happening. We didn't ask him. When we asked him, "Why are you a bit late?" he used to giggle and stay shy and look away or something like that. Then one day, one evening I walk up the stairs, our flat was on the top and the landlord and landlady stayed at the bottom. I go up the stairs and if I'm not mistaken the scene we're looking at, that was our lounge, and the stairway let up to this scene and then we had three bedrooms, a kitchen. I got there, it's darkish and I looked and I saw the most amazing sight. Kader Asmal with a girl on his lap. I nearly fell backwards. I composed myself and looked and they suddenly saw me and she leapt out of his lap.

HS Kader was red as a beetroot. "Hello, hello, sorry to disturb you", I said. No introductions at all and I shot off into my bedroom and waited till she departed. That weekend he says, "Hassim I must talk to you about something." So I said, "Yes?" He says, "This is a serious matter." "Yes, Kader, what's happening? Come on." He says, "You know we all came to London to educate ourselves, advance our knowledge, etc., etc., and so on, and all I expected was to get back home and participate in the

liberation struggle." I said, "Yes, that's true." He said, "You know what? I feel very, very sad. I want to marry."

"Oh", I said, "You want our permission?" Renegade bastard, he'd come to help us to liberate the country. So I said to him, "Look man, Kader, there are two types of liberations. You can fight for it and you can also support it from outside and we need outside support as much as we need internal support." He married her.

I said to him, "You can contribute very greatly from outside South Africa. This is the reason why we are here partly, to gain support from the rest of the world." He did well, formed the Irish Anti-Apartheid Movement and so on.

POM What in your mind will you take with you? No matter what happened to Mac. What would you take?

HS I would say what I would deal about is his fearlessness irrespective of the consequences. That is something that I feel is his prominent characteristic, his fearlessness. He brooked no opposition whatsoever. It could be anybody and he would take them on. As I said, and if our assessment is quite correct, even at this particular stage while we are talking, this whole question of the Ngcuka enquiry and so on, he's defiant. "I am right and that is the end of the matter." That I think is the overriding impression I will have and I will try to communicate.

Mac lives for the moment. His interest is an imminent, static period where he is interested in. If that interest shifts to something else he completely eliminates his past. I think this is one of the things that people will tell you who are close to Mac and he suddenly disappears. We never found him. OK. So as he described it so well in this letter to me, that you look around you, what are your interests at that particular time and exploit that, it may be a person, it may be whatever, but it doesn't last. I don't think he has ever had a lasting friendly relationship with anyone, but that I think is not a wise statement to make simply because we all are the same. If you shift somewhere you can phone your friends the first Monday or Tuesday and after that of course you are with your crowd so that's not a fair statement at all to make. But what I am saying is that if, for example, he comes to Durban there would be nothing wrong for him to pick up the phone and say, "How's your family?" That type of thing. I think he has segmented his life into distinct periods and for the type of work that he did and the type of responsibilities he took, that is in his favour.

For example, when he was in Durban conducting Operation Vula, he tells me a story. He says he entered a café to have a meal in Gardiner Street, just opposite the Post Office, and he saw somebody like me and he says he looked at me and he didn't want to be identified. He says he froze because he was afraid that I recognised him I would have gone and met him and if I had met him then he would have a possible source of exposure. I may speak to somebody and they may link it. And he got a fright when he saw me. Then to make matters worse he says, "You then turned and walked to the door and there was a policeman standing on the pavement and you were speaking to the policeman or a guard or somebody." He says he was terrified. He says as he stood for a little longer, "Then you (meaning this other person) you then came in and walked towards him and walked past", and then he suddenly said, "No, this is not Hassim." Very interesting, a little incident he related to me. He didn't want to be known by anybody and he kept to that part of Durban where none of his friends were acquainted or would frequent.

HS That is actually the dilemma of the Indians in this country. Let's get down to this discussion for a while. That is the dilemma of the Indians in this country. It's a serious problem, a very, very serious problem. The first government, free government, in this country had five Indian ministers and so on. This was in recognition of the important role that they had played in the liberation struggle. If you have a look at the liberation struggle itself you will find that the Indians played a role greater than their numbers in the country, a tiny minority, 1.2 million. As we said, it then goes back to the time of the indentured Indians and their resistance towards their indenture, the arrival of Gandhi and organised politics.

Do you know that the Natal Indian Congress which was created in 1894 was the first political body of its kind in the world? So our roots go back a very long while. If you have a look at the intensification of political struggle the ANC was nowhere in the picture. Gandhi started in 1914, the passive resistance campaign and so on and the Natal Indian Congress carried on. That was the only active party that was anti-government and also claimed concessions for the Indians themselves.

Then the campaign, the defiance campaign and so forth, it is from the defiance campaign itself, and as you will see Nelson Mandela says in his Long Walk to Freedom that he was amazed at the sight of Indian women offering resistance to unjust laws and going to jail and so on. That then struck him that this is the type of organisation that we should be creating and proceed further. Then of course the ANC, he became the leader of the ANC Youth Brigade and the rest is history.

So somewhere along the line throughout this very important period of liberation, the Indian was not very far off, Yusuf Dadoo, Naicker and so on. Mac then goes to Robben Island, he has a unique personality, shapes Robben Island prisoners and so on. He comes out and amazingly here you are, he comes back into the country with Operation Vula and so on. The thrust, as I feel, is predominantly an Indian thrust, if you're talking thrusts. And that when eventually change took place and in the euphoria they appoint the Indians as cabinet ministers and things like that, then by the attrition of time, once the actual soldiers in war have done their duty, it is over. They then give way to the others in the country. OK? I think it's even better.

And as these liberation warriors now are gone then the people within the country themselves who take over, the usual type, and the anti-Indian sentiment again begins to proliferate. You find now, the situation I'm faced with, here I was at a wedding two Sundays ago and normally you get people to say a few words at a function like that, as you said if Mac had died and I was there to say something. You can't only talk about Mac, you have to send a message across, you see. So amongst the things that I said, I said, "Look, you all are aware that the Broederbonders and the trial that is taking place, had planned for the mass ejection of Indians and they would take the N3 and they would march them down to Durban and from Durban they're going to put them aboard ships and take them wherever." I said, "That is being said by the Broederbonders but I warn you that this is not a figment of my imagination or anybody's imagination, but if the Indians in this country are not prepared to change their attitude towards Africans that scenario is going to come true." I said, "Don't be mistaken. If you think that you are living in Africa and living as you would in India then you must be blind."

There are 1.2 million Indians in this part of the world. OK, let me give you the Durban scenario. We've got Tamil, Hindus, we've got Calcutta Hindus and various shades in between. Amongst the Bania Indians, for example, we have a tailor class, we have a shoemaker class, we have a grocery

class and goddamn whatever classes, and the families would not meet. It's riven with distinctions themselves. How on earth do you expect them to be on friendly terms and so on with Africans that are a totally alien factor?

I'm telling them, I said, "For heaven's sake, I'm not expecting you people to go and embrace every African that you see but treat them with respect, treat them as your equal. Don't exploit them." Exploitation in the sense that you have got a master/servant relationship, long hours of work, paltry pay or whatever the case may be.

So to me personally at this juncture, after all our liberation struggle and so on and things like that, us going to jail and things like that, but if we are not going to change our attitudes towards the Africans, then we have a death wish. People don't talk about this but what's happening in Zimbabwe? Millions have fled. Malawi, Kenya, Tanganyika. Those who have now stayed behind are with the African free trade and so on, they've become part of the economy with the Africans. Mac knows that there is a lot of anti-Indianism amongst the parliamentarians and people who support them and Mac cannot stand that because he can tell them - you don't come to me, I've done my duty.

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