JOURNEY TO ITHACA

A PERSONAL MEMOIR

William Rowland


UNIVERSITY
OF
JOHANNESBURG

Journey to Ithaca

A personal memoir

William Rowland

UJ Press

Journey to Ithaca: A personal memoir

Published by UJ Press
University of Johannesburg
Library
Auckland Park Kingsway Campus
PO Box 524
Auckland Park
2006
https://ujpress.uj.ac.za/

First published 2024

https://doi.org/10.36615/9781776489275

978-1-7764892-6-8 (Paperback)
978-1-7764892-7-5 (PDF)
978-1-7764892-8-2 (EPUB)
978-1-7764892-9-9 (XML)

This publication was submitted to a rigorous double-blind peer-review process prior to publication and all recommendations by the reviewers were considered and implemented before publication.

Language Editor: Mike Leisegang
Cover design and image: Hester Roets, UJ Graphic Design Studio
Typeset in 10/13pt Merriweather Light

Contents

When you set out for Ithaca
Ask that your way be long,
Full of adventure, full of instruction.
The Laistrygonians and the Cyclops,
Angry Poseidon—do not fear them;
Such as these you will never find
As long as your thought is lofty,
As long as a rare emotion
Touch your spirit and your body.
The Laistrygonians and the Cyclops,
Angry Poseidon—you will not meet them
Unless you carry them in your soul,
Unless your soul raise them up before you.
Ask that your way be long,
At many a summer dawn to enter—
With what gratitude, what joy!
Ports seen for the first time;
To stop at Phoenician trading centres,
And to buy good merchandise.
Mother of pearl and coral, amber and ebony,
And sensuous perfumes of every kind.
Buy as many sensuous perfumes as you can,
Visit many Egyptian cities
To learn and learn from those who have knowledge.
Always keep Ithaca fixed in your mind;
Your arrival there is what you are destined for.
But do not in the least hurry the journey.
Better that it last for years
So that when you reach the island you are old,
Rich with all that you have gained on the way,
Not expecting Ithaca to give you wealth.

Ithaca has given you the splendid voyage.
Without her you would never have set out,
But she has nothing more to give you.
And if you find her poor,
Ithaca has not deceived you.
So wise have you become, of such experience,
That already you will have understood

Constantine P. Cavafy
Translator Unknown

England all Olivers and Rowlands bred,
During the time Edward the Third did reign …
Lean, raw-boned rascals! who would e'er suppose
They had such courage and audacity?

William Shakespeare
Henry VI, Part 1, Act 1, Scene 2

Dedication

With loving gratitude to my wife Hélène, my children Frank, Toni and Bronwyn, my sister Denise and my great-niece Sasha

Acknowledgements

Tanya Joubert for encouragement and countless hours of transcription;
Jeanette McKenna for perceptive insights and shared adventures recounted in these pages; and
Sandra Rowoldt Shell for meticulous editing of the text and invaluable advice.

Introduction

Why "My Journey to Ithaca"?

Because of the lifelong journey from my childhood home at Ithaca Mansions, Kloof Road, Sea Point, Cape Town, and the place where I was blinded in a shooting, via many settings and adventures, until my return to those very same spaces. The title evokes the epic journey of Odysseus, King of Ithaca, who set out to fight in the ten-year Trojan war, thereafter to be condemned by the gods to wander the perilous oceans for ten more years before his return to the island.

Constantine Cavafy's poem "Ithaca" is cited because of the images that resonate with my story. At the very end I include a personalised rendering of the poem, in gratitude to acknowledge that Ithaca gave me my journey.

Part I of this memoir recounts my life as a child adapting to blindness, as a boy attending the Worcester School for the Blind, as a young man studying in London, and what I call "the Cape Town years" in terms of family and career. In an earlier conception of the memoir, I had intended to record my life in a series of short, short stories. Although I abandoned that approach, I have nevertheless included three of those stories because of the poignant experiences they recollect.

Part II of my memoir is a compilation of chapters from my book *Nothing About Us Without Us* (UNISA Press; 2004), dealing with my activism in the disability rights movement as part of the liberation struggle in South Africa and my years as director of the South African National Council for the Blind, with the remodelling of the organisation and the national expansion and diversification of services for blind people.

Following these chapters is a collection of selected writings, reflecting high points in my international work and worldwide travels. The events and experiences captured in those pages are retrieved from the annals of deep memory.

I then include a series of brief reflections I wish to preserve for myself and those who care, some of them being life-changing moments, such as saving my daughter from drowning and the glimpsing of visual memories from my seeing years.

Finally, I have a chapter on my project "rediscovering my own history", which means revisiting the people and places of my youth, in which I painfully and pleasurably relive episodes from my past life and gather a network of new friends sharing that history.

My personal story is, of course, interwoven with events of our times and the emergence of the new South Africa. But I desist. How can one encapsulate a long life lived to the full in a few introductory lines? Better it is that my readers join the voyage as I set out for Ithaca.

PART 1

Chapter 1

The Day the Light Went Out

Wednesday 14 February 1945 was my third day at nursery school and my last day in the seeing world. At lunchtime my mother was at the classroom door and from there an easy stroll took us to our home at 5 Ithaca Mansions, Kloof Road, Sea Point.

Those few days in Loreto Convent Pre-School had not been uneventful and the images are indelible. In memory I see myself wandering the playground watching the other children from a distance.

Standing in a row with the other kids, a little girl's school case flew open and a bottle of milk tumbled out with an assortment of coloured pencils. How very carefully she packed everything back!

My dad had taught me to colour in and to trace patterns, but when the teacher told me to draw a house, I was unable to produce a picture. A little boy next to me drew a house for me, fronted by a balcony and balustrade. My only contribution was a tiny round window. Asked by the teacher whether I had drawn the house myself, I replied "yes". Even today my conscience pricks me for that untruth. At the time though, it seemed okay. I had, after all, drawn a window.

Our two-roomed flat had a small *stoep* looking out onto an expanse of impacted black soil. I jumped over the wall and sat myself down on a big stone, ready to play. To my right, Linda sat in the lounge window of the next-door flat, while looking up, I saw little Betty looking down from her second-floor balcony. The morning at school forgotten, we began to laugh and joke.

Then Linda's mother stepped up behind her and asked whether we knew it was baby's first birthday. Would we like

to come and play? Betty and I told our mothers and rushed around the block to number 4 Ithaca Mansions where Linda and her little sister lived with their parents and grandparents.

Figure 1: William as a baby

Figure 2: William (aged 2) with his mother, Bertha

Figure 3: William (aged around 3 years) with his father, Frank

We were taken to the back room where Mrs Varrie, Linda's mother, dragged a large box of toys in from the passage. She

left the room and quickly returned, holding something in her hands behind her back.

"I want you to close your eyes and count to three," Mrs Varrie said. "I have a big surprise for you." I did so and when I opened my eyes Mrs Varrie was just standing there motionless. She said to close our eyes and count again.

I don't remember hearing the shot, but when next I looked, a dreadful drama was unfolding. To my right little Betty lay in a pool of blood with a hole through the head. To my left Linda sat, legs folded under her on her bed, with a look of utter terror on her face. That was the last thing I saw before a bullet traversed my brain, severing my optic nerves and leaving me unconscious.

My mother was preparing lunch when she was called to the emergency. Our family relived the events of that day many times over the years, but my mother never actually recounted to me the horror scene she discovered. Mrs Varrie had been overpowered and locked in the bathroom by their domestic worker, and my mother gathered me into her arms and raced down the passage to the street outside. Regaining consciousness, I found myself in deepest darkness. "What happened? What happened?" I wanted to know. "You're going to be all right. You'll be all right. Just sleep," my mother said.

On the pavement in front of the flats my mother started running up and down calling for help. Then a man came up to her and took us into one of the flats, where he applied ice to my temples to stop the bleeding. His ministrations probably saved my life. In family memory this was Mr Gunner, a Rhodesian visitor to one of our neighbours.

Not far away in Quendon Road, Mrs Cohen pulled up at her house in her chauffeur-driven car. "There's been an accident at Ithaca Mansions," she was told. Immediately she despatched her chauffeur to the scene in case a car was needed.

And so it was that my mother and I, with little Betty and her mother, set off for the Monastery Nursing Home, our nearest hospital. Fleetingly I regained consciousness again

and heard my mother urging the chauffeur to drive as fast as he could.

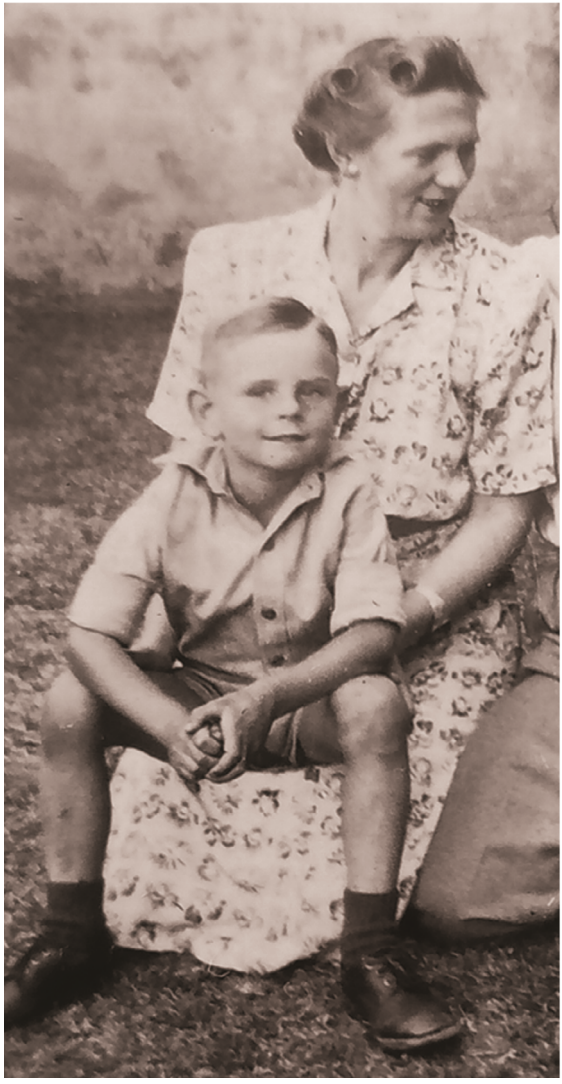

Figure 4: William with his mother on 20 Jan 1945; he was blinded on 14 Feb 1945

At the Monastery, Betty and I were put in a side-ward, presumably to die. Betty's father arrived and flung himself on his daughter, already dead.

"William spoke to me twice coming to the hospital," my mother told one of the doctors. Maybe there was hope after all, the doctor thought. A heart stimulant was injected and I was admitted to intensive care.

What follows is family legend, as retold by my mother. She was waiting for further word from the doctors, when one of the nuns, Sister Marie, came up to her and asked whether she would like to pray. She took my mother into the Monastery chapel, where the nuns were at their afternoon prayers. At the front of the chapel was a crucifix where my mother prostrated herself and cried to God to save my life. Suddenly a bright light illumined the crucifix, and my mother took this as a given sign that I would live.

A few days later the local priest, Father Shehan, paid a visit to my parents. He brought an extraordinary message: he had been praying for my life when little Betty appeared to him. She said she had asked God and that I would live. All her life my mother believed there was a reason. This she later found in the work that became my calling.

Somehow it was decided that I should never be left alone while in hospital. Volunteers were mustered from the Sea Point community, who kept a silent vigil at my bedside around the clock in six-hourly shifts.

For three weeks I lay in a coma and then one late afternoon I awoke to vivid consciousness, hearing my mother's voice as she entered my room.

I was hospitalised for six weeks, but only two memories still linger from that time. The first was a visit from my nursery school teacher. How I wish I could recapture her name, but "teacher" is perhaps a good enough name for the kindly voice at my bedside. The other memory is of my teddy bear, "Teddy", the constant companion at my side for play, day or night.

The nuns treated me with the greatest gentleness, but the loving kindness of Sister Marie surpassed all else, she of saintly memory to my family. The succour she provided to my parents – the only word I can apply – her prayers, her reassuring touch gave hope and strengthened faith beyond the power of medicine.

Penicillin was prescribed to prevent infection, but because it was a new form of treatment, a meeting of medical specialists was convened to agree on the dosage. At the time we were told that I was the first civilian in Cape Town to receive this medicine, earliest of the antibiotics. I was injected every six hours and after discharge from hospital the injections were continued weekly for six months. Promptly at 11 am every Thursday, Dr Viljoen would arrive at our home to carry out the painful procedure. Because of the injections the skin on my thighs lost all sensation and many decades passed before feeling was restored.

When did I realise I was blind? When I said to my mother "please put on the light—I can't see" and she folded her arms around me and said "I wish I could." No light, just like that: A fact of life for the rest of time.

The events at Ithaca Mansions were headline news from the start. The late afternoon edition of *The Cape Argus* on 14 February carried the story under the headline "Sea Point Tragedy." A girl of five and a woman of 60 were said to be dead and another child of five was in hospital critically wounded after "a shooting affair" in a Sea Point flat in the lunch hour. A middle-aged woman was in custody. The woman who had died was Mrs Varrie's mother, presumably from shock. However, it emerged at the autopsy that she had been shot in the heart through the back with little bleeding. The funerals of little Betty Aldred and the mother, Mrs G, took place on 16 February.

Mrs Varrie appeared in court the day after the shootings. She seemed confused and even unaware of the charges and was referred for mental observation. At a subsequent hearing on 1 March she was committed to Valkenberg Hospital where she would remain at the pleasure of the Governor-General.

Figure 5: William aged 6 years, after his blinding, with his mother Bertha

The *Cape Argus* front page carried a second dramatic story on 14 February that year under the heading "Dresden Hit". This announced the World War II bombing of Dresden by the Allied Forces. Some 25,000 Germans perished in the attacks and 90% of the city was reduced to rubble. I later learned that at the very time of the Sea Point shootings, thousands of people were suffering a fiery death in that stricken city.

Chapter 2

Feeling My Way

And then I was home again, learning my new life, and my parents trying to cope. Today, people in similar circumstances would receive counselling, but nothing like that was available to us at that time nor even thought of. As family, courage and common sense were our only resources.

I marvel at the fortitude shown by my parents in confronting their new reality. My mother did have her "blue days" when she was weepy, but they were rare. My father, however, lost his faith. "If God allows that to happen to little children, I want nothing to do with Him" was his verdict. Many years were to pass before he recovered his faith at the end of a very long life.

Following these traumatic events, it was decided that we needed an extended holiday, my father returning to his family in Grahamstown, the place of his youth, and my mother visiting her family in the Transvaal. I have treasured memories from that stay in the north.

At the home of my Aunty Jane and Uncle Dup in Pretoria I was allowed to chase the chickens in the yard and collect the warm, newly laid eggs from their nests. There was also the thrill of my first Highveld thunderstorms, typically erupting at going-home time for the civil servants (*staatsdiensreën*).

But the highlight was our visit to my Aunty Jo's farm in Ermelo, where I clambered to the top of mountainous heaps of freshly harvested mealies and went horse riding with my cousin Dirkie. I developed an obsession with handwashing, as if everything was dirty, and it took considerable severity on my mother's part to rid me of the habit.

It must have pained my parents to be apart because plans were changed so my father could join us. He brought further

adventure, and I was allowed to drive a tractor under verbal guidance and sling pebbles at a target with my *kettie* (catapult).

Returning to Cape Town, our disrupted lives began to take on a regular routine. Having a mental picture of our home, I was soon moving around the flat with relative ease. Outdoors, going to the shops for example, I was able to detect objects such as walls and lampposts seemingly with a modicum of residual vision. Over time I came to realise that I was blessed with a strong sense of echo-location and that I was, in fact, hearing these objects and not seeing them.

My father, fluent in Morse code, worked alternating day and night shifts at the communications company Cable & Wireless. My mother was the home-maker, managing the household and caring for the children. I wonder at the natural aptitude of my mother and father for parenting a blind child. To develop my hand skills I was given household chores to perform—shelling peas, peeling potatoes, packing cupboards straight. I was given my own set of tools to saw wood into pieces and hammer nails into a log. And I collected a fine assortment of puzzles requiring all kinds of fiddly bits to be separated and then put together again.

Toys are the tools of learning. Playing with Dinky Toys taught me the distinctive shapes of motor vehicles—Austin, Chrysler, and the rest. Also trucks, cranes, and aeroplanes. I owned a Hornby train set and after I had laid out the railroad on our lounge carpet, the engine and coaches would circle for hours as I counted the circuits towards new records. But my favourite belonging was the Meccano set. My father spent many happy hours helping me build house-like structures and weird contraptions. Our proudest achievement was a cableway running from the floor all the way up to the ceiling.

Sea Point was a closely-knit community in those days and my blinding elicited countless random acts of kindness. Because my left eye had been scarred by the bullet, it was decided that I should wear glasses for cosmetic reasons. Soon donations of glasses were being delivered to our front door,

with me breaking many pairs in the early days of uncertainty—three pairs on a single day on one occasion.

I acquired a tortoise as a pet, which lived on our front lawn and slept under the bordering bushes. It wasn't long before gifts of tortoises began to arrive, until my parents imposed a limit of 32. The tortoises were of two species, the mountain tortoises being round and bulky and the *padlopers*, flat and knobbly. I learned that tortoises with an indentation underneath were male, while females had a flat underside. I knew each one by name, Harry and Gillian being my favourites. Harry was a bit of a bully, charging other tortoises and knocking them onto their backs, but when my mother called his name, he was quick to show up to be fed fresh lettuce.

The Berrett family lived in a house next door to Ithaca Mansions and the mother, Mrs Berrett, who had one of the heaviest accents I ever encountered, never failed to be amazed when I recognised her voice. Her daughter Bila had a special place in our lives, the purpose of her frequent visits being to read me stories. It was a sad day when they emigrated to Israel.

Young Hughie Hawkins was another regular visitor. He would play roughhouse with me, always taking care that I did not hurt myself. Hughie later became a Catholic priest.

Bila, Hughie. Ah, where in the world can they be now?

Upstairs from us, on the third floor of Ithaca Mansions, lived the Taskers, Eric and Erica, both teachers, and their daughter Adrienne. They were perhaps our most generous neighbours. It was Uncle Eric who taught me to swim at the Sea Point Pavilion, a cord looped around my waist held by Uncle Eric keeping me afloat until I mastered overarm swimming. He taught me about rugby and the fielding positions in cricket, taking me to my first sports matches at Newlands where I met the Western Province cricket team and captain Gerald Innes promised to hit a six for me.

Somehow from somewhere Aunty Erica obtained learning materials and she it was who taught me the basics of

Braille so that when I went to school eventually, I was already starting to read.

Some of our happiest times were when my father was working the afternoon shift and had mornings free. Then we would go for outings like swimming at Camps Bay beach or walking in the Glen Forest Nature Reserve gathering pine nuts. On the rocks at Mouille Point we would choose a shallow pool where I could sit and play with the sea creatures my father gathered for me—limpets, periwinkles, prickly "sea eggs", and, when we were lucky, a little "sea cat" (from the Afrikaans for octopus).

Near the Green Point lighthouse—how I loved the roar of its fog horn on misty days—there were large lawns where I could run free. The up-slanting edges of these lawns warned me when a gravel path was coming up and kept me within bounds.

My mental development was not neglected, with my father teaching me multiplication tables, beginning with the 2- and 3-times tables. When we got to the 12-times table I was disappointed to be told that there was no 13-times table, but there were other more difficult calculations instead. Soon I was recruited by my mother to sit with her at the lounge table each month when she did the household accounts to add up columns of figures for her.

My mother read me the children's classics, A. A. Milne's *Winnie the Pooh* and *Grimms' Fairy Tales*, as well as other children's stories often with sound effects such as the huffing and puffing of the wolf at the doors of the three little pigs. My father took me on to more advanced reading, such as a book by British astronomer Fred Hoyle and the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, a life-long favourite of which I still have a Braille copy in the cupboard to my left as I write.

Building my own record collection was another idea that sparked our enthusiasm. I took a liking to cowboy music and *You Are My Sunshine* by Gene Autry and *Pistol Packin' Mama* by Al Dexter and his Troopers received many spins on my wind-up gramophone. At Christmas it was Bing Crosby's *Silent Night*

that echoed through the house. It still touches my heart to think of my mother's favourite songs sung by Vera Lynn, *I'll Pray for You* and *My Son, My Son*.

Radio listening had a powerful hold over me, with broadcasts of plays, serialised books, and Children's Corner, with readings from Enid Blyton, amongst others, and popular songs for children such as *Christopher Robin is Saying His Prayers*. I spent endless hours in front of our Phillips radiogram, but there was an absolute rule that when people came to visit, I first had to come and chat. It broke my isolation and had an early socialising effect.

Intuitively we knew that I would have to adapt to the seeing world because the seeing world would not be adapting to me. An example of this was my mother's suggestion that I learn what we called "sighted letters". And so the capital letters of the Roman alphabet were laid out in Plasticine on a tray plus the shapes of numbers. This knowledge has stood me in good stead in many situations, for example in locating my hotel room by feeling the raised or engraved numbers on the copperplate at the door. Likewise, features of the environment or the shape of things are often described by reference to letters of the alphabet or other figures, which has helped me to understand the layout of a T-junction or what is meant by a U-turn. Similarly, it is easy to picture the inside of a church with nave and transept in the form of a cross.

Two blocks up the road from Ithaca Mansions was the small Anglican Church of The Holy Redeemer, where I went to Sunday school and where my mother and I attended services on special occasions, such as midnight Mass on Christmas Eve. The Holy Redeemer was situated on the corner of Kloof Road, where the white community lived, and Tramway Road which housed a small, coloured community of some fifty families. While the two communities were racially segregated, they worshipped together in a single congregation with the coloured people sitting at the back of the church. Later, in the early 1960s—because it represented a so-called "black spot"—the Tramway Road community became one of the first

in South Africa to be subjected to a "forced removal", being resettled mainly on the desolate Cape Flats in a sand-blown new township named Bonteheuwel.

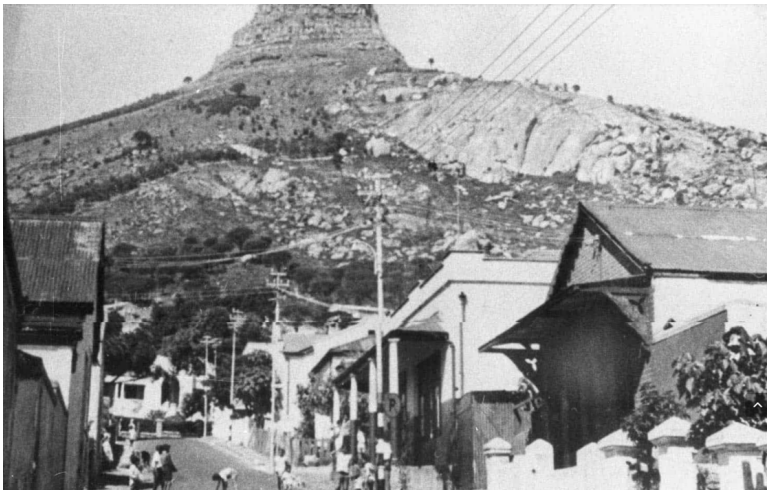

Figure 6: Tramway Road

Just down the road from The Holy Redeemer lived the Lawrence family, Francis the mother being our "washer woman". Each week when she came to collect our washing and deliver the freshly ironed laundry from the previous bundle, my mother and Francis would take tea together in our sitting room, not as "madam and maid", but as mothers who had much to discuss about their children, Francis's son William being named after me.

The forced removal put an end to such intercommunal activities, and once the dwellings had been erased, the area was given over to a play park for children. Nearly four decades were to pass before the ground was returned to the original residents under a "land claim" in the new South Africa. But the group lacked capital to rebuild their homes and another eighteen divisive years dragged by before the scattered and dwindling community was able to dispose of the ground in 2015 to a developer in an uneven deal resulting in a payout of R750,000 to each beneficiary and bloated profits for the purchaser.

Earlier, I told of our first family holiday in the Transvaal, after which an up-country holiday each year became a regular routine, not only to visit aunts and uncles and my numerous cousins, but more importantly, to consult famed Johannesburg ophthalmologist Dr Piet Boshoff. The pattern of these consultations was repetitious with an eye examination, a talk to my parents, and the prescription of medication including calcium tablets supposedly for their regenerative effect. I look back on those consultations with heartache and anger because Dr Boshoff would certainly have known that damaged optic nerves, lacking a myelin sheath, do not regenerate. We could have been spared the unnecessary expense of those visits and the false hope.

Dr Boshoff is said to have had a fearsome personality and is remembered for his unorthodox methods. One of these was to refer patients to a dentist, ostensibly because a tooth was impinging on a nerve, causing eye problems. Although the dentists must have realised that the treatment would be to no avail, they nevertheless performed the tooth extraction, thereby to escape the wrath of the good doctor.

One of these visits to the north stands out for a different reason; our appointment with the renowned faith healer Lady Salmon of Germiston. Her prayers and laying on of hands, as with my treatment, were to no avail.

It should not be thought that the experiences and events recounted in this chapter all took place when I lost my sight at the age of five. They stretched over several years and overlapped with my going to school. My schooling was delayed until the age of eight because of hopes of my recovery, but inexorably the next major change in our lives crept up on us, and at last came to pass—the time for me to leave home and be admitted to the School for the Blind, Worcester, 120 km from Cape Town on the far side of Bainskloof Pass.

Chapter 3

Fiat Lux

That first journey from our home in Cape Town to the Worcester school in my father's 1938 Chevy was full of heartache, because of the family parting. The only moments of comfort were when my mother drew me close for murmured prayers.

My father had painted an overoptimistic picture of the fun I would have playing with other children and jumping on the merry-go-rounds and swings. This would happen in time, but first I had to find my way and make friends.

My parents must have been surprised at the size of the sprawling campus with its five hostels—three for boys and two for girls—the two-storey "new school" building with its classrooms and offices arranged around an open inner court, the crafts department where older pupils learned trades, and the "old school" building with the principal's dwelling at the top known as "*Die Kraaines*" (The Crow's Nest). For quite a while, though, my awareness would be limited to the hostel, my classroom, and the path in between.

I can hardly imagine my parents' feelings during their two-and-a-half-hour drive home that day, but they would have taken courage from their meeting with the kindly Miss Barker, beloved matron of the little boys' hostel.

I carry a painful memory from my first day at school on 21 July 1948. After class, helped by the other children, I found my way to the big *stoep*, where coffee was served in the afternoon. The space emptied out and all at once I found myself alone in the inclined passageway alongside the building known as "the slope". There I wandered up and down—I can still feel the metal pipe of the railing under my hand—calling the name of a hostel assistant: "Miss Van der Watt! Miss Van der Watt!" I don't know how long this lasted, but at last I

was discovered, and taken by the hand back to my quarters. I didn't cry.

I was placed in the English class at the level of "big Sub A", as contrasted with "small Sub A", the beginners' class, Sub A being the equivalent of today's Grade 1. The English children of all the lower standards were grouped together in a single class, because of their limited number. Because of my age and knowledge of Braille, I was not placed in the beginners' class, but one step up and after six months, at the end of 1948, I skipped Sub B and was promoted to Standard 1, the equivalent of today's Grade 3.

The Afrikaans-speaking children at the school outnumbered English-speakers by nine to one. The reason was a high prevalence of hereditary blindness because of a limited gene pool and the tendency—over 350 years and at least twelve generations—for many Afrikaners to marry within the family. The isolation of some communities and their small numbers amplified the effect, as did first -cousin marriage, which was accepted by certain church groups. It meant that particular names were recurrent at the school. For example, over several decades the school was never without Kruger children amongst its pupils. The disproportionality of the nine to one ratio is borne out by the 1946 census figures, according to which 60 per cent of the white population was Afrikaans-speaking and 40 per cent was English-speaking. This imbalance in numbers explains why some of the names mentioned in this chapter are given in Afrikaans, this having been the dominant language at the school.

The tools of learning in those days were simple and yet ingenious. Braille was our medium of reading and writing and to begin with we were given cards with short words printed on them. Next, I was given a book and the very first line in my first reader was "I see the cat". The irony of these words for a blind child seems not to have occurred to anybody.

We each had our own writing frame with a stylus to prick out the Braille letters in mirror image writing from right to left. Turning the page over, one read from left to right.

For arithmetic—which we called "sums"—we used a Taylor Frame with square pegs fitting into rows of octagonal holes. At one end of the peg was a ridge, which, depending on the positioning, stood for the numbers one to eight. At the other end of the peg, the ridge was divided into two dots used for nine and zero and as signs indicating addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division.

I was naturally drawn to the other little boys in the English class. Herby Levin became a lifelong friend and Bruce Muir, we were told, suffered from "eye cancer" and died soon after from what must have been retinoblastoma. But in the little time we had together, there were poignant episodes.

One Saturday afternoon the three of us got together with Little Jackie and, huddled in a tight circle, we prayed to God to change us into birds so we could fly away home. Later that afternoon, Jackie was nowhere to be found. Had he become a bird, we wondered, and flown off? Our turn could be coming soon.

Another time we composed a letter to be sent to God, asking Him to give us back our sight. A strong southeaster was blowing, and standing in the wind, I released the Braille page which fluttered off to be carried, we believed, all the way to heaven. Our letter was discovered later at the other end of the playground caught up against the fence.

As my father had promised, there were swings and merry-go-rounds to play on, and even a see-saw. Our favourite playthings were the discarded motor tyres strewn about the yard, which we would roll along over the gravel, pretending we were driving a car: "*wroem, wroem—wroem, wroem*". We also liked to see how many we could stack on top of each other, the record being 21, with the tower tumbling to the ground as we hoisted number 22 into position.

As I grew older, I learned to walk on stilts and to ride a bicycle, using echolocation to navigate the school terrain. The biggest fun was giving lifts to the girls.

Nicknames were popular, often pointing unkindly to some personal characteristic, one young boy with Albinism being known as "*Witmuis*" (white mouse) and a kid with neurological symptoms who gave little hops as he walked being called "*Bokkie*". Those of us who wore glasses were teased with the name "Four Eyes". The teachers weren't spared either, the vice principal being known as "*die Donkie*" and one of the stricter schoolmasters as "*Boel*" (Bull dog). One of the female teachers was nicknamed "Head Lights" for reasons that will be obvious.

By the time we reached middle school we were playing competitive games simulating national sports. For "tin cricket" a condensed milk tin was hammered into a metal ball which was placed inside a second tin with the edges turned in. When this "ball" was rolled across the gravel, the metal core rattled and added to the sound needed by the batsman to hit the approaching object. We sometimes had a real cricket bat, but more often than not a sturdy plank had to suffice. A paraffin tin was our wicket and for a catch to be recognised, the ball had to be picked up rolling—without scraping the tin. We had boundaries and took runs, grounding the bat and calling "over" when we had finished running. A throw-in hitting the wicket before this call meant you were out. Teams were usually three or four a side.

Another of these sports was *dryfings* in which the aim was to drive the opposing team back towards their goal line. The game was played with a "book ball" comprising a rolled-up Braille magazine tied with string. This ball would be kicked to and fro by the two teams, each kick being taken from where the ball landed. In this way the team making the longer kicks would gradually drive the opposition back until a kick finally landed behind the goal line, scoring a point.

So-called extramural activities at the school included amateur wrestling. The aim was to pin your opponent's shoulders to the mat, thereby scoring a fall. Failing this, a points system applied. I twice qualified for the Western Province championships, coming third in my weight division

on the first occasion. A credible performance seemingly, except there were only three competitors. The next year I came third again, out of seven.

But the fight I remember best took place when I was about sixteen years old. Rejected by one of the girls in favour of a partially sighted boy—the totally blind usually came second in such matters—I found myself pitted against my rival in the school championship. Facing each other in the starting hold, I twisted into him, forcing him across my hip, and flung him to the floor. His shoulders hit the mat, giving me a fall and the bout was over in less than half a minute. Revenge is sweet it is said, but he still had the girl.

I also joined the chess club, where I quickly mastered popular openings. We were given a special honour when the town champion, Mr Dolman, came to play against us one evening. A little into the game I realised that there was no way in which Mr Dolman could avoid losing two pieces. The situation was farcical, and it was with difficulty that I suppressed the urge to burst out laughing. The next day I was given a talking to by the chess teacher: I had beaten the town champion, but I should not become swollen-headed.

Saturday evenings were devoted to cultural activities, with a three-week roster of music appreciation, debating society, and folk dancing (*volkspele*).

Music appreciation meant gathering in the Radio Room—named for its radiogram—to listen to gramophone records. What I specially remember is the countless repetitions of Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*, which is a playful introduction to the instruments of the symphony orchestra. Prokofiev cleverly ascribed a particular instrument and musical motif to each creature (including the humans) in the story. So it is possible to hear every time Peter enters the story, and for example the little bird, the grandfather, and the wolf stalking the duck.

In the debating society two teams of three speakers would debate a given topic with a vote at the end to decide the winner. Topics I remember being debated included the

merits of classical music versus the popular Afrikaans music (*boeremusiek*). Another was whether it is better to be blind or deaf. The emphasis on "better" rather than "worse" should be noted.

I never really took to folk dancing in which participants formed two concentric circles moving in opposite directions, until the moment came to pair off, take hands, and spin around (*tiekiedraai*). As yet, I lacked the daring of some of the other boys who returned to the hostel with tantalising tales of soft tits.

It was round about this time that I took to playing practical jokes, typically putting out a message for everyone to gather outside the school building and have them wait around for nothing to happen. Eventually someone would go to check with the senior staff, returning with the command to disperse immediately. In one of my most creative pranks, I called the school posing as an SABC reporter. I said that on the coming Saturday a team would visit the school to make recordings of the school band (*boereorkes*). The band should start rehearsing at 9 am to be ready for our arrival midmorning. Midmorning I phoned the school again to say the team had been delayed, but that the band should keep practising as we were on our way. In this way I kept the boys playing away until 7 pm, at which point they packed up in anger and bewilderment.

Later I myself played in the school band: guitar and banjo. A greater thrill was playing rock and roll—Herby Levin (accordion and vocals), Edgar Oberem (saxophone), and me on guitar. It wasn't long before we had an enthusiastic following. Herby was a brilliant Elvis Presley mimic, and our act went over big in neighbouring towns. But our music was incompatible with the conservative culture of the school, and we were convinced that discrimination was at work when we were placed third in a talent competition, after ballet dancing, which most of the audience couldn't see, and a doleful organ solo. And audience applause fuelled our conviction.

There is one more adventure to relate before returning to the classroom, an incident remembered to this day as The

Mealie Uprising (*Die Mielieopstand*). *Samp*, which we called mealies, was our major staple until one day it was decided that seconds would no longer be served, probably for sound dietary reasons, but we left the table hungry. And so Theo Ferreira and I instigated the uprising, in which a group of us marched on the school store and seized a bag of mealies, commanding the hostel assistant Miss Nel to cook a meal for us. We were summoned to the principal's office, where we argued our case. Dr Biesenbach said he would like to think the matter over, but the next day seconds were dished up again. The incident was perhaps a sign of things to come in my life as a disability activist. Likewise, I was co-founder with Stafie Pelser and Herbert Levin of OBBO, *Organisasie vir die Bevordering van Blinde Omstandighede* (Organisation for the Promotion of Blind Well-being), in which a group of us banded together to resist the bullies and otherwise improve our circumstances.

Of course one attends school to learn, and therefore I ought to say something about my academic progress. Even so, much of what I have recounted regarding games and sport and recreation was formative and—most important for blind children—socialising.

After eighteen months of schooling I was placed in Standard 2, and from then onwards all tuition was in Afrikaans. We received special lessons in Braille to learn the English and Afrikaans contractions and abbreviations (Grade 2 Braille), and to master the rules of spacing and layout. By the time I reached Standard 4, I stood first in my class, a position I retained throughout the coming years.

My subjects for matric were Afrikaans and English, History, Physiology and Typing. As a prospective physiotherapy student, my sixth subject was Science (Physics and Chemistry). In the final examination I achieved five As, and one B, which was for Science. I had hoped to achieve straight As, but the examination paper in Science included areas not covered during our classes. I did, however, achieve the highest national marks for Afrikaans and English and a hundred per cent pass for Typing.

Teaching in the subjects I have named imparts knowledge and skills. At a higher level of comprehension, there are other learnings that affect our lives far more profoundly. In this regard I have always maintained that at school I learned only three things, but that they more than sufficed for my future needs.

The first of these learnings came from our History teacher, Johan Pauw. When one studies a piece of work, he said, one can count the number of facts. "Think of them as cattle which you are chasing into a kraal." This became for me a technique for memorising to which, at university, I added the use of mnemonics. In examinations, this enabled me to reproduce reams of facts without omission.

The second learning came from another History teacher, Connie Aucamp. She was unimpressed by my ability to memorise the textbook in its entirety and to reproduce it word for word in tests and examinations. "You must use your own words," she said. It was originality that counted most, sowing in me a vital seed of creativity.

My third learning was a love for Afrikaans and, by extension, a love of language. The Afrikaans teacher, Chris du Toit, was responsible for this and his methods were radically unorthodox. He was a linguistic purist and for each Anglicism found in our work, we were fined a sixpence, which went towards a class party at the end of the year. For each linguistic error, punishment was meted out on a Friday evening in a ritual known as "coffee drinking" (*koffiedrink*), in which one stroke of the cane across the buttocks chastised each mistake. It is hard to imagine how such methods could yield positive results, but somehow, they sparked in me a quest for purity of language and the well-chosen word.

Religion was a predominant feature of our lives as the school was founded by prominent churchmen and the board was answerable to the Cape Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church. Church attendance on Sundays was compulsory, as were prayer meetings marking church festivals such as Ascension. A quiet time was observed in the hostels, mornings

and evenings for Bible reading and prayer and Sunday was a day of rest, with play forbidden and a heavy silence pervading the school grounds.

Three times a week we gathered in the school hall for devotions when the principal, Dr Paul Biesenbach, was often present to give us inspirational talks enlivened by instructive anecdotes such as the following:

> *A pious man drew the curiosity of his neighbours who wanted to know the secret of his good living. And so one night they eavesdropped while he was at his prayers. "Dear Lord," he said, "A, B, C, D, E, F" and so on until the end of the alphabet. "Lord," he concluded, "you know what is best for me. I pray you to arrange these letters into the right words."*

Dr Biesenbach believed every school had to have a message. The message of our school, he maintained, was "victory"—"Victory over Blindness."

Our school motto had a bearing here. The words *Fiat Lux* (let there be light) are, of course, taken from the Bible, and carry a dual meaning: the light of education and spiritual enlightenment. While we took all of this very seriously, we also gained amusement from the pun "fiat looks", a play on the irony of light as a motto to our blindness.

The religiosity at the school was not, I think, unconnected with a task I set myself during my second last year in Worcester, to read the Bible from cover to cover. A Braille copy of the Afrikaans Bible was housed in a purpose-built cabinet in the hostel corridor, and I disciplined myself to read at least one chapter every night and two on Fridays, excepting during holidays, when no Braille Bible was available to me. It took me all of seventeen months to read the 31,102 verses and 1,189 chapters of the Bible, spread over 75 Braille volumes, until late one evening I at last swept my fingers over the dots of the final line: *Die End*.

But religion, even in excess, could not stem the flow of hormones in our adolescent veins. My first intimacy with a girl

was with Louise, on the train taking us home for the holidays. Everyone in the compartment was blind and so our innocent fondling failed to attract attention. The opportunity was coincidental, and we never spoke to each other again.

What I really wanted though was to be *gekys*, which meant asking a girl to be your partner via a Braille letter known as a "*skip*" (ship). The problem was that Irene was partially sighted and couldn't read Braille, and so the approach had to be via a typescript letter delivered by hand.

Social interaction between boys and girls was limited, but on certain afternoons we were allowed to meet face-to-face in a space known as "the parade". As these sessions became more relaxed, touching and the holding of hands was inevitable, until we were summoned to a meeting with the principal, in which he awkwardly explained that in public we should always be at least six inches apart. This we dubbed "the six-inch rule", producing little measuring rods to maintain the mandatory distance between the sexes and make fun of the school authorities.

Where there's a will there's a way, it is truly said. Next to the gymnasium was a vacant office, and it was there that Irene and I met during morning breaks to kiss and cuddle. On Sunday afternoons we could take walks into town, creating the opportunity for us to meet clandestinely off campus. With the townsfolk taking their afternoon nap, the local rose garden was a pretty secluded spot, and it was there that our love first blossomed. Tender the thought.

Our relationship lasted for three years and well into my after-school life. I ended the relationship by typed letter sent, at my mother's urging, from London, where I was studying, and not without heartache. I had to think carefully about my future.

Irene and I had contact only one more time. Many years later it was reported in the local press that I was receiving my doctorate, and Irene phoned my mother asking permission to congratulate me. The afterglow of one's first love lasts a long time and perhaps never fades.

Old Luck

Old Luck was neither old nor lucky, but in those days his name meant affection and respect.

My memory of Old Luck is a series of little incidents; even less—moments caught as snapshots.

In a narrow space in the back yard, between his room and the elevated lawn where I played, he used to wash the dustbins. Somewhere around the corner he had tipped the contents into a large container and the warm smell of rhubarb hung in the air, but here the bright running tap, the wet cement, and the grey dustbins (I nearly said glistening, but that could not have been) made the morning seem cool.

I grabbed a lid to help him, but he said "no". The dirt or noise, perhaps; or the chance that I would bend the metal and cause him trouble.

One afternoon my mother found me in Luck's room. Underneath the block of flats, the tiniest of spaces, there was no light or ventilation. When I think of him in that room, I think of myself standing at the door and him inside bending over and coaxing a Primus flame. In the corner was a bunk with ruffled blankets. I said he was standing over a flame, but at the same time I see him lying down in the dark and coughing.

Was it then, or the time before, or the time after, that my mother caught me there and forbade me to go into Luck's room? "You will get sick," she warned.

Then there were the times when Luck was out. I would peer around the corner into that space between his room and the lawn and his door would be locked. The dustbins gone. Now it was afternoon, and everything was shady. I bounced my ball across the cement and onto the grass, chasing after it. I tossed it in the air and missed it coming down. I spun around and there was Luck putting it into his pocket. It was a joke and we laughed.

Often the two of us would go for walks. I cannot remember setting out on those walks or where we went. But I

can remember getting back and running ahead to say hello to my mother, Luck dawdling up the hill behind me, smiling.

Once I had a "penny lick"—a huge white ice cream blob stuck in the top of a yellow cone. That was before the days of fancy ice creams.

"Have a bite!" I cried to Luck dashing over to him and holding out the cone. He drew back, quickly lifting his hand in some gesture.

"No," my mother's voice sounded behind me, "not for Luck".

Perhaps I left for boarding school. Or maybe Luck went back to his people, or only to hospital. It must have been quite a while, though, because when someone said "Luck has died" I did not feel sad. Just disappointed about the little surprise I had been keeping for him: an expression I'd picked up somewhere—"*siyabonga* Luck," I'd planned to say, meaning "we thank you."

Old Luck was the caretaker at Ithaca Mansions and, I believe, my first friend.

Tree Memories

"Do you know what a beautiful thing a tree is?"

"Yes," I said, "but tell me."

"Outside the door, to your right, is a tree covered in white blossoms. It looks so peaceful standing there. And behind it is a stone wall."

I listened.

"I can see it from where I sit," my mother said. "I wonder. Do you remember when you were small, how your father and I used to take you to Claremont Park?"

"I'm not sure. I can remember standing amongst trees, in a dark place, as if it were raining; but it must have been the colour of the leaves."

"When I was young," my mother said, "I used to think one day I would live in a house with a garden full of trees. And there would be a little wooden table, and sawn-off logs to sit on."

I said: "Don't think about it. Let it be."

She waited.

I said: "The most beautiful thing I ever saw was a mountain burning. Lions Head, early in the evening—I must have been three years old. From our *stoep* you could see the tiny red tongues dancing all the way up the slope into the shadow. Halfway to the top was a path across, with little flames jumping up and down, and to the left, a pine. And all at once the flames started to move, running along the path towards the pine. It burst into fire, like a star, for an instant, then tumbled down. And the moment after, no sign remained of it ever being there."

When she spoke again, after a pause, her thoughts had taken a different direction.

"You used to love climbing trees and copying the things other children did, like jumping off a wall. My arms would be stretched out to catch you if you fell, but you never knew. I think you would have been angry."

"One can move more freely in a tree than on the ground, once you have memorised the branches and where they go. To this day I have not forgotten the maps of the trees I played in."

"And you used to like hiding away amongst the branches. Sometimes we hunted for hours."

"One afternoon we went to see the Dekenahs, after they moved into their big house out in the suburbs. Eileen and I were picking loquats in the garden and the foliage up in the branches was the thickest I ever felt. Somehow, we seemed to be speaking to each other from behind separate screens. I remember listening to her muffled voice and thinking of her in her soft clothes and wanting to touch her, but the barrier of the leaves was impenetrable. Then, without warning, she made

her accusation: "You're blind," she said. "I'm not," I defended myself. "You're blind," she insisted.

For a long time I sat very still before calling her name again, but she had vanished. I stayed hidden all afternoon until it turned cold, and they began to search for me, around the house and everywhere outside. Would she tell them where I was? Why would she not?

"When at last I was discovered, I was ordered down in disgrace. I had no explanation to offer. As I was led to the car by the wrist they shouted for Eileen, but she never came out to say goodbye."

Forgotten Children

The hostel was haunted, of that we could be sure. Had not Miss Terblanche herself glimpsed a grey form drifting up the annex staircase that night Martin received the electric shock? Just as he flicked off the upstairs light it came gliding towards him, and she shouted. With his poor sight he saw nothing, but he was badly shaken by the current which seized his hand.

The incident put a different complexion on Pieter's story. He had unlocked the cellar to collect a bucket of coal. While feeling his way around inside, something had jumped at him from the dark. "Like a little man, almost weightless, but terribly strong" was his description. He had been pinned down for nearly an hour, fending off bites and scratches. On his cheek were five scorch marks, as if a fiery hand had been laid there. A curious detail, which worried him particularly, was the creature's woolly hair. Could it have been a *tokoloshe*? We wondered, not daring to utter the thought.

The little boys' hostel was a ramshackle old place, with long creaking corridors. The communal bathroom was a vast cement chamber at the opposite end of the building from the dormitory, and to reach the lavatories beyond, one had to pass barefoot across its stone slab through rivulets of cooling bathwater. Only desperate need could drive one to undertake such a journey after lights out, and not without companions.

In a cruel prank, unsuspecting little ones would be led there by the hand and quietly abandoned in that echoing space where the sob of a child was the most doleful sound imaginable.

I give these impressions mainly as background to what happened next. It was winter and it was raining—right after quiet bell, signalling prayers and sleep. Just as I was settling down, my thoughts already drifting, a commotion in the far corner threw the room into turmoil. Martin leapt from his bunk to check what was wrong and someone called out "shut up, you!" but it was not a noise you could control like that. It was a kind of wailing—a wailing with the rattling of a bedframe.

They grabbed Bennie and forced him to sit upright as we crowded round, shoving each other to get close. Being born in the caul, as they say, he could see things others couldn't see, forebodings and strange lights, and we wanted to know: what now?

Well, he, too, had just been falling asleep when it happened. Slowly, two figures dressed in white robes emerged from beneath his bed, carrying a coffin. Running next to them was a black Schipperke. At once he knew—his dead father, his missing puppy from last Christmas.

Luckily, Bennie had been taught what to do under such circumstances. Over the edge of his locker hung a school blazer and he beat it with all his might. Immediately, the spirits vanished, but leaving definite proof of their visitation. In the bend of his elbow was a deep indentation, the mark of a blade thrust at him as they departed. I felt it with my own fingers, clearly, and forever after in that room, sleep was not an easy matter.

When I think of my schooldays, the first flashback is always to that room of fantastic imaginings. There sits Herby on the floorboards, begging for details as he models a Plasticine Christ—a tall and slender figure about to be bruised and battered—as I read aloud from Saint Matthew's gospel the words of the mob: "Crucify Him!" And sometimes the wireless is playing over on the windowsill and they are broadcasting the funeral of General Smuts—five and a half uninterrupted

hours of reverberating psalms, Chopin's Funeral March, and the rumbling gun carriage with horses' hooves. How Ds Van Rijn wept, "amid the encircling gloom". Here, too, is Louwtjie under winter blankets. Lying on his back, legs crooked, the horizontal comb between his knees is a perfect goal post for two teams of rugby players chasing each other and a marble across his tummy, Louwtjie mouthing the applause of the crowd as Hansie Brewis kicks.

From this room, I can move along the passage past Wilfred's door: "Thwack!" goes Jaap, the disciplinary slipper, and Wilfred's crazy giggling breaks into caterwauling. Opposite is where we played rough house with the young hostel assistant, tumbling about on the bed, until the night Terence said to take off her panties. Attie's door is further down, and Frikkie's at the end where you turn the corner for the bathroom, Willem's domain: Mad Willem cleaning piles of shoes; Mad Willem stoking the geyser; and the two of us together making *boeremusiek* with our fists against the wall—concertina and guitar—"*kedoemtjiek-kedoemtjiek*!"

Definitely, Willem's domain. But also there is a corner belonging to Little Flippie, at the basin drinking water, swallowing and swallowing, until it overflowed from his nose. An orphan; three years old, perhaps, with just a sickly *Ouma*. Late afternoons he would be there, gulping away, the spilling water drenching his over-sized nightgown and pom-pom slippers.

Thinking of that; it is quiet time again and early morning. Miss Barker, gentle mother of forgotten children, is reading from the Bible: "As a flower of the field, so he flourisheth." Now she tells us, in simplest words, that the Lord Jesus, who greatly loves us, has in the night come to fetch Little Flippie, "clasping him to His bosom".

How the silence of the schoolground that day still pervades memory's wasteland (murmuring voices in the wind, rustling trees in the sky, and quietness). But towards evening, across the gravel expanse, the crunch of shoes as Herby and I approached the vacant sickroom, breathing in the camphor

fumes. Now the place was bare and there seemed nowhere to search, except in the corner cupboard from which we unloaded an enormous roll of bedding. Could the body be hidden amongst these sheets and pillows? Would it still be warm, wrapped up like this? Disappointed, Herby climbed back into the cupboard and hoisted himself onto the upper shelf, while I began searching farther along the wall. And there I came upon the empty bedframe, stripped even of its coir mattress; just a few metal pipes and a wire mesh full of angular holes through which I thrust my hands. It was the most forsaken object I ever touched.

One other memory belongs to the disconnected record—a dream, three decades later, driving me from my bed at four o'clock in the morning to write a peculiar page of verse. In the dream (or poem) two small boys traverse a deserted gravel plain. As they silently progress, there looms beside them, in the shadow of their hearing, a massive statue pierced by jagged spaces. They stroke the tortured metal, and as I listen Herby says: "in memoriam!" After all these years.

Chapter 4

London Years

The time had come for leave-taking and my parents and I were in the office of Dr Paul Biesenbach, the school principal, to say our parting thank yous. Conversation was desultory, but included reference to my studies and future plans. And then, as we were preparing to go, Dr Biesenbach had this to say: "in the Swiss city of Zurich there stands a statue of the great educationist Pestalozzi and inscribed on the base are the words 'the achievement of the pupil is the reward of the master". In all my years of schooling these were the only words of praise I ever heard from the principal and they more than sufficed.

Nearly fifty years later I was to visit Pestalozzi's statue with a friend to have the inscription read out to me, only to discover it didn't exist. Those words may be of unknown origin, but the incorrect attribution has done nothing to lessen their meaning for me.

In those days—the late 1950s—just a handful of occupations were considered suitable for blind men: physiotherapy, music teaching, piano tuning, and telephony being the main ones, to which law and social work would be added in due course. The alternative was sheltered employment as a basket weaver or mattress maker. For blind women the choice was even more limited.

The first blind person from South Africa to qualify as a physiotherapist at the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) in London was Alan Hamilton in 1928. Over the next few decades there were several examples of successful private practice in our major cities. In Cape Town Gerald Schermbrucker provided a role model which was, I think, more influential in my choice of occupation than the rather superficial career counselling I received at school.

Gerald Schermbrucker also headed the panel that interviewed me for a government bursary. The Readjustment Board of the Department of Labour was established to assist servicemen returning from World War II to integrate into the workforce and in time became the source of funding for blind students studying abroad. The threeyear bursary granted to me by the Readjustment Board included living expenses at 79 Holland Park, my residential address in London along the Bayswater Road in Notting Hill Gate. But there was a condition: that on returning to South Africa I would have to work in a government hospital for three years.

And so it was that four of us boarded the *Pretoria Castle* passenger liner departing from Cape Town for Southampton. With me were classmates Louis Koen and Bruce Lilja and a mature student André Vlok, aged 29. At the RNIB our "set" was joined by another mature student, Scotsman Jim Fisher, aged 38.

The boat trip lasted a fortnight and was punctuated by moments of special enjoyment, such as a party to mark our crossing of the equator and an invitation to dine at the captain's table. In a daily competition one could stake a shilling and forecast the distance that would be covered by the ship over the next 24 hours, with the captain's estimate as baseline. A forecast of 423 miles earned me the princely sum of eleven shillings.

In the chess competition, one of my matches caused a sensation when my Eastern European opponent tried to cheat me by changing the position of one of my pieces. He spent the rest of the voyage in quiet disgrace. Separate from the competition, a Belgian Congo youth and I went one-on-one every day. He was one of the toughest opponents I ever played, the sort that would announce "checkmate in seven moves".

But the biggest adventure awaited us when we disembarked in Madeira. Primed by more seasoned passengers, we broke away from the sightseers and headed straight for the island's infamous brothel. John—a future Fleet Street journalist—took me under his wing, saying he would

pick a girl for me. My naive expectation of gentle foreplay and a long afternoon of lovemaking was quickly shattered. It was a matter of commerce to be transacted with all haste. I did take away with me some flattering compliments—a few terse English phrases no doubt reserved for all gullible clients.

In London, our first challenge was to navigate the Tube, the interconnected railway system crisscrossing the city. Our local station was Notting Hill Gate on the Circle Line, from where each day we travelled five stations on to Great Portland Street. At Edgware Road the coach doors opened on the opposite side to the other stations, giving us a two-stop warning of arrival. From there a short walk past Russell Square took us to the five-storey RNIB building housing the physio school and other services for the blind community.

Very soon I learned to make this journey unaccompanied, using my white cane. The regular layout of the city and hazard-free sidewalks were conducive to independent travel for blind people. The population generally was friendly and helpful, as were officials such as the police and train station workers.

At the school we were expected to wear white coats for our practicals, massage and electrotherapy, and gym clothes for exercise therapy. We also attended classes in Anatomy, Physiology, and Physics, the first year being devoted to theory of practice.

Massage could take various forms. In *effleurage* one stimulated the circulation by firmly sliding the hands along the length of a limb. When "kneading", one grasped a muscle tightly carrying out a circular movement. "Percussion" meant lightly striking the body in a steady rhythm with the sides of the hands or cupped fists. An abdominal massage required a gentle approach, while a back massage was performed more vigorously. A full-body massage could take up to one hour to complete. At no point should massage cause discomfort.

"Electrotherapy" comprised a number of modalities. In "galvanism" a mild direct current was used to stimulate nerve endings, two electrodes being wrapped in wet linen pads and bandaged on opposite sides of a limb, for example.

"Faradism" involved electric impulses applied to muscles causing rhythmic contractions, thereby toning the muscles. "Shortwave diathermy" was a form of deep heat induced by electrodes positioned over a painful joint or muscle. Infrared radiation was a more superficial kind of heat produced by a lamp focused on some part of the body, while ultraviolet radiation produced sunburn, thought to be curative for certain skin conditions.

Lessons in Physiology and Physics took the form of live lectures during which we took down Braille notes. Anatomy was a more hands-on affair with models of the heart, eye, and other bodily organs available for teaching purposes. The anatomy of the skeleton had to be mastered in detail and the external features of all major bones had to be committed to memory. After eighteen months, the preliminary examination included a viva in which one was handed a bone at random to identify and point out salient features, with questions to follow.

Some of our lecturers were memorable characters. Wally Randall took us for Physiology, and on Fridays he would go out for a pub lunch. The effects often showed in our afternoon class, as happened on one occasion when he was explaining to us how certain nerves interdigitate. Stumbling over the word, he sat there practising it for a while before he went on: "inter-di-gi-tate ... inter-di-gi-tate ... interdigitate."

Eric Leary, totally blind, was one of the most outstanding lecturers in all my years of study. His subject, of which he had an exceptional grasp, was Anatomy. He had the ability to teach facts in ways that were vivid, like explaining the workings of nervous networks in terms of rivers and their tributaries.

As in my schooldays, I took to practical joking again. Today I look back on the prank we played on Mr Leary with considerable feelings of guilt. In lecture room C3 one morning, we trained a 1,000-watt infrared lamp on his chair. As the heat took effect, he began to move his chair around, with us tracking his movements. Afterwards the students jested that

Mr Leary would probably be bringing his family to C3 for their summer holidays.

Our first contact with patients came after six months, when we were assigned to a hospital for nursing practice. There, we learned how beds had to be made up, how to wash patients, and how to care for their basic needs by delivering bottles and bedpans. We also learned hospital ethics: how to address doctors and nurses of differing seniority and how to answer the ward telephone. Surgeons, unlike other doctors, had to be addressed as "mister", according to British convention.

It was at Whittington Hospital on Highgate Hill in north London that we at last began to treat patients. The wards were extremely large, with a row of some twenty beds on either side of a passageway divided down the middle by cupboards and other furnishings. We were not allowed to use white canes inside the hospital and had to navigate these spaces by following familiar landmarks and ambient sound.

Exercise was important for patients confined to bed to prevent blood clots, while breathing exercises were necessary to prevent chest infection. When limbs were in traction after orthopaedic surgery, the mechanism had to be unhooked to allow for movement and resuspended, a tricky manoeuvre that had to be carried out with the greatest care. Helping patients to walk again with sticks or crutches required careful support and quick reflexes to stop patients from falling when they were unsteady on their feet.

Outpatient treatment was performed in a separate section with curtained cubicles containing all the necessary apparatus. Patient records were kept in Braille and in print, and stored in a steel cabinet next to the supervisor's table. In the winter months a thicket of coats hung from a huge rack partially obstructing the way to the cubicles. The facilities were shared with qualified sighted physiotherapists, providing new opportunities for learning and flirtation.

Of the many hundreds of patients I treated a few stand out in memory. Mr Fawkeson's cancer was terminal, and his

laboured breathing and intermittent delirium linger as echoes from the past. Shirley, aged 29, was a Chinese woman with a bubbly personality whom we all wanted on our list. A severe stroke had caused hemiplegia, and my task was to restore strength and movement by means of exercise. The first time I took her for a walk down the ward was a moment of triumph for both of us.

Some of the doctors, too, left lasting impressions. Professor Wall, with his Scottish brogue, took us for dissection and liked to say of his blind students "they read the bones". In one of the wards Dr Strange and Dr Savage did duty and their names were cause for much hilarity. And then there was the surgeon named Commerell whose nickname was God, this because of his saying to a female patient "God gave you a hip and it broke. I gave you a new hip and it will never break".

So much then for my studies and hospital work.

Yes, I was in London to prepare for my future career, but my three-and-a-half years abroad presented innumerable other opportunities for exploration and adventure that were life-shaping in their effect. I will begin at the spiritual frontier.

As a student, I attended two churches, where I was exposed to the powerful preaching of two of the most influential leaders of the evangelical movement in the 20th century. For the first eighteen months I went to All Souls Church, Langham Place, in central London. Consecrated in 1824, it was constructed from Bath stone, according to a design by John Nash. In the west gallery was a Hunter organ housed in a Spanish mahogany case, also designed by Nash and the church's famous choir added to the beauty of worship. The atmosphere of those hallowed gatherings still pervades the spirit.

But it was the sermons of John Stott that drew me to the two-hour service each Sunday as one of 2,500 people who passed through the doors every week, many of them foreign nationals. I recall little detail from those services, but I do remember Stott saying one Sunday – and this at the height of the Cold War—"and what if God is on the other

side?" To question whether truth does not perhaps lie with the other side remains with me a fundamental principle of intellectual enquiry.

While at Rugby School in 1938, Stott heard Eric Nash deliver a sermon entitled "what then shall I do with Jesus, who is called the Christ?" Afterwards Nash pointed Stott to Revelation 3:20: "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: If any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me." It raised for Stott the crucial question: "Have we ever opened our door to Christ?" Half a century later, Stott professed how that simple step changed the entire direction, course, and quality of his life.

Stott joined All Souls as a curate in 1945 and became rector—a Crown appointment—in 1950. He held this position until 1975 but remained emeritus rector up to his death in 2011 at the age of 90. He was revered for his ability to explain complex theology in a way that the laity could understand. One entered the church not quite knowing what to expect and week after week the sermon would surprise. This was in sharp contrast to the second preacher of my student years.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones was a Welsh Protestant minister and medical doctor. He had an expository style of preaching and would often take many months, and even years, to expound a chapter of the Bible verse by verse, as was the case during the two years I attended Westminster Chapel. Over this period, he covered barely ten verses of Ephesians 6 in weekly sermons lasting fifty minutes to an hour.

The theme was the armour of God and in meticulous detail Lloyd-Jones described each piece of weaponry of the Roman soldier, explaining how each one represented an element in our spiritual defences—the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, the sword of the spirit. Verses from other parts of scripture were adduced to reinforce the analysis. Although progress through the chapter was extremely slow, the sermons were never repetitious and continually extended and renewed the message.

In his writings, Lloyd-Jones defined preaching as "logic on fire". He believed logic was vital to the preacher, not in the sense of the Enlightenment, but "on fire" to denote the power of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the preacher provided a logical demonstration of the truth with the aid of the Holy Spirit.

Prayer, too, was inspirational and when Lloyd-Jones called upon the Lord with the words "bare Thy mighty arm" it was as if the Holy Spirit pervaded the building. The chapel's Romanesque style, with its high vaulting and rounded arches, had a sound quality expansive in effect.

The religious understanding I gained from Stott and Lloyd-Jones was supplemented by my reading of religious texts and in particular, the writings of Martin Luther. The essence of the Reformation, I came to realise, is captured in a single Bible verse, that of Romans 1:17: "For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, the just shall live by faith."

The just shall live by faith and not by good works, good works being the fruits of faith.

The acceptance of this truth required an act of conversion I believed, which for me took the form of prayerful commitment. Later, my belief system would undergo further transformation, as I shall relate when the time comes.

Although Stott and Lloyd-Jones both espoused evangelical doctrine, they held opposing views on the course the evangelical movement should take. At an assembly organised by the Evangelical Alliance in 1966, Lloyd-Jones called on all clergy of evangelical conviction to leave denominations that contained both liberal and evangelical congregations. This was taken by many to be directed against the Anglican Church. Stott was not scheduled to speak, but he used his position as chairman to rebuke Lloyd-Jones, saying that his opinion was against history and the example of the Bible. He did however, admire Lloyd-Jones and often quoted him in his books. At a church congress the following year, evangelical Anglicans committed themselves to full

participation in the Church of England, largely because of Stott.

One other figure from the evangelical movement impacted my life in the student years. Francis Schaeffer was a Christian theologian and philosopher promoting a historic Protestant faith. He is best known for founding *L'Abri* (the shelter), a spiritual community and philosophical centre in Huémoz-sur-Ollon, Switzerland, in 1955. It soon became a popular place of pilgrimage, so to speak, for young people from far and wide, as also for me during an unforgettable seven-day holiday break.

Several hours each day were devoted to intense philosophical discussion and debate with Schaeffer and his visiting students as protagonists. I have just two recollections from my stay at *L'Abri*. The first is the metaphor used by Schaeffer when confronting a contradiction in thought: "I ride my tiger." I take this to mean faith endures despite uncertainty. The second is my conviction that Romans 1:17 is indeed the basis of Christian truth which was also powerfully reinforced.

Let us now turn to matters of the heart. Within six months after my arrival in London, I formed a relationship which lasted until my return home nearly three years later. Mary O'Dowd, or Maisie, was a small-town girl from Northern Ireland. She was highly intelligent and had a beautiful singing voice but was seldom able to perform away from our hostel in Holland Park because of her employment duties there. She introduced me to Irish folk songs, *Captain Fisher* and the rest, and I respected her Catholic faith, even taking Holy Communion with her from time to time.

Before Maisie, there was Brenda, a pharmacist's daughter, but she lived far out of London and opportunities for intimacy were severely limited. Jean, however, was a different matter. We met at a Christian retreat in Scarborough, where the gates of passion were flung open wide. A visit to her family's home near Bradford proved very frustrating because

of her father's watchful eye, restricting us to a quick goodnight kiss at bedtime. We kept in touch by letter and telephone.

And then one day I went to Maisie and found her throwing things around the room and packing her bags: "I am going back to Ireland." She had found out about Jean. "Okay," I said, "you can tear up all those letters you found and we'll go straight to the phone right now and I'll end it with Jean," which is what I did. And there were no recriminations afterwards.

The beautiful letter my mother wrote to Maisie to thank her for her caring ways was deserved many times over.

In the hostel, boys and girls were allowed to be in each other's rooms but had to return to their own rooms by late evening when Mr Williams, the warden, did his final round. The regularity of this routine enabled us to prepare a surprise for him one Friday night. Gaining the co-operation of one of the girls, we made a recording of us tickling her and her calling out and giggling.

At the appointed hour we locked our door and turned the recording up loud. An insistent knock on the door and sudden silence within. Letting Mr Williams in, he turned the room upside down but couldn't find the girl. Our derisive laughter echoed after him.

Few things evoke memories of a past era more vividly than does its music. In the late 1950s skiffle was at the height of popularity—Lonnie Donegan and *My Old Man's a Dustman* comes to mind—while American popstars often dominated the UK charts with the likes of Elvis Presley, Pat Boone, Buddy Holly, and The Everly Brothers. But when Welsh roommate John Linel and I decided to form a rock band, it was The Shadows that shaped our repertoire. The Shadows were an instrumental rock group and backing band for Cliff Richard, and its members were our musical heroes—Hank B. Marvin, the lead guitarist with his virtuoso finger work and plectrum tricks, Bruce Welch (rhythm guitar), Chet Harris (bass guitar), and Tony Meehan (drums).

During my schooldays I had played an acoustic guitar, but now we needed volume that would carry to the ends of a dance hall. And so John and I set out for a music store in Charing Cross Road to buy amplifiers and electric guitars, for me a Höfner and for John a Fender, state-of-the-art for that time. We also needed two more band members for the standard four-musician line-up, and for this we recruited Terry Fleetwood (bass guitar) and Ian Hunter (drums).

Once a week we gathered in the hostel's recreation room for band practice, while on weekends visiting popular venues to try and get bookings. At one of our first gigs, we were approached by Peter Foot, who offered to become our agent, advising that we should find a good name for the group. I favoured The Temptations, but somewhat arbitrarily Peter chose The Features, which to me seemed far from a winner.

On Friday or Saturday late afternoon, we would set out from the hostel, lugging our equipment across the city by Tube train to the club or hall where we were to perform. Although we lacked a vocalist, we were able to keep the crowd on the dance floor with the pulsing rhythms of popular instrumentals such as The Shadows' *Apache* and *FBI*. Gigs were three hours long, but we were often asked to play for an extra hour for extra money. In this way, I was able to supplement the spending money from my government grant, earning enough to attend West End productions from time to time and travel abroad during holiday breaks. And it was all a lot of fun.

As was another of my pursuits: fencing lessons. In the gymnasium after class on a Thursday afternoon, wearing my grid mask and padded jacket, I would spar for an hour with the athletic Miss Schaeffer. My thrusts and parries became skilful movements as I learned to interpret the scrape of the French foils against each other and the sudden release of pressure. Each time the foil tip touched the opponent's jacket one scored a "hit". I have played a variety of sports in my life, but for me as a blind person, fencing was the most unusual and the most intuitive.

It was a golden age in West End theatre, and I was able to enjoy several of the enduring classics—*West Side Story*, *The Sound of Music*, and Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap,* which, at the time of writing, has become London's longest-running show with over 29,000 performances. At the close of every performance the audience is requested not to disclose the play's ending to anyone outside, an annoying frustration when, many years later, one cannot recall the final twist of the plot.

Of the many plays I attended, I will single out two only for reasons that will become obvious. *Rhinoceros* is a legendary example of the Theatre of the Absurd. In a small, provincial French town, the inhabitants turn into rhinoceroses as they succumb to mass metamorphosis. In this way Romanian dramatist Eugène Ionesco satirised the upsurge of fascism and Nazism in the events preceding World War II, in which the people of Italy and Germany yielded to popular rhetoric. The play also evoked the Iron Guard, an earlier movement in Romania, notable for its virulent and violent antisemitism.

In the production directed by Orson Wells at the Royal Court Theatre, Sir Lawrence Olivier was cast in the leading role of Berenger. By the end of the play, Berenger is the only remaining human, having witnessed his best friend, his colleagues, and his lover become rhinoceroses. He makes a telephone call, but all that can be heard is the beautiful trumpeting of the rhinoceroses. He switches on the radio, but the rhinoceroses have taken over the radio station. In the final scene, Berenger himself tries to become a rhinoceros, but fails to grow a horn or thicken his skin. The anguish acted out by Sir Lawrence, the animal cries and guttural utterances were for me, transfixing. *The Guardian* of 10 June 1960 (no byline) had this to say: "Who would have guessed that when Ionesco first began to trickle on to the London stage that he would provide a vehicle—and a very well designed one—for one of Lawrence Olivier's best performances?"

The other play of special note is the acclaimed South African jazz opera *King Kong*. It portrayed the life and times of

a heavyweight boxer, Ezekiel Dlamini, known as King Kong. Born in 1921, he achieved a meteoric rise to boxing fame, but his life rapidly deteriorated into drunkenness and gang violence. He knifed his girlfriend and at his trial, asked for the death sentence. Instead he was condemned to 14 years' hard labour. He was found drowned in 1957, his death assumed to be suicide.

King Kong opened on 2 February 1959 at the Witwatersrand University Great Hall with Nathan Mdledle of the Manhattan Brothers vocal group in the lead role and Miriam Makeba as the 'Back of the Moon' shebeen queen in Sophiatown. Over 250,000 South Africans, white and black, saw the show in all the major cities of the country. The songs and most of the lyrics were written by Todd Matshikiza, while the production was a collaboration of numerous prominent black and white artists of the day.

The play in the West End opened at Princes Theatre on 23 February 1961. For me, it was an emotional encounter with the black culture of South Africa, with spirited acting and captivating music. The liner notes of the cast recording are reflective of this experience: "No theatrical venture in South Africa has had the sensational success of *King Kong*. This musical, capturing the life, colour, and effervescence—as well as the poignancy and sadness—of township life, has come as a revelation to many South Africans that art does not recognise racial barriers."

The song *Sad Times, Bad Times* was taken as a reference to the infamous Treason Trial in Pretoria, which lasted nearly five years (1956 to 1961), before it collapsed and saw the acquittal of ANC leaders including Nelson Mandela. The Rivonia Trial was to follow (1963 to 1964) when Mandela was sentenced to life imprisonment.

In December 1961, I was recruited as a volunteer at the Cold Research Unit on Salisbury Plain in the south of England. Advertisements offered "an unusual holiday opportunity", meaning ten days at the unit, all expenses paid. There were six of us in the group: Stafie Pelser and I from South Africa

and two men and two women from various parts of the UK. We were isolated in three pairs and comfortably housed in separate lodgings, but with telephone contact between all the units, allowing Stafie and I to befriend Beth and Estelle and have them read books to us. We also took along Braille books of our own.

The purpose of the research was to investigate the causes and transmission of the common cold. Typically, as in our case, one third of the volunteers were infected with a virus preparation through the administration of nasal drops. The effect was monitored through regular medical examinations and the collecting of tissues used by the volunteers. These were double-blind trials with neither doctors nor volunteers being aware of who had been given the virus.

Dr David Tyrell was one of the doctors overseeing our group and he became head of the unit the following year. During his many years at the unit he discovered over 100 rhinoviruses, including the coronavirus which causes roughly 10 percent of all colds.

When we weren't chatting with other volunteers on the phone, Stafie and I spent long hours in discussion solving all the problems of the world. Another week and, who knows, we might have succeeded. However, one incident, later recalled with mirth, overshadowed our stay. Reaching up to a high shelf, I took down a large canister containing ten pounds of sugar. But the canister slipped, spilling all its contents over the kitchen floor. We swept up as best we could and waved the remaining grains aside using our towels. But we had not done a good job and much of the sugar remained. This sugar gradually spread throughout the house so that by the end of our stay the crunch-crunch of our shoes as we walked around the place sounded much like soldiers marching on gravel.

Isolation was strictly observed, with cooked meals being dropped off in a bin outside our front door. Walks in the countryside were permitted, residential areas being out of bounds. This presented a problem to us as blind people in unfamiliar surroundings, but this was overcome by having

the handyman follow us at a distance of some thirty paces shouting directions.

All in all, it was an enjoyable adventure, and we didn't even develop colds. Hardly were we back in London though when we both caught heavy colds; in my case, one of the worst ever. Finally, we had blood samples sent off to Salisbury and that was the end of the matter.

Holiday breaks gave time to relax and opportunity for travel, like the long weekend André Vlok and I spent on the Isle of Wight. Two local girls, sisters to each other, kept us company on our cliffside walks and we became instant regulars at the nearby pub. In those days I did not take alcohol and on the last afternoon I was amazed to hear from the barman that I had drunk the pub dry of fizzy orange.

Girlfriend Maisie and I spent ten days in Rome visiting the historical sites: St Peter's Basilica, the Roman Forum, the Colosseum, and the rest. The highlight was an audience with the Pope at Castel Gandolfo 25 kilometres south-east of Rome. Pope John XXIII was borne into the audience chamber on his ceremonial throne (*sadia gestatoria*), passing to my right just beyond touching distance. He addressed us and we received his blessing.

But my most adventurous excursion was to hitchhike around Ireland, accompanied by Bruce Lilja as my partially sighted guide. From Dublin we went south to Cork, then across to Galway and up the west coast to Sligo. Returning to the east coast, we went north to Belfast and the Giant's Causeway beyond, large basalt columns from an ancient volcanic eruption, whose tops lead like stepping stones from the foot of a cliff into the sea.

We seldom waited long for lifts and occasionally were given hospitality and even overnight accommodation. In the main we would look for a grassy place after sunset and pitch our tent under the stars, settling into our sleeping bags for warmth.

I will recount just two incidents that happened along the way. In Galway one early evening, we jumped a fence and set up our tent in the field beyond. When morning came and Bruce opened the tent flap, we discovered that we were sharing the enclosure with a herd of bulls. We snatched up our things and ran for safety. Clearing the fence, I heard the horns of a charging bull slam into the woodwork behind me.

A few nights later in Belfast, we chose a small patch of grass to erect our tent. The next morning we were rudely awakened by the police: "Get out of here before we arrest you," they said. We had been camping out on a traffic circle in the centre of town.

Arguably, the most lasting benefit of my visit to Ireland came from kissing the Blarney Stone, said to bestow great eloquence and persuasive charm. The story goes that Cormac MacCarthy, the builder of Blarney Castle, was embroiled in a law suit back in the 15th century and appealed to the mythical Irish goddess Clíodhna for assistance. She advised him to kiss the first stone on his way to court in the morning. He successfully defended his case with great skill of words and subsequently set the stone into the battlements of his castle.

Millions of celebrities and ordinary folk have since visited Blarney Castle, eight kilometres from Cork, seeking the gift of the gab. To kiss the Blarney Stone one has to stand against the parapet at the peak of the castle and lean over backwards with the help of an assistant. The introduction of wrought-iron guide rails and protective bars makes this less hazardous, but in my day, I had to be dangled by the ankles to press my lips to the stone.

Crossing the Irish Sea, Bruce and I went north to Gretna Green, historically the first village in Scotland on the old coaching route from London to Edinburgh. When the Marriage Act of 1754 was passed, it became unlawful for couples under the age of 21 to marry without the consent of their parents, whereas in Scotland, boys of 14 and girls of 12 could marry with or without their parents' consent just by making a declaration before two witnesses.

Almost anybody had the authority to conduct the marriage ceremony and Gretna Green became the easily reachable destination of cross-border elopements where so-called "anvil priests" performed the marriage ceremony at the blacksmith's shop. There we were fascinated to learn of this romantic history and attend a mock ceremony staged for the entertainment of tourists.

Nearing the end of our journey, the sights of Edinburgh seemed almost mundane, lacking the exotic narrative of Gretna Green. To take in the grandeur of Holyrood Palace, the Scottish residence of the royal family, and the fortifications of Edinburgh Castle, historically the most besieged place in Great Britain, a blind person requires effective audio description, a non-existent facility at that time. Even so, we took pleasure in touring the palace and the castle and walking the Royal Mile between the two.

The final leg of our journey from Edinburgh to London was uneventful. Our sense of achievement is understandable, given the ground we had covered in just ten days and the adventure we had lived through with minimal strain on our modest student budgets.

The halcyon days of my London life could not last forever. I was the proud possessor of a diploma from the Royal Chartered Society of Physiotherapy, and after a few months of extra hospital practice, André Vlok and I boarded the *Athlone Castle* in Southampton harbour to sail for the fairest Cape, and for me the fairest Cape meant reunion with my family and a return to the place of my youth, my beloved Sea Point. An on-board romance with Welsh school teacher Megan brightened the voyage, but otherwise it was a time to unwind and imagine the future.

While I could not share in the view of Table Mountain as the ship approached its mooring, the sense of wonder vibrated all around me. My dad accompanied me to my cabin to collect the luggage, remarking that the cabin number, 503, exactly equalled the number of pages of all the letters I had sent from

London. The short trip to Ithaca Mansions in my dad's old Chevy added one more precious memory to that perfect day.

Chapter 5

Cape Town Years

Life now took on a more complex pattern with work, romance, pastime pursuits and, in time, further studies all interwoven. I had a bursary obligation to work at a state hospital for three years, and for this I was assigned to the Lady Michaelis Children's Hospital in Plumstead, Cape Town. This would mean catching a bus in Sea Point at 7 am, boarding a train at Cape Town station, and finally walking several blocks to the hospital premises.

To prepare for this daily journey, I set out one morning with my white cane, my father following at a distance to call out directions and monitor my safety. I soon befriended fellow travellers along the route, who readily gave their assistance at busy road crossings and helped me to climb into the right train carriage, trains being racially segregated in those days.

The hospital, too, was racially segregated into two main wards, one for whites and the second for the other race groups; my well-equipped treatment room being located halfway in between. Next door was a heated pool where I carried out hydrotherapy in the form of water exercises and swimming. A nursing assistant kept an eye on the children in the pool and lent a hand in the change rooms.

I moved about independently without my white cane, a skill I had mastered as a student in London. Because of the slow turnover of patients, I was able to use the sound of their familiar voices to guide me as I worked my way along the rows of beds.

Part of my hospital routine was to join the doctors on their ward rounds. Cases would be discussed, and physiotherapy treatment prescribed as necessary. It was during these sessions that I learned about the distinctive diagnoses of a children's hospital at that time.

In the mid-1950s there was a polio epidemic in South Africa, causing muscular paralysis in many young people. This cohort of patients returned to hospital in the 1960s for joint fusions, muscle transplants, and other treatments to improve functionality.

Perthes disease is a childhood hip disorder caused by a disruption of the blood flow to the head of the femur, causing the bone to die. Healing occurs as new blood vessels infiltrate the dead bone. The disease is named for Georg Clemens Perthes, one of three doctors who in 1910, independently of each other, dispelled the idea that the condition was related to tuberculosis. It predominantly occurs in boys of Caucasian descent, as was the case with the kids at our hospital. Both the post-polio and Perthes patients benefited from various modalities of physiotherapy treatment.

The patient I remember best was Sophie, a diminutive, little girl from a local township, who suffered from brittle bone disease. Freeing up her movements had to be done very carefully, as bone breakage was a constant threat. She had an unusually deep voice and her cheerful greeting every day brought joy to the heart. Many years later I somehow renewed contact with Sophie who, by then, as a young adult, was living in a care home in Limpopo. She was one of the most disabled patients I ever treated.

Two physiotherapists were employed at Lady Michaelis, and we reported to Matron Jean Hamilton, who was especially supportive to me in my work, as were ward sisters Cluxton and Gregg. The orthopaedic surgeons we worked with included the stern Paddy Bell and the more relaxed Klaas Steytler, always willing to discuss cases in more detail.

Towards the end of my placement at Lady Michaelis, I applied for a supervisory post at Tygerberg Hospital, but wasn't even given an interview. When applying for work, I believe it proper to disclose one's disability up front, but clearly my blindness had counted against me. I raised a complaint in the local press under the pseudonym *AMPER*

KWAAD (Almost Angry) which elicited strong public support for my position from readers of *Die Burger*.

Figure 7: William as a young man, playing his guitar

Socially, I renewed my ties with some of my old school friends. Silvia, Marianne, and Walter shared a house in Goodwood and soon I was a regular visitor there. Marianne was an excellent cook and, being a farmer's daughter, her meat and potato dishes never left us hungry. Silvia became my girlfriend and at the end of our evenings together, she and Walter would accompany me back to Cape Town to catch my bus to Sea Point, after first stopping off at the Waldorf Café in St George's Street to listen to our schoolmate Herby Levin perform, voice and accordion. To my mind, his version of *Moon River* rivalled the Danny Williams original. Silvia was employed for many years as a switchboard operator at Bokomo Foods. It was

the best occupation for young blind people without post-school studies.

An invitation to spend the weekend at the farm of Marianne's brother, Boetie Bester, near Moorreesburg became a turning point in my life. A friend of the family, Frans Kitshoff, was travelling to Moorreesburg the same weekend and was asked to give me a lift, but before driving through, Frans first had to take part in a choral recital at the Tiervlei Dutch Reformed Church. With him in the car was Hélène Scholtz who was also a member of the choir. It was an unforgettable evening, the more so for Hélène's beautiful singing voice. During our easy-flowing conversation, I learned that Hélène had received the Mimi Coertse Bursary for voice training and that she had been a radio actress since the age of twelve. I took her telephone number before I left.

Arriving at the farm late evening, I heard radios playing and found the household in turmoil: President Kennedy had just been assassinated. My own dramatic announcement attracted little attention: "Tonight I met the woman I am going to marry." Recalling that same evening, Hélène later told me that as we were driving around the circle at the bottom of Adderley Street, she had thought to herself: "I am going to fall in love with this man."

I bring one other girlfriend into the picture before I move on, and for a very special reason. Lee lived at the Costa Brava, a block of flats on the sea front not far from Ithaca Mansions. She surprised me one day with the news that neighbours we had bumped into in the passage would like to see me. These neighbours turned out to be Ian and Dee Aldred, parents of little Betty who was killed in the shooting when I was blinded. What emotions our visit evoked in the Aldreds I cannot say. We made no reference to the past and I simply told them about my work as physiotherapist with some other details of my life. Did they see in Lee someone in their daughter's place? Impossible to know, but the thought did occur to me.

My first date with Hélène was to attend a party at the Clifton home of Afrikaans poet Ingrid Jonker, after which

I became a frequent guest at the flat shared by Hélène and Damaris Loubser in Hof Street, Gardens. The first meal Hélène ever cooked for me was a pasta dish. My dislike of pasta did not prevent me from finishing my food, but I was able politely to escape a second helping. Hélène refused to act as my chauffeur, which meant taking a bus both ways, a kind of test of my resolve, I suppose.

It was on Blaauwberg beach, sunbathing on our towels and holding hands, that Hélène suggested I might like to ask her to marry me, which I did there and then.

But that was just the beginning. In Afrikaner culture one had to ask the parents for their daughter's hand in marriage (*ouers vra*) and the setting for this was at the home of Hélène's sister, Nelie Stander, on an upstairs balcony overlooking their spacious Oranjezicht garden. After long minutes of nervous conversation, the moment at last came for me to put my request to Hélène's father, *Oupa* Scholtz, a minister of the Dutch Reformed Mission church. Yes, we had his blessing.

Our official engagement took place on 18 February, my mother's birthday, during a small family celebration at our home in Ithaca Mansions. Planning for the wedding was immediately taken in hand by Hélène .

The wedding ring was a simple gold band with a "yellow diamond" as centrepiece of the design. Our names, Hélène and William, were engraved on the inside, together with the date of our marriage. Hélène made her own wedding dress and supervised the preparations for the wedding feast. Her training as art teacher found expression in meticulous detail but allowing for suggestions from my side. With little time to spare, we had to find our first home and choose the furnishings.

On 27 June 1964, in the Groote Kerk at the upper end of Adderley Street, we took our marriage vows before the beloved Dominee Frans Conradie. The most treasured moment from the wedding ceremony was the recitation by Hélene's sister Nelie of 1 Corinthians 13 from the 1953 translation of the Afrikaans Bible. I quote here the final verse:

"[13] *En nou bly geloof, hoop, liefde--hierdie drie; maar die grootste hiervan is die liefde*."

From the church, the bridal car took us to the Stander residence at 27 Alexandra Avenue, Oranjezicht, where the wedding feast awaited us. Some 100 family members and friends were present as the afternoon slowly unfolded with speeches and toasts, congratulatory messages, and the serving of a sumptuous meal, as planned by Hélène. At some point, I even cut the wedding cake. It was early evening by the time we took our leave and drove the short distance to our new home at 305 St Martini Gardens.

I unlocked the front door and stepped inside, only to hear Hélène expressing her disappointment that I had not borne the bride across the threshold, a custom of which I was unaware. Stepping back outside, I cradled her in my arms and set things straight.

The next day we drove to Hermanus, some 120 kilometres away along the Cape south coast, where the Lady Michaelis Children's Hospital, my employer, had a beach cottage and where we would spend the first few days of our honeymoon. From there we travelled on to Cape Hangklip to join the Stander family at their holiday home. It was the first of many visits we would make there over the coming twenty years and more. I will return to this idyllic setting in just a little while.

After the dust had settled, so to speak, our lives quickly took on a regular routine. For me, this still meant a two-way bus and train trip to the Lady Michaelis, where I worked as physiotherapist, while Hélène worked as art teacher, changing jobs to be at the nearby Jan van Riebeeck High School. Her dedication to the task and care for individual learners earned expressions of gratitude for decades to come, whenever her path crossed with ex-students.

Being a gifted radio actress, she was increasingly in demand for parts in radio plays and serials. Recordings were done late afternoon and early evening at the Sea Point

studios of the SABC. I would like to recount two incidents in this regard.

Susan van Wyk was renowned as a producer of Afrikaans radio dramas and had a fearsome reputation because of her demanding ways. On one occasion, when Hélène had done her best in a difficult role, Susan unexpectedly cried out: "Rowland, now you have done it!" Rare praise indeed from this grande dame of Afrikaans radio theatre.

And then there was the night of the Tulbagh earthquake on 29 September 1969. Hélène was in the recording studio when the floor started to shake and the microphones began to sway, with one of the actors calling out in panic: "Let me out of here! Let me out of here!" I myself felt the tremor at our house in Tamboerskloof, where it caused a major crack in one of the walls that required expensive structural repairs.

In addition to her radio acting, Hélène joined the opera chorus at the Nico Malan Theatre which meant regular evening rehearsals during the annual opera season. I, of course, attended the opening night of each opera, but for me as a blind person, opera has limited appeal. The parties that took place on closing nights were lavish affairs, with the opportunity to keep company with the opera stars and everyone else involved in the production.

Our home was filled with music which could be heard nearly everywhere in our openplan house. Hélène's admiration for certain female vocalists was all-consuming and when she took to a particular recording, she would listen to it over and over again. Roberta Flack's *The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face* still touches the heart and searching through Hélène's preserved record collection I find no fewer than five Barbra Streisand albums. Reading the jackets I rediscover *Songbird*, *You Don't Bring Me Flowers*, and many other hits that cheered our days.

We shared a love of classical music which for me, transitioned into an enthusiasm for serialism, a movement in contemporary music in which the composer abandons tonality in favour of a method of composition using a series

of pitches, rhythms, dynamics or other musical elements. A special focus was the dissonant electronic music of Karlheinz Stockhausen. For example, *Gesang der Jüngelinge* in which we hear the disembodied voices of the three youths cast into the fiery furnace by King Nebuchadnezzar for refusing to worship the golden image he had set up. They survive through divine intervention, causing Nebuchadnezzar to allow worship of the God of the Jews (Daniel 3). As a member of the Cape Town Central Public Library, where I befriended the chief librarian, I was favoured with a steady stream of Stockhausen recordings.

Storytelling became important as our children—Frank, Toni and Bronwyn—reached early childhood. Often, these were stories I made up myself, interweaving the storylines with the lives of the children and featuring them as characters in the action. In *Klaparro the Giant Chameleon*, the chameleon wreaks havoc by catching seagulls at the seafront. A little boy, Frenkel, captures the chameleon and, with the help of a police helicopter, whisks him off to a mountain top. When he fetches him back, the two of them become a circus act, with the audience looking on as Klaparro devours spectacular amounts of food and Frenkel performs tricks such as flying through the air holding on to the chameleon's tail.

In *The Giant of Table Mountain*, the giant leaves his mountain slope and takes a bus ride into town where he has a brush with the police and befriends a little girl. He next visits a dentist who has to use a stepladder to reach his mouth. The giant then holds a party attended by all the main characters in my stories. When the giant stages a long-jump competition, the dentist is the judge, laying down arbitrary rules as he disqualifies nearly all of the competitors. The giant himself takes a tumble and then it is the little girl's turn. The wind catches her long blonde hair and she jumps the longest distance. Finally, the giant writes a letter to his grandma in the Magaliesberg to tell her about his adventures.

In another story, a little girl awakens to the noise of a huge machine destroying a nearby house. She visits the building site repeatedly, asking the foreman, Uncle Pontius,

whether she can touch the machine. Slipping a little part out of the works she disables the machine. The next day she returns to comfort the machine, slipping the part back into place and causing the machine to resume its noisy work. Uncle Pontius and the work folk gather round in gratitude and praise.

My life in Cape Town from 1962, when I returned from London, to 1976, when I moved to Pretoria, was characterised by a wider range of activities and interests than at any other time, before or since.

Lawn Bowls

In 1963 Dr Julius Sergey, a Johannesburg dentist and father of the "clinic style" of bowling, founded the National Association for Blind Bowlers (NABB), with its first branches in Johannesburg and Cape Town. I belonged to the first half dozen or so recruits in Cape Town.

Existing bowling clubs allowed us the use of their greens on Sunday mornings, when we would play against each other in pairs or sometimes in singles matches. My regular bowling coaches also became close friends. The first was Hilda Friedland, and she and her husband Chuki, being childless, virtually adopted Hélène and me as family.

I will take the imperial measurements then in use to explain our method of play. A bowling green is 120 feet long and at the beginning of each head the lead player had to take two steps from the ditch and lay the mat at least two yards down the green. One then took up position on the mat with the coach about two yards in front of you to call direction. First, the jack has to be delivered to at least 75 feet and the purpose for each team is to get as many of its bowls as possible closer to the jack than the opposition. The bowl or wood has a bias and so the coach stands at an angle to allow the bowl to curl in towards the jack. Sometimes the bowl trails the jack, changing the position of play. A pairs game comprises 21 heads, while a singles game ends as soon as one of the players scores 21 shots but being at least two shots in front.

In 1964 I participated in the first national tournament for blind bowlers at the Wanderers Club in Johannesburg, the tournament being recognised as part of the first South African Games, a sporting event founded to counter the emerging sports boycott. Thirty-six of us played in the tournament which included a singles and a pairs competition. I did well, but without winning either of the competitions. I was however awarded a gold medal as "Best All-round Blind Bowler". Just before the official dinner at the close of the tournament, Julius Sergey asked me to be the speaker. It was my first public speaking engagement, signalling things to come.

I went on to play in 21 national tournaments and to serve on the National Executive Committee, which meant attending a monthly meeting in Johannesburg and sleeping over at the home of a friend, Shirley Watkinson, who will appear again later in these pages.

An additional benefit of blind bowling was its socialising effect. The NABB fraternity of blind bowlers and their helpers formed an extensive network of friends and contacts which, over time, became a valuable resource in my work.

Chess

Having learned to play chess at school, I now joined the City Chess Club. We met regularly on a Tuesday evening in a room made available to us at the City Hall. Seated in two rows opposite each other at a long table, we would spend up to two hours in friendly rivalry.

My personal chessboard was designed for play by blind people. The black squares were raised in relation to the white ones and each chess piece had a peg underneath fitting into a hole in the middle of the square to prevent it being knocked over. The white pieces had sharp tops and the black pieces flat tops. I also acquired a Braille chess clock, as in competition there are rules prescribing the number of moves to be made in the allotted time, for example, 15 moves per hour. Occasionally

we would play in club competitions, six aside, and soon I was promoted to board 5 in the club rankings.

Fellow club member Mr Jones became a close friend and often I would visit him and his wife on a Friday evening along High Level Road in Sea Point, for dinner and a game of chess. He also dictated chess openings for me to take down in Braille. The French opening became a particular favourite of mine, when playing black. In this opening, black responds to white's move pawn to king 4 with pawn to king 3, after which white and black usually each advance the queen's pawn by two squares.

A visit to Cape Town by Swedish Grand Master Gideon Stahlberg caused a sensation at the club, when he took us on in a tournament of simultaneous chess, going from board to board to counter our individual moves. Someway into my game Stahlberg offered me a draw, which I refused. Mr Jones, sitting next to me, issued a stark warning: "the others are fast dropping out and soon it will just be you versus Stahlberg." Next time Stahlberg came to my board I had different words for him: "Mr Stahlberg, I accept the draw." The following day the local newspapers reported that Stahlberg had engaged in 18 simultaneous matches, winning 14 and drawing 4.

The World Chess Championship of 1972 was a match between 29-year-old challenger Bobby Fischer of the United States and defending champion Boris Spassky of the Soviet Union. The match took place in Reykjavík, Iceland, and has been dubbed the match of the century. It enthralled chess lovers around the world, as it did me.

The match was played as the best of 24 games, with wins counting 1 point and draws counting half a point and would end when one of the players scored twelve and a half points. Three games per week were scheduled, commencing on 11 July and ending on 31 August, when Spassky resigned the 21st game, giving Fischer twelve and a half points. Fischer had won 8 games and lost 4.

During the championship, most days commenced with my mother-in-law, Helena Scholtz, reading to me the reports

in *Die Burger* covering the progress of play and Fischer's eccentric behaviour. By the end of the championship, Fischer had become a worldwide celebrity, described as the Einstein of chess. His victory ended 24 years of Soviet domination of the world championship. I was captivated by Fischer's strategy, surprising Spassky by repeatedly switching openings, and by playing openings that he had never, or only rarely, played before.

Table Mountain

In 1969 I became the first blind person to climb Table Mountain, with Cape Town journalist Wilhelm Grütter as my guide. Our ascent was via Platteklip Gorge, the most popular route up the mountain, although not the easiest. It follows a steep incline strewn with large flat rocks, intersected by a river. Wilhelm went ahead, calling out warnings and instructions as we advanced. It took roughly three hours to cover the distance of 2.5 km.

As a kid I had gazed in wonder at the mountain with its flat top covered in white clouds, the famous tablecloth. Now I stood on the summit and could have the epic view described to me—the city stretched out below, with Table Bay beyond, and blue mountains in the distance. The top is 3 km end to end, and a short walk took us to the highest point, Maclear's Beacon, named for the Irish-born South African astronomer who corrected earlier miscalculations of the earth's curvature using the beacon as a point of triangulation. I was standing 3,563 feet above sea level (1,086 metres).

Our successful climb had given my companion the confidence to choose a more difficult route for our descent. India Venster, with its sheer drops and precipitous edges, meant slower progress, carefully feeling the way ahead with my feet. In fact, I discovered that climbing down was a good deal harder than climbing up, when the outstretched hands can pick out obstacles and handholds. But it all had been an unforgettable adventure.

Arriving home in the late afternoon, having taken longer than expected, I thought we would encounter panic and concern, but nothing of the kind. Family and friends alike, underestimating the challenge perhaps, had gone about their regular routine in a relaxed frame of mind. "Expect me when you see me" was the thinking, a silent vote of confidence, I suppose.

Many years on, building on my Table Mountain experience, Mount Kilimanjaro beckoned. The magazine *Rooi Rose* was eager to cover the story and agreed to fund the expedition, assigning a journalist with mountaineering experience to accompany me. However, South Africa was by then subject to international sanctions and my application for a Tanzanian visa was refused.

Tactile Exhibitions

Sometime in 1967 I attended a piano recital at the South African National Gallery. During the reception afterwards I was touching the sculptures on display, when a man came up to me and started making helpful remarks. His voice was heavily accented, and I took him to be a gallery attendant but, in fact, it turned out to be the director himself, the Dutch-speaking Professor Matthys Bokhorst.

A few days later I was invited back to the gallery for a discussion at which we conceptualised the first sculpture exhibition for the blind to be held in South Africa. Professor Bokhorst had recently returned from the Netherlands, where he had learned of a tactile exhibition for the blind, held there earlier in the year and he was eager to stage a similar exhibition in Cape Town. Education officers Sandra Eastwood and Elsa du Plessis were assigned to the project, while the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague and the Nederlandsche Blindenbond provided relevant information as necessary. I acted as adviser and leveraged my network of friends and blindness organisations for the issuing of invitations. It was the beginning of a long association with the National Gallery and a lasting friendship with Sandra.

And so it was that the first tactile exhibition was staged from 7 to 19 December 1967, offering guided tours to blind groups from local hostels and social clubs, as well as to individual blind visitors. Altogether, 48 blind adults were taken through the exhibition.

The exhibition comprised twenty sculptures, of which seventeen came from the gallery's permanent collection and three on loan from the Peter Stuyvesant Foundation. The sculptures were of modest size and displayed on pedestals of a convenient height, allowing for easy exploration by touch. Figures included two fighting cocks, a pair of boxers, horses in different poses, a seated woman, a Zulu chief, and a crucifixion. The majority of works were by South African artists, but European artists were also represented, as in Auguste Rodin's *Brother and Sister*. Gerhard Marcks's life-size *Adam and Eve* proved particularly popular with the ladies from the Helen Keller Hostel. A ciment fondu head by Bruce Arnott was a personal favourite, because of a meaningful conversation I had with Bruce himself.

The sculptures all had an affinity with reality to facilitate understanding and interpretation and featured a variety of materials of different textures and temperatures to the touch, such as marble, bronze, and wood. Each piece had Braille and large-print labels. Sculptor's tools and materials were also on display and visitors could extend their experience by touching works in a concurrent exhibition of Italian sculptures. The success of the exhibition was beyond question and laid the foundation for regular exhibitions continuing into the future and repeatedly marked by experiment and innovation:

- In 1969 design students at the University of Cape Town created tactile boxes, where both blind and sighted had to rely on touch to identify and explore the objects within;
- In 1972 the Link exhibition explored the aesthetic correlation between works of art, natural objects, and manufactured objects; and

- In 1973 at the Duo exhibition, each sculpture was examined to the accompaniment of a piece of classical music selected by Günther Pulvermacher, Dean of the Faculty of Music at the University of Cape Town. Where this proved impractical, blind visitors were encouraged to sing their own song or clap their chosen rhythm. Altogether, 338 people attended this exhibition.

In 1969 clay modelling classes were introduced with the clay pieces left to dry on the work tables, where they could be viewed by visitors. These classes were taught by lecturers and students from local art institutions, including Sister Doreen, a nun of the Order of the Holy Paraclete. At one of these classes I modelled the figure of a man seated on the ground with legs outstretched, titled: "Sometimes I sits and thinks, and sometimes I just sits." But the piece best remembered by family and friends is a tortoise I carved from a bar of soap.

The Touch Gallery opened in 1972 and comprised three rooms adjacent to the main gallery, with space for exhibitions and practical workshops plus a "dark room".

Sandra and I travelled to other cities to give practical demonstrations and hold discussions, which resulted in further tactile exhibitions in Johannesburg, Pretoria, Durban, and several smaller centres. Sandra went on to devote a long and productive career to the promotion of art accessibility, not only for the blind, but for people with other disabilities as well. Her work was duly recognised internationally, and a paper presented on her behalf at a world conference by Sister Doreen led to the first such exhibition at the Tate Gallery in London. These many years on she is still associated with the National Gallery, where she heads up the Meaningful Access Project (MAP).

During international travel for my work I visited galleries in many places to spread the word and enjoy such art as I was allowed to touch. Our efforts culminated in an invitation to the International Council of Museums (ICOM) in Paris, to provide a briefing on the pioneering work in South Africa. The information was received with acclamation, earning this

response from the Director: "Is there anything I can do for you in return?"

"Yes," I said, "I would like to visit the Rodin Museum and be allowed to touch."

"The gallery is guarded by a tigress," he said, "but I will tame her for you."

After a telephone call—and much murmured conversation—I set out for the Rodin Museum, accompanied by Alexandra, an ICOM member of staff.

I was warmly received and allowed to touch at will. I took my time in appreciating each piece—*The Thinker, The Kiss*, and more—but the work that left the most lasting impression was *The Cathedral*, two large marble hands mounted in opposition to each other to evoke the sacred edifice. This is the thought that ran through my mind: "You will touch this once only in your life. Take care to memorise the exact position of the hands."

Braille Trails

I advised in the development of several Braille trails, most notably at the Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden in Cape Town. A Braille trail has a guide rail or guide rope enabling a blind person to follow the path independently, touching specially chosen plants along the way. At Kirstenbosch, a diversity of plants was selected for their varying textures and as representing the Cape flora. A knob on the rail or a knot in the rope indicated when a plant was to hand, the plants being placed at convenient heights and within easy reach. Each plant had a Braille label giving its common name as well as its botanical name. The surface underfoot is important too. Sand, gravel, or grass give a natural feel, while artificial materials such as asphalt and cement are to be avoided.

More recently, I assisted a team at North-West University in the creation of multisensory gardens at the Pioneer School and at the Karoo Desert National Botanical

Garden in Worcester. In these gardens, plants and trees are selected for touch, smell, and vision, each one being associated with a poem specially written by a South African author for the project. Using a cell phone, the visitor downloads a QR app to read the code that activates a voice recording of the poem being read by its writer. I was honoured to have my poem *The House Where I Live* installed as a kind of gateway poem to the garden at my old school.

Hangklip Holidays

Cape Hangklip is a tongue of land at the eastern end of False Bay, some 85 kilometres from Cape Town. A rugged cliff with a rocky outcrop overhanging a cave gives the area its name. It was here that my brother-in-law, Ruben Stander, bought a plot of land in 1957—25 morgen (20 hectares)—on which he built a beach house. In time, this became known to us as "*Die Ou Huis*" (The Old House), after the erection of a second property, "*Huis By Hoogwater*" (House at High Tide), a five-minute walk away over the beach.

The Old House became a holiday home for Hélène and me twice a year with an extended stay of at least three weeks over the Christmas break. These were populous occasions with the Stander family of six—Ruben and Nelie, one son and three daughters—and us with our own growing family, plus countless guests for whom a place to sleep could always be found. Often this included people who were well-known publicly, such as Anna Neethling-Pohl, grande dame of Afrikaans theatre, actor Marius Weyers, singer Amanda Strydom, Piet Cilliers, editor of *Die Burger*, and writer-journalist Murray Lavita. Family and visitors alike were invited to chalk their names on a wall in the living room, and this became a poignant record of everyone who had passed our way. My name was written in dots simulating braille.

At Hangklip, life took on a regular and cherished routine. During the day, activities were very much related to our surroundings, such as swimming and fishing and walking

along the dunes, while the evenings were given over to social get-togethers.

Singalongs were enjoyed by all, with me on guitar and Ruben and Hélène as lead singers. These evenings of self-entertainment drew on popular music of the day, but our repertoire of *Kaapse Moppies* topped everything else. These are songs emanating from the coloured community and typified by the pathos and humour of ordinary working folk. Some of these *Moppies* I only ever heard sung at Hangklip. Here are the opening lines of three of the songs:

Waarom staan my hoennertjie
So treurig voor my deur
Waarom staan my hoennertjie
So treurig voor my deur

Gee tog vir my hoennertjie
Sewe pitjies kos
Dan weer word my hoennertjie
Se skewe litte los

Hou djou rokkies bymekaar, hou djou rokkies bymekaar,
hou djou rokkies bymekaar; môre gaat ons Boland toe.
Hou djou rokkies bymekaar, hou djou rokkies bymekaar,
hou djou rokkies bymekaar; môre gaat ons Boland toe!

My voete loop na Wellington maar ek ga' Worcester toe,
my voete loop na Wellington maar ek ga' Worcester toe,
my voete loop na Wellington maar ek ga' Worcester toe,
my voete loop na Wellington maar ek ga' Worcester toe.

Hier staat ek weer in die Roelandstraat
Hier voor die jats en die magiestraat
O moenie rasie en wat het ek gemaak
Toe kry ek sewe maande
bo in die Roelandstraat

A contribution from my side was each year to introduce a new and unusual activity. One such activity was storytelling, with

an emphasis on ghost stories. Troops of baboons were proving to be troublesome neighbours and the more daring amongst them would sometimes venture into the house to steal things. And so, the story about a ghost baboon was a big hit.

And then, in a lowered voice one night, I told the young folk that I was going to share with them a family secret. In the Stander family, I confided, there was a mad woman, Aunt Dora, now committed to an asylum. One year she came to Hangklip and, listening outside her door in the dark, we thought we heard her saying her prayers, until we realised she was beating her breast and calling on Satan. Her son Marius ran wild, shrieking in the night, and the only way to put an end to it was for *Oom* Ruben to set a mantrap to catch him. Sometimes the young folk found these stories so scary that they refused to go to other parts of the house unaccompanied, but they always came back for more.

Palmistry is a skill I learned as a student in London from a lady friend with gypsy qualities. When I did this at Hangklip, the older folk were as enthralled as the younger ones. This is the art of supposedly interpreting a person's character or predicting their future by examining the hand. With my fingers I traced the lines in the palm of the hand to ascertain length of life, state of health, the balance between head and heart, and good luck. The prominence and comparative length of fingers and thumb revealed willpower, ambition, conservatism, materialism, sexuality, and other characteristics. Marks on the side of the hand indicated number of children. Negative signs, such as a short life, I kept to myself. The credibility of my fortune-telling was greatly enhanced by a surprising episode. A boyfriend of one of the Stander girls, a stranger to me, came visiting and offered his palm for reading. "Your hand has a feature I haven't come across before," I told him. "Your lifeline has a faint copy in parallel, which makes me wonder whether you were meant to be a twin?" "I have a twin brother," he declared.

Having attended a public exhibition of hypnotism, I thought that copying the witnessed procedure would work for

me. This I put into practice during another of our Christmas holidays, but not in a group setting. Each volunteer was asked to gaze intently at a gently swaying pendulum. "You are starting to feel drowsy," I said. "Sleep, yes that's right, sleep." When my sighted assistant advised that the subject was ready, I asked questions or requested the person to do something. The most memorable incident was with my son, Frank, who I presented with a bar of soap, telling him to taste the chocolate. "*Dit smaak lekker*," he said.

But the high-water mark of these times was Christmas Eve. We would gather early for a devotion, snacks, and drinks, waiting for night to fall as the children's excitement mounted. Shortly after dark everyone would assemble at a vantage point looking out to sea and, suddenly, a flare would blaze and a figure – *Oom* Gottie or Frank say, – would appear on the rocks, bedecked with seaweed. Father Neptune no less, our substitute for Father Christmas, and always he would call the name of the youngest child in the house as he crossed the beach: "Toni! Toni!" when it was my daughter's turn and later "Bronwyn! Bronwyn!" my younger daughter. Father Neptune would then distribute the gifts, enjoy a glass of wine, and depart again for his home in the deep.

Fishing

It was at Hangklip that I took up fishing, purchasing a rod and learning to cast and reel in the fishing line from the rocks. Much more fun was fishing from a small motorboat which we took out into the bay. It was there one afternoon that we found ourselves amid a shoal of Geelbek, of which I boated three. A meal of fish which you have caught yourself has extra savour.

Today the conservation status of the Geelbek is vulnerable (SASSI red list). Up to a metre in length, it can weigh as much as eleven kilograms. The body is silver in colour, with a yellow mouth and gills. Other species I caught from time to time included Steenbras, Stompneus, Elf and the little Hottentot. Today some of these names have become politically incorrect.

Another adventure was diving for perlemoen (*Haliotis midae* or abalone), with my brother-in-law Fella. Spotting a specimen at a depth of three metres or so, he guided me down and put my hand on the shell, which I detached, taking care not to have my fingers clamped to the rock.

Just once I went fishing elsewhere. Waterskiing on Zandvlei—a shallow estuary flowing into False Bay—I learned that my instructor, an Austrian named Bruno, owned a tunny boat. He invited me to come along one day.

Early that Saturday morning my driver dropped me off at Simon's Town docks, where I boarded Bruno's boat. Leaving the harbour, we turned right and some 30 kilometres out to sea from Cape Point, there is a stretch where the cold Atlantic meets the warmer waters of the Indian Ocean and where the tunny feed and there we dropped anchor.

Strapped into the tunny chair, I cast my line over the side. Our catch for the day was 77 longfin tunny, of which I brought in seven. When you have a strike, you have to play the fish, letting it run and then reeling it in over and over several times. This I did until the fish reached the edge of the boat, where Bruno's assistant took over and hauled the wildly flapping fish aboard.

The tunny is not a regular eating fish in unprocessed form, but I did take a specimen home as my trophy for the day. The rest of the catch was sold off commercially.

University Studies

Three years into my professional life as a physiotherapist I decided to register for university studies. I did enjoy job satisfaction, but intellectually I felt unchallenged. I therefore chose subjects I took to be the most difficult on offer, these being majors in systematic philosophy and the history of philosophy. Eventually, I thought I might abandon my chosen occupation and opt for a life in academia.

My studies involved distance learning through the University of South Africa, with a requirement of ten modules. From 1965 to 1969 I actually completed twelve modules, three each for my majors, plus one apiece for Psychology, Political Science, Sociology, History of Art, English, and practical Afrikaans. In addition, I completed matric Latin, a third language being an entry requirement for BA studies. I achieved A-passes for ten of the modules and Bs for the other two, because of insurmountable obstacles. I will explain.

During my second year in Systematic Philosophy we learned how to draw up truth tables. These are diagrams in rows showing how the truth or falsity of a proposition varies with that of its components. I was unable to devise a method to draw up these diagrams in the examination room and sacrificed ten marks.

In the English course one had to carry out a phonetic analysis of a given piece as part of the exam. I was unable to make the necessary visual markings and forfeited those points.

The first-year-course in History of Art covered art in its diverse forms from Carolingian script through works of the Middle Ages to masterpieces of the early Renaissance. In assignments and the examination one had to discuss the composition of particular works of art and explain their symbolic content, alluding to significant features such as colour, light, perspective, and more—a smile perhaps or a gesture or a reflection. To cope with this as a blind person required special resources not readily available.

It was Sandra Eastwood, my friend at the SA National Gallery, who came to my rescue. She spent many an hour describing to me illustrations of famous paintings and sculptures, using a dressmaker's compass with a little spiked wheel to draw details in raised dotted lines I could feel.

As an example of what we did, I take *The Tribute Money*, a fresco painted by Masaccio (C. 1425) in the Brancacci Chapel of Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence. It depicts a scene from the gospel of Matthew, in which Jesus directs Peter to find a coin in the mouth of a fish to pay the temple tax. Christ and the

disciples are placed in a semicircle, reflecting the shape of the chapel's apse.

The story is told in three parts. The central scene is that of the tax collector demanding the tribute. Christ and Peter point to the viewer's left, where, in the middle ground, Peter is taking the money out of the mouth of the fish. The final scene, where Peter pays the tax collector is at the right.

The painting uses single-point perspective with the vanishing point converging on Christ's head, making Him the focal point. The gestures of the tax collector and the vermillion colour of his tunic suggest his impertinence. Because of aerial perspective, the mountains in the background and Peter on the left are paler and dimmer than the figures in the foreground, creating an illusion of depth. The light emanates from a source outside the picture.

All of this and much more had to be described and discussed with me to complete my assignment or the exam question. Somehow though, I earned high praise from Unisa Art professor Frieda Harmsen, who confided that I was her best student.

Understandably, my closest bond was with my Philosophy professor, R. S. Meyer. It began with an investigation. I was in the habit of memorising passages from the textbooks and then quoting them in the examinations. This gave rise to the suspicion that I was directly copying while in the exam room, and therefore cheating. However, once I had explained my study methods and use of assistive technology, I was given due credit for my accomplishment. Frequent contact with Professor Meyer followed down the years, which included a request from him that I lead a study group to meet monthly in Cape Town.

My three years of study in the history of Philosophy covered western thought from the ancient Greeks through to modern times. In systematic Philosophy I encountered recent trends in Philosophy such as existentialism, phenomenology, and behaviourism.

It was the French philosopher René Descartes who, in the 1600s brought the dualism of mind and body into prominence with his dictum *cogito, ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am). The problem that arises is to explain the causal link between the immaterial mind and the material body. This dualistic philosophy was finally discredited by the philosophers of mind of the 20th century, in particular in the behaviourist philosophy of Gilbert Ryle, for whom the meaning of language rests on behavioural evidence. There is no knowable difference between two states of mind (beliefs, desires, etc.) unless there is a demonstrable difference in the behaviour associated with each state; the belief that it is raining, say, compared to the belief that it is not raining.

R. S. Meyer, my Philosophy professor, studied under Ryle at Oxford University and, on returning to South Africa, his teaching and writing bore the stamp of behaviourism. His book *Thinking and Perceiving* strongly influenced my own thinking and deepened my interest in the nature of perception which became a dominant theme of my studies for the BA Hons degree and helped shape my subsequent degree studies.

The title of my MA dissertation was "Space and Blindness: A Philosophical Study". Having discussed a number of theories pertaining to spatial concepts, I pose the question: do the blind possess spatial concepts? I then discuss spatial concepts in relation to the separate senses and conclude that the possession of these concepts by blind people is shown in their behaviour.

In confirmation of the argument, I recount how a blind housewife with a white cane goes shopping at her local store. In her recognition and sorting of products and money and her travel along the sidewalk and across a street she exhibits behaviour demonstrating her possession of the concepts of shape, size, direction, distance, and motion.

As part of my dissertation, I also took up the so-called Molyneux Problem because of its fascination for me as a blind person. Sometime during the 17th century, William Molyneux, an Irish mathematician who had a blind wife, wrote to the

English philosopher John Locke with an enquiry which I here paraphrase: Suppose a man born blind and now adult, and taught by his touch to distinguish between a cube and a sphere of the same metal and nearly of the same size, so as to tell when he feels one and the other which is the cube and which the sphere. Suppose then that the cube and the sphere be placed on a table and the blind man be made to see: would he by sight before he touched them, now be able to tell which is the cube and which the sphere?

Molyneux himself drew a negative conclusion, arguing that the blind man would lack the visual experiences to distinguish between the two objects. Locke concurred. Agreeing with this position, I reasoned that perceptual difference had to be learned for vision as for touch.

Studying for my three Unisa degrees while in full-time employment imposed a punishing schedule. Arriving home at 5 pm, I would eat an early supper and take a short nap, after which I would work at my desk for two solid hours from 7 to 9 pm before preparing for bed and spending a little time with my family. This went on day after day, month after month, year after year, not to mention weekends. During the first five years I was sustained by a single thought: there will come a day when I will mount the Unisa stage finally to receive my degree, a moment of emotional fulfilment I still happily recall. Now, after more than a decade of such labours, it seemed the time had come to quit. Because of favourable developments in my career, I had in any case given up plans to enter the academic world.

But, then, at an official function in Johannesburg one evening I was seated next to Brunhilde Helm, professor of Sociology at the University of Cape Town and an earlier Cape Town acquaintance of mine. Responding to her enquiries I had this to say: why spend another 2,000 hours studying just to put the title "Doctor" in front of my name? She strongly disagreed. "You owe it to yourself to finish what you have begun. Register with me and I will see that you complete your doctorate within two years." It was a promise kept.

My dissertation—later published as a book by the South African National Council for the Blind—bore the title *Being-Blind-in-the-World: A Philosophical Analysis of Blindness and a Formulation of New Objectives in Rehabilitation*. I quote below an excerpt from the introduction to explain what it was all about.

> *What is it like to be blind?*
>
> *This is a question which has been answered in various ways according to different points of view. In the present study our aim is to examine in depth the views of one particular group, but a group whose members, because of their occupational pursuits, their interaction with blind people, and their involvement in the cause of the blind, might reasonably be expected to possess a special understanding of what it means to be blind. These are the professional workers with the blind—educators, social workers, rehabilitation teachers, administrators, and others engaged in similar fields of service. What image do these specialists have of blindness? How do they gain their impressions? Are their views valid?*
>
> *In addressing these issues, we begin by investigating the sources of knowledge upon which professional workers base their assumptions. We contend that in the main there are two such sources, namely personal contact within a professional setting and the authoritative utterances of acknowledged experts. The first of these gives rise to the process of stereotyping, while the second results in a process we call theoreotyping, that is, the tendency to typify blind people according to some theoretical interpretation.*
>
> *But our analysis of stereotypes and theories is merely a preparatory phase to our own enquiry into the nature of blindness. It serves to negate existing preconceptions, that is, to eliminate them from our thinking, in order that we may be uninfluenced by them as we proceed with the positive phase of the analysis. Here the aim is to describe blindness as pure experience—not what it appears to be to the outside observer, but what it subjectively is in terms of lived-through situations.*

> *An in-depth study of examples is an essential part of our method at this stage, constituting a phenomenological analysis—a description of the what-it-is-likeness of the blind person's encounter with objects and people—from which emerges a new understanding of this particular mode of being-in-the-world.*
>
> *In the conviction that our findings provide a legitimate basis for professional work with the blind, we formulate a set of basic principles for rehabilitation counselling and teaching.*

These principles were duly put into practice at Optima College, a national training institution for blind people in Pretoria, which I founded in 1984. The curriculum included skills of daily living, orientation and mobility, Braille and typing. A unique innovation, not found anywhere else at the time, was assertiveness training to boost the self-confidence of our students in dealing with attitudinal barriers. Vocational training was expanded too, with traditional switchboard operating transitioning to call centre training and touch-typing making way for word processing, changes that resulted in more rewarding job placements, for example at the South African Broadcasting Corporation, in government departments, and in private companies such as Toyota. Where we encountered initial resistance from employers, I resorted to an audacious ploy: "give us a trial period of three months and if by then things aren't working out, we'll take our candidate back and trouble you no more." My first experiment of this kind ended with the permanent appointment of Lettie Krügel at the Department of Water Affairs, just four days into her new job.

A New Calling

After two and a half years, I resigned my position as physiotherapist at the Lady Michaelis Children's Hospital to open a private practice at Gibraltar House in Sea Point, Cape Town. There, a waiting room and reception area, where

my mother volunteered her services part-time, adjoined a space divided into three cubicles by partitions, a product of my father's carpentry. Each cubicle was curtained off and contained a plinth for patients to lie on and a piece of equipment for me to administer shortwave diathermy or electrotherapy or ultrasound. An ultraviolet lamp was available for skin treatment and an infrared lamp to alleviate pain through heating. There was also enough space to perform moderate exercise, an essential part of physiotherapy practice.

Growth in my practice was slow, depending as it did on referrals from local doctors whom I contacted by telephone or written letter. At that time, medical advertising was strictly prohibited. Charges were modest and five decades on, the figures seem absurd: for example, an account for a single ultrasound treatment charged at R1.80. And one had to compete with the medical profession when it came to room rentals and staff costs.

Speaking to local doctors, I incidentally came across a psychiatrist who had worked at Valkenberg Hospital where Mrs Varrie, the shooter who caused my blindness, had been her patient. She asked of her this question: "How do you feel about what you did?" "How would you feel?" was Mrs Varrie's reply, the only words from her mouth that ever reached me after the tragedy.

But then came a turning point; one of those events that changes the trajectory of one's life forever. It began with a telephone call from my friend and long-time mentor Gerald Schermbrucker. Could he come and see me at my rooms the next afternoon? He had something to discuss with me.

What I took to be a social visit had a different purpose and Mr Schermbrucker came to the point right away. Would I like to give up my practice and come to work for the South African National Council for the Blind as public relations officer? He explained the responsibilities and gave some background regarding the National Council.

Would he please allow me 24 hours to think the matter over? I somehow knew what my answer would be, but I needed

to consult my wife Hélène and get my parents' opinion. All those years of study, all those patients ... a leap in the dark, but the answer was "yes".

Let it be said, though, that my training was not wasted. The medical and scientific knowledge I had gained stood me in good stead in many different settings down the years, working in the field of disability. The full list would be a lengthy one, but would range from the developing of services for blind and partially-sighted people to my participation on behalf of the World Blind Union in negotiations towards the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

I was 26 years old when, in April 1966, I joined the fundraising team of the South African National Council for the Blind at Geneva House in Parliament Street, Cape Town. As public relations officer I had two key tasks: to manage the fundraising programme and to seek publicity for the work of the National Council, which in those days meant coverage by radio, newspapers, and magazines.

The fundraising programme was diverse, and I had much to learn not only about fundraising methods, but also about accounting (financial statements, balance sheets, and the rest). An extraordinary volunteer who came to the office every day was Mr McKeller White, the retired general manager of Standard Bank SA, and it was he who mentored me in accounting matters and the figures and statistics of fundraising.

The backbone of our fundraising activities was direct mail appeals. Initially, I crafted the appeal letters myself, which were printed in bulk, stuffed into envelopes, and tied into bundles of 100 for posting. Office typists addressed the envelopes, taking the addresses from telephone directories across the country. One of our typists, Miss Back, rattled off no fewer than 1,200 envelopes every day, working mornings only. The response rate in the form of cash donations, postal orders, and cheques sent by return of mail was around 2%. The names and addresses of all contributors were added to our regular donor list to be approached again twice a year during

Our Blind Week—the first week in May—and in the Christmas appeal each December, where the response rate exceeded 20%. Any donor who had not given for two years or more received a personalised "renewal letter". The vast majority of regular donors were women aged 40-plus. At its peak, the regular donor list contained north of 50,000 names.

Various formulae were available to copywriters for the drafting of appeal letters. The one I chose was known as "Star-Chain-Hook". When somebody opened an appeal letter, one had but a few seconds to capture the attention and avoid the letter being set aside. "Star" meant an opening statement of no more than two lines that would make the recipient read on. This was followed by a line of reasoning, the "Chain", putting our case for support and ending with the so-called "ask", the "Hook". Blind children were the most popular cause amongst our donors, and I was insistent that every story had to be true and traceable to a real person, as with "Little Gerhard" who was about to start his schooling. We needed money to help little children like him. Letters like this went out in the tens of thousands.

Street collections were another source of income. Once a year we would apply to town clerks across the country for a collection day and, where granted, we would approach women's organisations, church groups, and others to manage the event. The largest collection by far was the one in Cape Town, which always took place on the first Saturday in May. Sealed collection boxes were issued to us by the City Council, and these we put in the hands of volunteers assigned to busy street corners and other key points throughout the city and suburbs. Money was counted by municipal officials on the following Monday at Electricity House, with two observers from our office in attendance.

The sale of Christmas cards offered another income stream and took our name into thousands of homes each Christmas. The choice of design fell to my sighted colleagues, but I did have the pictures described to me and came to realise what themes proved most popular, angels being an obvious

example. To boost marketing, I founded Welfare Christmas Cards, comprising 24 charities in all, with a kiosk near the flower sellers in Adderley Street, where the public could buy their cards. In due course we also put out a Christmas catalogue inviting the public to purchase a variety of goods by mail order. Calendars, gift tags, decorations, and kitchen knickknacks were the sorts of things that people chose.

A remarkable benefactor of our work was Cape Town businessman Hymie Matthews, founder of the Trophy of Light. Trophy of Light competitions were golf days organised by consenting clubs, some 20 of them eventually, all over South Africa, and even in Walvis Bay across our border in South West Africa, now Namibia. The largest of these competitions was held at the Clovelly Country Club, chaired by Pick n Pay founder, Raymond Ackerman, where on one occasion I was invited to present the trophy and other prizes. Raymond and his company remained loyal supporters well into the future.

And then there was the Projects Committee, initially chaired by Mrs Wallace, wife of the Canadian Trade Commissioner, and after her, by Vivia Ferreira, wife of a highly revered ophthalmologist. Their events were adventurous, profitable, and a lot of fun.

Fiesta 69 was a fete held at Maynardville in the Southern Suburbs, with stalls selling all kinds of donated goods. It included a beauty competition, with me as one of the judges, on the understanding that beauty was not a matter of looks only. The winner was crowned Miss Fiesta 69.

We staged a number of film premieres, the most sensational of these being *The Great Gatsby*. The Gatsby suit I bought for the occasion remained my favourite for many years to come. We also did one of the early Bond movies. When the film *Grease* was released, we held a gala breakfast themed for young people. On arrival, each young man was given a comb and a tube of *Brylcreem*.

An open day at the Vergelegen Wine Estate in Somerset West gave visitors access to the famous wine cellars and allowed them to view the interior of the stately homestead. For

the children, there were pony rides in the garden. All charges for entry would be for our benefit. At the close of the event in the early afternoon, Colonel Addington, the organiser, handed a bag of money to us, which my sister Denise and I deposited in the boot of our car. Just then a man stepped up to us and said: "I have a gun here. Hand me the money or I'll blow your brains out." A soft click and I knew Denise had leaned on the boot to secure the lock. Suddenly somebody called out from a distance "Raymond! Raymond!" and the man whose name it must have been ran off. The police were unable to trace the culprit.

The staff in the Cape Town office were unfailingly loyal to the cause and we seldom had a resignation. Rae Ruthven, who was appointed Appeals Secretary in 1972, stands out in memory for the quiet and efficient way in which she coped with the work and for her friendship towards me. On the Monday before our first Spring Ball at the Mount Nelson Hotel, she came to me with a solemn warning: "I hope you realise you will have to open the dance floor on Friday!" I immediately telephoned the Arthur Murray Studios and explained my predicament. Either I would have to come for a dance lesson lasting one whole day or else for a shorter while every day. By coincidence, one of their teachers, Miss Harvey, had taught dancing to St Dunstaners—blinded war veterans—in London and it was she who put me through my paces for an hour each day. Not only did I open the floor, but throughout the evening I waltzed and did the foxtrot with delighted guests.

To raise awareness of our work away from the major cities, I undertook public relations tours twice a year. Travelling to some chosen area in the country, I would go from town to town, meeting with town clerks to discuss our street collections and speaking at meetings of women's groups and service clubs such as Rotary and Lions. This I did by car with a university student hired as driver. I also took the opportunity to visit places of special interest. As example I take my tour of Namibia where I touched the Hoba meteorite, the largest intact meteorite on earth, on a farm near Grootfontein. Weighing some 60 tonnes, it fell to earth around 80,000 years ago. Another discovery was the *Welwitschia mirabilis*. This

plant consists of just two leaves, a stem base, and roots. It lives for 500 to 600 years and only ever sprouts two leathery leaves spreading out on the desert sand, where I knelt to explore every detail with fingers and tongue.

To generate publicity for the National Council, I from time to time issued press releases telling about our work and the achievements of blind people. Negotiations with the SABC led to the establishment of a regular In Touch programme for blind listeners. I presented a series of these programmes myself, but the long-time presenter was Clive Payne, whose voice was familiar to all of us who tuned in to the English Service. Building on this success, Evette Johnson, owner of Rondebosch Travel, and I, came up with the idea of In Touch Tours, enabling blind people and their sighted companions or family to travel overseas.

The first In Touch tour went to Israel, with around 20 participants, half of whom were blind or partially sighted. Wherever possible, we arranged in advance for permission to touch objects of interest in places we visited, while we were accompanied by a gifted tour guide, Yehohanan, who fulfilled his role in brilliant fashion. At the end of the tour, I declared him to be "an honorary blind man". It was deeply moving to visit Masada and listen to the story of the mass suicide of the Jews under Roman siege in the very place where it happened. We breathed the fragrant air on the Mount of Olives and swam in the Dead Sea, as every day brought new sensations. But for me, the climactic moment came during an adventure Evette and I undertook on our own. It involved wading through water waist-high along a tunnel passing under the wall of Jerusalem. It ended in the pool of Siloam, where Christ performed one of his most wondrous miracles, the healing of a man born blind. There I bathed in quiet contemplation.

I quote the relevant passage from the Gospel of John 9:

> *[1]And as Jesus passed by, he saw a man which was blind from his birth.*

> [2] *And his disciples asked him, saying, Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?*
>
> [3] *Jesus answered, Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him.*
>
> [4] *I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work.*
>
> [5] *As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.*
>
> [6] *When he had thus spoken, he spat on the ground, and made clay of the spittle, and he anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay,*
>
> [7] *And said unto him, Go, wash in the pool of Siloam, (which is, by interpretation, Sent.) He went his way therefore, and washed, and came seeing.*

In the mid-1960s I became part of an initiative unrelated to my work and that would bring lasting benefits to the blind community. It was Sir John Ellerman, reputedly the richest man in England with strong ties to South Africa, who sponsored a visit to our shores by Walter Thornton, a blind man campaigning for the adoption of the so-called "long cane" and associated training.

The use of sticks by blind individuals to warn them of obstacles in their path goes back centuries, but it was James Biggs, a blinded photographer in Bristol, England, who first painted his cane white in 1921 to attract attention and enhance safety. In 1944 Richard E. Hoover, a rehabilitation specialist working with blinded war veterans in the United States, blindfolded himself for a week while experimenting with white canes and devising an accompanying technique for mobility. This is the origin of the long white cane and the technique of swinging the cane to and fro in front of the body in rhythm with the footsteps, with the tip alternately tapping the ground on the side away from the front foot.

It was in John and Esther Ellerman's garden in upper Kloof Road, Sea Point, that I received my first lesson in the use of the long cane from Walter Thornton himself. And so I

became one of the first, if not the very first, blind person in South Africa to master long cane travel. St Dunstan's South Africa took up the cause with funding from Sir John, and in due course the training of orientation and mobility (O&M) instructors became a regular offering of Guide Dogs South Africa alongside their dog training. At the time of writing, there are over 50 O&M practitioners working at schools, universities, and institutions across the country.

My wife Hélène and I became close friends of the Ellermans, enjoying many evenings of self-entertainment at their elegant home, with Sir John reciting Stanley Holloway monologues from memory, such as Albert and the Lion, and Hélène and I—her singing and me on guitar—performing our *Kaapse Moppies* and songs written by me.

The story of my Cape Town years would be incomplete without recalling the most dramatic day at my office in Geneva House, Parliament Street. In the early afternoon of 6 September 1966, someone came rushing into the building calling out: "Verwoerd has been killed! Verwoerd has been killed!". Just a few hundred metres up the road, in the House of Assembly, Prime Minister Hendrik Frensch Verwoerd, the architect of apartheid, had been approaching his seat when a parliamentary aide, Dimitri Tsafendas, pulled a knife from his belt and stabbed him several times. He died shortly afterwards. Just two days after the assassination, on 8 September, my wife Hélène gave birth to our son Frank.

And Then a Permanent Calling

In my tenth year as public relations officer of the South African National Council for the Blind, the top post of Director fell vacant. At the urging of colleagues, especially Gerald Schermbrucker and Dr Walter Cohen, I applied for the position and was appointed. The Cape Town years had been rewarding beyond measure, but now a time of new challenges lay ahead. Goodbye my beloved Cape Town. Hello Pretoria, city of new horizons.

PART 2

Chapter 6

Disabled People South Africa: "Nothing About Us Without Us"

Disability in South Africa has to be viewed against the background of the liberation struggle. During the 1980s and early 1990s, disabled people were part of that struggle and today we share in the fruits of a new democracy.

For every person who died in the struggle, three others became disabled, and it was largely from this pool of injury and anger that the leadership emerged of Disabled People South Africa (DPSA), the organisation that has spearheaded the disability rights movement in the country. These were also the conditions that gave rise to a mass movement of disabled people, which at its peak, must have numbered 10,000 to 12,000 activists, working in unison and speaking with one unsilenceable voice.

My purpose in this chapter is neither to give a short history, nor to document in full the events of those turbulent times. It is simply to record some personal recollections as a backdrop to what I shall have to say elsewhere. And this is how, for me, it all began.

I fly to Durban to attend the Third Congress of People with Disabilities, as observer. I arrive at the Amanzimtoti Town Hall to be greeted by my first comrade, Mike du Toit. He tells me there is a move for me to be the first Chairperson of DPSA, and I say that others have earned the right more than me.

At lunch I am joined by Joshua Malinga of Zimbabwe—future Chairperson of Disabled Peoples' International—and he tries to persuade me with political arguments, but I remain resistant. And then, the next morning I am visited by Elda Olifant, on behalf of the Soweto contingent, and her impassioned words convince me. I agree to serve, provided all

the other leaders are prepared to participate. And that's the way it was, back then in September 1984.

My next memory is of a DPSA congress a few years later. Jerry Nkeli—a future Human Rights Commissioner—takes the floor and calls for proceedings to be suspended and for us to take to the streets to protest against the government's handling of disability grants, for the majority, their only source of income. And so we break up into action groups—transport, slogans and posters, media—and two hours later we are on the road and singing freedom songs.

As we reach the bottom end of West Street in Durban, the lead cars draw level with each other, and stop dead. It is rush-hour on a Friday afternoon and there is instant mayhem, with the traffic gridlocked and motorists swearing at us. We disembark and begin to *toyi toyi* and chant our slogans. And this goes on for three quarters of an hour before the riot police show up and try to find the leader of the protest, as we deliberately confuse them.

I negotiate a peaceful ending with the police, and I ask the comrades to return to their vehicles—"real slowly now", I say, and it takes an age.

The next week I am questioned by the police, but nothing else happens.

Those were exciting times, but stressful. And there were many such occasions.

Having refused to recognise the International Year of Disabled Persons, the South African Government in 1986 proclaimed its own politically expedient Year of Disabled Persons. It was in Bloemfontein that year that we withdrew from the national conference, returning only when given the platform to read our most powerful statement yet. It was Phindi Mavuso who presented our catalogue of injustices, the double discrimination of apartheid and disability.

And when the leader of the extremist Afrikaner Resistance Movement, Eugène Terre'Blanche, called for his followers to arm themselves with a million rifles, it was Friday

Mavuso who had 1,200 of us march up a Soweto hill to the Baragwanath Hospital gates to hold our protest rally against the rising tide of violence. How stunned we all were that April morning in 1995, several years later, on learning of Friday's road accident. His untimely death deprived us of our most charismatic leader. And how moved I was to sit in his small bedroom after the Soweto funeral, talking to the family—such a humble home; such a great man.

Of course, we did a great deal more than protest. As time progressed, two initiatives took shape; a political one, to mobilise disabled people to claim their rights, and a developmental one, taking the form of income generation through self-help. We also articulated a new philosophy: that disability was not a health and welfare issue, but a human rights and development issue; that the medical model of disability was inappropriate, and that doctors and social workers should not run our lives; that the pacifist methods of struggle would best serve our cause; and that we should align ourselves with the liberation movement. We became "conscientised" and adopted our now famous slogan: "Nothing About Us Without Us!"

I will not deny a darker side to these happenings. We had our power struggles—and violence against others was contemplated—but the leadership remained fiercely loyal. We did receive veiled threats, mail was intercepted, and telephones were tapped. And yet we never wavered; after all, there were many others in much greater peril than ourselves. And certainly there were life-threatening incidents that have never been explained.

Figure 8: President Nelson Mandela with Friday Mavuso and William, ca.1992

In our consultative forum with government we made three final demands—in the areas of access, transport, and social grants—attached to a twelve-month ultimatum. The ultimatum expired and we set out to destroy all disability structures of government. For two years we were out in the cold, and then came the momentous announcement by F. W. de Klerk of the unbannings, the release of Nelson Mandela, and political negotiations. And DPSA was right there in the thick of things, accepted by the ANC as a member of the Patriotic Front Against Apartheid. And Friday Mavuso and I visiting Mr Mandela in Shell House to appeal for his intervention on our behalf in a matter of serious concern—the three of us chatting and holding hands, in gratitude and comradeship. And later, our serving on the Inauguration Committee when Mr Mandela became President.

And now it is more than ten years on from our first meeting with Mr Mandela, and twenty years since that historical congress. The time of struggle is behind us and what

lies ahead is a time of delivery. And some believe that will be the hardest part.

N.B. The time frame given in the final paragraph above and in following chapters was applicable at the time of writing (2004). By then the disability rights movement in South Africa had reached its culmination.

Chapter 7

"Forcing Open the Doors of Delivery"

"*Umkhonto we Sizwe! Umkhonto we Sizwe!*" It is the name of the armed wing of the ANC; these are also the words of a freedom song. The bus bounces up and down wildly as the youths stamp their feet and sing; it is a day of celebration, and the joy of the people is unbounded.

We de-bus and become part of the human mass converging on Johannesburg's FNB Stadium. "Freedom come, freedom come; freedom come, through the barrel of a gun!" The words of the singing comrades thunder through the loudspeaker system as we wrestle our way to our seats, Carla Zille and me. The disability movement has been part of the political struggle, like the women's movement, the churches, the trade unions, and many other groups—and we are all here to receive the liberated leaders.

A praise poet takes the stage to hail the returning heroes. The crowd roars "Viva the struggle of the people! Long live Nelson Mandela! Long live Fidel Castro! Long live ...."

And suddenly they are there: "the first eight" to be released from prison; Walter Sisulu, after nearly 27 years in jail, Achmed Kathrada, and all the others, after decades of incarceration. And their speeches are almost anti-climactic—reflective, philosophical, fragments of history, but, oh yes, defiant and uncompromising.

And now it is 11 February 1990, and the entire nation is waiting for the unbelievable to happen. Carla describes what she is seeing on TV, and I tell her what I hear because she is hard of hearing: Mandela walks through the gates of the Victor Verster prison ... the motorcade speeds to Cape Town ... Mandela steps out on to the City Hall balcony to address the jubilant crowd, and for the first time in our lives we hear that

singular voice. It is the same voice that four years later, after the first democratic election, will proclaim: "Free at last!"

That was the first day of the future in South Africa, in my opinion. We in DPSA had long prepared ourselves for the coming negotiations, but what we had not anticipated was the chaos of a country in transition. Racial barriers were gone. Every social system was under review. Old laws were being scrapped. New people were in charge everywhere, people without any background in disability and with other priorities. Who to speak to? What to say? How to say it? Where to say it? How to be heard at all amongst the hundreds of activist groups making demands and clamouring for influence.

Almost by default we begin to focus on the provisions of the draft constitution, specifically on the Bill of Rights. We argue for an anti-discrimination clause, but the Constitution writers say that sufficient safeguards are provided elsewhere. We persist and certain wording is included, but then dropped, reincluded and dropped again. Fortunately we have allies and the gay lobby, in particular, voices support for our position. In the end a clause is adopted outlawing discrimination on a variety of grounds, including disability. It is our first victory in the new South Africa, giving disabled people a real sense of ownership of the constitution.

The constitution contains a second provision of which we can be proud. Having recognised eleven official languages, it goes on to name Sign Language as a further language to be developed. Even though we would have preferred to have Sign Language recognised as an official language, the existing wording does have important policy and funding implications. In actual fact, Sign Language is today often referred to as "the twelfth language" of the country, even in official circles.

Disability in this way was put into a human rights context, but the development dimension was still lacking. Here, the flagship programme of government was to promote reconstruction and development (the "RDP"). Again it proved extremely difficult to get our message across until, just days before publication of the policy paper, we met in an emergency

session with RDP Minister Jay Naidoo to extract from him the promise of inclusion. The result was a single paragraph committing the government to policy formulation and identifying disabled people as a "vulnerable" group in society, along with women, youth, and people in rural areas. Although the term "vulnerable" has since been expunged from our vocabulary, an important principle had been established.

It was soon after this that Maria Rantho was deployed by the movement into a special office on disability within the RDP. In time, this office would become a fully-fledged Office on the Status of Disabled People (OSDP), which is today located within the Presidency itself and reports directly to a cabinet minister. The first task to hand at that time, though, was the drafting of what came to be called the Integrated National Disability Strategy (INDS) in consultation with the disability sector.

The INDS drew on the World Programme of Action and the UN Standard Rules for its content. It declared disability to be a human rights and development issue and indicated the priority areas to be targeted, these being education and training, employment, income maintenance and social security and housing. Each area was assigned to a line department to be integrated into its policies and programmes. The INDS recognised the needs of "sensitive groups" such as women, children, the elderly, rural persons, and disabled people. Provision was made for the OSDP, as well as for the establishment of a national coordinating committee. Drafted under the guidance of Maria Rantho, it was later strengthened and expanded under the direction of her successor in the OSDP, Shuaib Chalklen, and finally launched in November 1997.

Called to parliament by the ANC, Maria took her activism into the very corridors of power. One by one, disabled men and women began to be appointed to positions in public life—the Human Rights Commission, the Gender Commission, the Youth Commission; the South African Broadcasting Corporation (myself), the South African Tourism Board, the National Development Agency, and Ntsika (the agency

for small business development). Not only was each of us required to advocate on behalf of disabled people in these positions of authority, but we were expected to report back to our constituency, that is, the community of disabled people in the country. The principle of self-representation was fully accepted by government, and the appointments continued, including in the Public Service Commission, the National Lottery Distribution Agency, and the transport parastatal.

But we could never depend on goodwill alone. Progressive legislation and enlightened policies are necessary to provide us with the longer-term guarantees of fairness. Labour legislation prescribes affirmative action in relation to race, gender, and disability. Larger employers have to register employment equity and skills development plans, on which they have to report periodically. In the public sector, by 2005 two per cent of jobs had to be occupied by persons with disabilities. Under the National Skills Development Strategy four per cent of learnerships have to be awarded to disabled persons. Compared with American and British legislation, however, enforcement mechanisms in South Africa are weak, while the disadvantages experienced by disabled persons in the fields of education and transport remain as negative factors.

One of the most positive policy directions has been that of black economic empowerment, which is inclusive of women and disabled persons. At an October 1998 Presidential Jobs Summit of the "social partners"—government, organised business, trade unions, and community—our representatives were able to negotiate some challenging guideline targets, including a commitment by government that five per cent of public sector spending to promote small business would be directed to the enterprises of disabled persons and a further commitment that five per cent of government procurement would be allocated to businesses owned by disabled people or employers with at least five per cent of disabled workers. There was also an undertaking to develop incentives for equity partnerships empowering disabled people economically. How we leveraged this undertaking is a story in its own right, and the subject of another chapter.

The impressions I have given are optimistic, and rightly so. South Africa is the envy of disabled people in most developing countries and hopefully some of the elements of our transformation will be replicable elsewhere. But, at times, the pace has been agonisingly slow and policy does not always translate into practice.

Telescoping the events of the past dozen years into a selective account such as this does tend to minimise the frustrations and disappointments suffered along the way, especially at the beginning. At one point, Friday Mavuso and I seriously discussed a possible invasion of the Union Buildings. He would arrange a special tour and when they reached Mr Mandela's office, they would stage a sit-in and demand to speak to the President. I would be the spokesperson on the outside, priming the media. Happily, though, it never came to that. But there is a lingering impatience that cannot be ignored, and which found vivid expression in the slogan chosen for the 2001 DPSA Congress: "Forcing open the doors of delivery and equity!"

I end with another positive impression. In this instance, I have been invited to witness the briefing of the new disabled parliamentarians by Essop Pahad, Minister in the Presidency. Wilma is concerned about the positioning of her interpreter on the floor of the house. They need to face each other for good communication. Lewis wants to know about the immediate surroundings. Whether there is a garden if he needs to take his guide dog outside. Joseph asks about transport and parking. As a wheelchair user he has to be sure about the practical arrangements. Michael wishes to know what materials will be provided in Braille.

Wilma Niewoudt-Druchen, Lewis Nzimande, Joseph Mzondeki, and Michael Masutha, with Hendrietta Bogophane-Zulu—women's leader and HIV/AIDS activist—are the five persons deployed to parliament by the movement in the 1999 general election. What strikes me about the briefing is the matter-of-fact way in which issues are dealt with. Our parliamentarians are there by right. They ask for no

favours, but they do expect equality of access to facilities and information. It is the new generation of leaders preparing to do their work; to force open the doors of delivery, as the slogan says.

Chapter 8

South African National Council for the Blind

Project Renewal

Next to me on the desk as I write is a Braille volume of 73 pages. It is the Strategic Plan of the South African National Council for the Blind. According to the optimistic wording on the front cover it is "a bridge to the future"—to which I would add—for an organisation seeking its own transformation.

I can think of only one other document to equal this one in its significance for the sector, but the two documents lie at the extreme opposite poles of policy direction. The new "Stratplan" document is the product of consultation and self-appraisal, whereas the other document I have in mind was an instrument of coercion.

I imagine it came in the morning mail. The Director would have opened the letter in his office and seen another piece of government correspondence: Consolidated Circular No. 29 of 1966. Perhaps he glanced at the contents, perhaps he put it aside for later. Maybe he referred it to a colleague. We'll never know, but of one thing I am sure, my predecessor's predecessor at that moment could not have foreseen the generation of injustice to come from that document, reinforced from time to time over the next fifteen years by further "circulars".

Circular No 29 was issued by the Department of Welfare and Pensions in concurrence with—to use the language of the day—the Departments of Bantu Administration and Development, Coloured Affairs, Indian Affairs, and others. It stated government policy unequivocally: "It is intended that non-white welfare organisations for the various racial groups should develop alongside of white organisations. In the course

of time they will advance to a level of complete independence when they will be quite capable of managing their own affairs."

Such directives were not handed down into a vacuum. Apartheid was institutionalised by the Group Areas Act of 1950 (the most infamous piece of legislation passed into law by the all-white parliament) and further consolidated by Act 36 of 1966, which finally determined where South Africans could live and the ways in which they could associate with one another.

At the SANCB, separate divisions for coloured and Indian blind were created, as well as a special committee for blind black people. Efforts were made to extend services via these parallel channels, but as the quantum of resources was unchanged, the effect was negligible. General services, such as employment placement, remained open to all, but the rehabilitation centre, being residential, admitted whites only. A workshop employing blind black workers in a white urban area was transferred to a remote "homeland" location and a SANCB affiliate serving coloured and Indian blind persons around Johannesburg was forced to split into two organisations, one with money and no infrastructure and the other with an infrastructure but no money. And following his detention under the Suppression of Communism Act, the name of the Reverend Arthur Blaxall, Vice-President of the SANCB, was quietly removed from the letterhead.

But why did people yield to such pressures? Was it out of expediency or conviction? Or were there other reasons?

At this distance in time it is easy to condemn and hard to explain. But the fact is that people seemingly of principle did implement this policy, even while engaging in desultory negotiations to get it changed. The government, though, was more decisive in its actions, as is clear from the examples we have given. When "non-whites" attended meetings, government officials simply withdrew. More insidious was the threat that state subsidies could be withheld, or even registration to operate and raise funds. Personal fear of the

consequences of stepping out of line would also have been a potent factor.

To change all of this, and much more, into something else that was inclusive and just, functional and developmental, could never have been a project in isolation. South African society itself had to change, and this required new and different forces. And such forces were latent, but it was to take an oppressive act of a particular kind to unleash them. This was the decree by the Minister of Bantu Education, M. C. Botha, making Afrikaans the compulsory medium of instruction in black schools. On 16 June 1976, a youth protest march was brutally attacked by the police and within hours, Soweto was burning, sparking a new phase in the liberation struggle.

At the SANCB, the first major step towards normality was taken in 1981, with the removal of all references to race from the constitution. Four years later, when Optima College in Pretoria replaced the old Enid Whitaker Rehabilitation Centre in Johannesburg, it was opened to all races. The establishment of a Development Division gave support to the emergent self-help movement, in which blind and other disabled persons everywhere were forming worker co-operatives to create self-employment, and when in 1993, Ruth Machobane was elected as Vice-Chairman, she became the first blind black person to hold senior office in the organisation.

The opening up of Optima College, it has to be said, did not happen without trepidation. Would there be ugly racial incidents? Would people refuse to come to Optima, or simply not apply?

A single anonymous letter and some graffiti were the sole signs of resistance. And very soon, black and white students were to be seen strolling up and down the corridors arm-in-arm and studying and joking together, quite naturally.

These were indeed positive developments, but in our divided society, this very fact gave further cause to some for suspicion and mistrust, as I would discover from personal experience. The attack came in the form of a letter addressed to the Executive Committee of the SANCB claiming that my

"leftist" politics were harming the organisation. A motion of no confidence was put to the vote and decisively defeated but had the true extent of my activism in the disability rights movement been known to my immediate colleagues, or had they been aware of my secret visit to London to clear the way with the ANC for the entry of DPSA into Disabled Peoples' International (DPI), I might have been in much bigger trouble.

But worse was to follow. As civil resistance grew in the country and rolling mass action took hold, some of the anger of the people was turned against traditional institutions. Blind persons marched through the streets holding up placards accusing the SANCB of racism, thrusting me into the anomalous position of a defender of the organisation in harrowing press interviews, while in other forums I was taking the attack to the government as leader of DPSA.

The financial collapse of the Ezenzeleni Workshop, one of the SANCB affiliates, triggered the culminating confrontation. An invasion of our premises by close on 100 blind workers and trade unionists plunged us into three days of unrelenting chaos, as on the one hand our negotiating team sat through round after round of fruitless talks, while on the other hand I held out against the demands of my Executive to call in the police. Never shall I forget the scene in our offices of the workers, with bared torsos, pounding the boardroom table and chanting "Kill the Farmer! Kill the Boer!", and my secretary fleeing in terror.

In the end, the police did intervene, removing the workers to the train station; but they returned and the process repeated itself, with me refusing to lay formal charges. The reward for my part in these proceedings was a scorching reprimand from my bosses for not having taken firmer action.

Almost certainly, this incident would have continued to haunt us down the years had it not been for the foresight of one of our more perceptive Executive Committee members, Philip Bam. It was Philip who proposed that the SANCB, although it had no legal obligation to do so, make financial reparations to the workers. There is, too, a historical footnote

to this unfortunate episode: a very successful self-help project, Ubuntu (humanity), emerged from that situation, with the support of the SANCB, and today that group of workers in its own right has become a fully-fledged affiliate of our organisation.

But effective change cannot depend on haphazard events alone. At some point a systematic process has to take over.

The first step was to draft another constitution for the SANCB to take advantage of the devolution of government under the new South African Constitution and to ensure greater representivity, especially for blind people. The idea of having nine provincial sub-structures was embraced enthusiastically, but the entrenchment of a blind majority in the decision-making bodies of the organisation seemed offensive to some and unnecessary to others. Today, several years on, it seems hard to believe that blind people themselves felt the provision to call into question their ability to lead, but that is how it was at the end of a stormy debate at that watershed 1995 conference, as the motion was taken to the narrowest of votes—76 in favour, 72 against.

However, something that was even more far-reaching was on the way.

At the 33rd Biennial Conference of the SANCB (Durban, October 1997), delegates resolved that the organisation should re-evaluate its services and programmes. We in management saw in this the opportunity to conceptualise a comprehensive transformation programme—the word process would have been more accurate—which was to last longer and cut deeper than anything we could have envisaged. This became known as Project Renewal, and it was carried out in three phases:

- **Phase 1**: Provincial consultations involving representatives of the affiliated organisations, as well as blind persons in the community;
- **Phase 2**: Evaluation of SANCB services and programmes; and
- **Phase 3**: Analysis of some sixty critical issues by Strategic Focus Groups (SFGs). The SFG reports in turn

gave substance to an interim implementation plan, impacting on the internal workings of the organisation, which was superseded at last in June 2001 by a comprehensive Strategic Plan.

But can so much planning actually make a difference in the lives of blind persons?

Of course it can, with sustained effort, with committed people, and with enough resources. I fully acknowledge the importance of specific commitments and definite timelines, but to me, because there will always be limitations, a developmental culture and the general direction are of far greater importance. Long after the plan of the moment has been forgotten, there will remain an organisation belonging to blind people able to make new choices—and even new plans. For now, we can do no more than point to first fruits.

And the first fruits are good, as can be seen from the list below:

- A completely new service model for adult basic education and training (ABET), delivering literacy and independence skills to eight communities in three provinces;
- A community-based orientation and mobility programme in a fourth province;
- An early childhood development programme to co-ordinate work at seventeen service points across the country;
- A fledgling South African Blind Youth Organisation (SABYO);
- A fledgling movement of South African Blind Women In Action (SABWIA);
- The conversion of sheltered workshops from a welfare to a small business model;
- A project to train blind persons as interpreters for a Telephone Interpreting Service for South Africa (TISSA);
- An enterprise to train blind operatives for employment in call centres;

- A new department for Advocacy and Government Relations within the SANCB;
- A specialised Education Desk within the SANCB;
- An Eye Care Information Centre within the SANCB;
- A facility to assemble Perkins Braillers, reducing the unit cost by 40%;
- The manufacture of a South African Braille writing frame, reducing the unit cost to one-tenth of the imported product;
- And, via the Bureau for the Prevention of Blindness—a wing of the SANCB, the Right to Sight Campaign to eliminate the immense cataract surgery backlog in the country.

Other major initiatives will have to await government or other funding:

- An education support service for schools;
- A country-wide employment development service; and
- A "development node" to pilot a community-based rehabilitation (CBR) programme, linked to the existing ABET programme, in our poorest province.

It has to be emphasised that these are modest initiatives supplementing an existing network of services and programmes provided by the SANCB and its affiliates. They are, however, a purposeful response to expressed needs and specifically intended to reach out beyond urban populations. These initiatives are not the making of the SANCB alone but depend on a whole series of new partnerships and special relationships with government, other organisations, and, in some cases, even with commercial companies.

Is there, finally, any test that could be applied at some point in the future to measure the success, or otherwise, of all these efforts?

Indeed there is, and it is one acknowledged as critical in all reconstruction and development work in South Africa. It is the extent to which previously disadvantaged individuals become empowered to take charge of their own lives and

participate in their communities. It seems to me that this must be the thrust of each and every initiative, even at the cost of beloved flagship programmes of the past.

Chapter 9

Building A Movement

At the heart of any social movement has to be the sense that something is not right, for yourself and for others, and that it can be put right. And then people begin to discover each other in a common cause, and as that cause is translated into action it becomes a force of increasing irresistibility.

That's certainly how I see the genesis of the disability rights movement in South and Southern Africa: at the beginning a handful of activists; later a mass movement of many thousands, brought together by accident or design, from the extremes of poverty and violence.

I myself came down the more conventional track of a good education at a school for the blind, professional training as a physiotherapist in London, work in a children's hospital with post-polio youth and infant orthopaedics, and then my career at the SANCB, first in fundraising and public relations, and, after increasing self-involvement in rehabilitation and other programmes, as executive director, from 1976 onwards.

And then the fork in the road ...

In 1981 the United Nations declared an International Year of Disabled Persons, but sanctions-isolated South Africa refused to recognise the event, because of its antipathy towards the UN. When our protestations went unheeded, we decided to celebrate the IYDP with our own national conference. What stands out in memory from that occasion is a presentation by a young occupational therapist, Pam McLaren, on an outreach programme at the Manguzi Hospital in the far northeastern corner of Zululand, on the Mozambican border. Most striking was the plight of over 3,000 people with Mseleni Hip Disease, which had reduced their mobility to painful crawling.

Straight after the presentation, I introduced myself to Pam with a simple question: would she, if I found the funds, include blind people in her outreach work. She immediately said yes, but a few days later, she attached a prior condition: I would have to spend a week on the Makatini Flats to learn about rural conditions, or to be "sensitised", as we might say today.

It was a week of personal awakening. By day, we went to pension pay-points with the community health workers to talk to people about their problems, and visited people in their tiny, thatched reed homes to find out how they lived. To my question "how are you?" the answer was unvarying: "I am hungry."

In the evening, Pam would cook a meal and take out some wine, while we discussed at length the experiences of the day. We debated the possible causes of Mseleni Hip Disease and concluded that it had to be the outcome of harsh living conditions. The sufferers were mainly women, and they were the ones who, every day, over many years, had to trudge to distant wells or rivers to fetch back heavy containers of water for family use, balanced on their heads.

I joined a local family to observe their daily routine, from early morning until late afternoon—the fetching of water, the tending of children, the coming and going of neighbours, the collection of wild plants for relish, the grinding of mealies in a wooden stamper, the winnowing of the grain in a winnowing basket, the collection of wood for the fire, and the making of *phuthu* (porridge) for the evening meal; but I realised that this was no ordinary day for them, when I was given cake, their offering to an honoured guest. These were of course, mainly women, as the men would be migrant labourers.

At the hospital, I examined with my hands the limbs of a woman with leprosy—no fingers, no toes; just blunted stumps.

In translation I listened to her story as a disabled Mozambican refugee. Renamo rebels had attacked their house, killing all the men, and raping the women on top of the dead

bodies. Somehow, she had escaped with her injuries and her life over a landmined border into South Africa.

At Zamazama (in the sense of the isiZulu word "*zama*" meaning '"try"), I met with a group of twelve unemployed blind youths. Their leader was Zacharia, also known as *Isikhindisemali* (the short pants with money in his pockets), because of his uncanny ability to always earn a little cash by singing his songs to the accompaniment of a homemade guitar. He had remarkable mobility skills, being able to walk unaccompanied over long distances in rural terrain, simply by following the natural landmarks. None of these young people had ever met a disabled person who was employed. How could they themselves find work?

My visit to Manguzi was the beginning of an unspoken partnership with Pam that lasted many years, I, the theoretician, she, the practitioner. What emerged was an initiative to implement CBR in South Africa according to the precepts of the World Health Organization. At the community level were the rehab workers, several of whom were co-ordinated by a health professional at the district level. Also at the district level was a referral hospital to deal with surgery and difficult cases.

The key was the rehab worker who had to train family and community members in what to do when someone couldn't see, couldn't hear, couldn't speak, couldn't walk, or showed "strange behaviour", to use the WHO terminology of the time.

What we soon learned, though, was that each situation had to be approached with utmost flexibility and that the rural initiative had to include solutions of income generation. Over time there developed a network of some 200 individuals and projects engaged in rural activities ranging from rehabilitation work in the community to self-help enterprises—one of them at Zamazama. That which had begun as the Rural Disability Action Group ended up in 1986 as the organisation RURACT.

While the objectives of RURACT were personal independence and income generation, through training

and self-help, there was another outcome that, looking back, I think was even more important: the mobilisation of disabled people in rural areas. It meant that the groundswell of activism across the country, spearheaded by DPSA and its urban leadership, could link up with parallel processes in the remoter parts of South Africa. However, it also meant conflict between disability leaders and the professionals, attacks and recriminations, which left many therapists and social workers angry and disillusioned. Some fled the scene, but there were others who well understood their enabling role and the absolute necessity of self-representation.

It would be a mistake to regard this attack on professionals—and by extension on service providers—as just a minor aspect of the political struggle that was unfolding on every side. Disabled people felt that the very system that was supposed to alleviate their circumstances and provide them with a means of livelihood was in reality a barrier to their progress. That, then, was where change had to begin.

But the majority of disabled people were also black, and therefore experienced the effects of poverty and racial discrimination first-hand in their own lives every day, a situation made worse if you were a woman and doubly worse if you were disabled. And so the rising militancy all around, from the fight against apartheid, spilled over into the disability rights movement and gave it its liberation aspect.

This was also true of other countries in the region. In Zimbabwe, a war of liberation had ended with independence in March 1980, and many of the disabled people there were war veterans, while everybody had inherited the attitudes and vocabulary of the political struggle. There existed a natural affinity between the disability leaders of Zimbabwe and South Africa and a special relationship developed, a kind of two-country axis to drive the struggle of disabled people across the subcontinent.

At the founding of the Southern Africa Federation of the Disabled (SAFOD) in Durban in 1986, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Zambia, Namibia, Lesotho and Botswana were represented.

The SAFOD headquarters were established in Bulawayo, and it was there that I attended my first cross-border congress. Alexander Phiri, who would later become our secretary general, opened the congress with a rallying cry: "Comrades in the struggle for social justice!"

There followed a revolutionary address such as I had never heard before. And then, when President Robert Mugabe failed to show up, it was my turn, as his somewhat bewildered substitute. My greetings from the movement in South Africa were well received, as was my message of solidarity.

Our strategy in SAFOD was to activate and support disability movements in all ten countries of the region and our handbook was the World Programme of Action Concerning Disabled Persons. This UN instrument, adopted in 1982, proposes practical measures to be implemented by governments in the fields of rehabilitation, prevention, and the equalisation of opportunities. Rehabilitation and prevention, we argued, were indeed the business of government, and sometimes NGOs, but the equalisation of opportunities was our domain, our agenda to be negotiated with policy-makers in government.

Funds were found to promote the World Programme of Action and the mechanism used was two-country seminars, to allow for the sharing of experience and the interaction of membership. We had rules about the participation of women and to ensure the regular inclusion of new delegates, and events were always attended by one or more of the SAFOD leaders—Joshua Malinga (our mover and shaker), Alexander Phiri, A. K. Dube, myself, and others. Also, there were the biennial SAFOD congresses that rotated around the region and the founding rallies of the stronger movements, sometimes attended by cabinet ministers and, in one instance, by President Sam Nujoma of Namibia himself.

The movement seemed to take a firmer hold more quickly in those countries familiar with liberation-style politics, such as Zimbabwe and Mozambique, whereas it proved extremely difficult to go beyond first individuals in countries with

traditional or dictatorial regimes, for example, Swaziland and Malawi. Lesotho was an exception, perhaps because of its close connection with South Africa, but also because of the strength of the founding group, ably led by blind lawyer Moses Masemene, who became Minister of Justice. Angola remained a hopeless case because of the American Civil War being waged there, a civil war that ended only in 2002.

Running programmes from a regional level was often problematic, although two initiatives did, in my opinion, show returns—grass roots development and, particularly, the women's programme. Here I give credit to A. K. IDube, our programme director and a formidable fundraiser, and to women leaders such as Susan Chitembe, who became the minister of the Department of Disability and the Elderly in the Ministry of Gender, Community Development and Social Welfare. in Malawi, and Maria Rantho, disability activist and first disabled Member of Parliament in South Africa.

Disabled women, on the widest possible front in Africa, felt themselves to be unwanted and abused and marginalised. Therefore SAFOD women's seminars were about strengthening self-image, taking charge of your own life, and demanding representation. Men were excluded, unless invited in, and when this happened, it often turned out to be a harrowing experience. Men were also commanded to keep their distance, and it became regular practice to read out a sexual harassment warning at the commencement of SAFOD gatherings.

While self-help projects were few and far between outside of South Africa and Zimbabwe, we did produce very useful training materials for the setting-up of these worker co-ops. Emphasis was laid on a fairly lengthy process of preparation, to allow the group to bond and natural leadership to emerge, and of course on careful planning and selection of products for manufacture. Record-keeping and the basic principles of management were also taught, with much stress, in the latter case, on consultation and democracy within the group. Leadership skills were taught in their own right.

As Chairperson of SAFOD, I carried out country tours from time to time to learn about local conditions and make contact with the membership. It meant visiting projects and consulting with groups, but often individuals would turn up unexpectedly at the hotel or be waiting at the arrival point, and they, too, would expect to discuss their problems. The itinerary included media interviews, and always one or more meetings with senior government representatives to explain the role of the national movement and to hand over copies of the World Programme of Action.

One of the most memorable of these tours was through Mozambique, in the company of George Tinga, a university lecturer and a man of great dignity, dignity that was sorely tested the day of our interview with Dr Leonardo Simão, the Mozambican Minister of Health.

Arriving on time for our afternoon appointment, the delegation was dismayed to find the elevators out of operation because of a power cut. "What do we do now?" I wondered. "Let's go," said George, slipping out of his wheelchair onto the floor and launching himself on a six-storey slide on his buttocks up the stairs, in his best suit.

None of us will ever forget Dr Simão's first words to us at that very successful meeting: "I am your enemy. Convert me!"

"Mr Minister," I said, "the fact that you say that means you understand our problem."

South of the capital, Maputo, was a camp accommodating around 2,000 disabled war refugees, living in tents on the bare ground. In one of these tents I met with nine blind people to learn about the Mozambican movement's first project, the equitable distribution of food in the camp so that the blind people could get enough to eat. Paolo, the only one able to speak English, slept on a bed frame without a mattress, all his worldly belongings in a cardboard box underneath. "How long have you been here?" I asked. "Nine years," he said. I was appalled, and astonished to find that he still had a plan for his life.

Outside the northern coastal city of Beira, we visited a self-help project where they manufactured coffins. It was a very hot day and on the drive back, George and I fell asleep in the car. We were awakened by a thunderclap of sound off to our left. "Renamo rebels," was my instant thought. "The shot of an AK47 rifle?"

A blow-out of a worn tyre on our vehicle, was the explanation.

In Beira, we were put up at a government guest house, by official invitation. A beautiful old colonial mansion all to ourselves, and two cooks. We ate well and, on the insistence of our hosts, I entertained a sizeable group of the local comrades to dinner. It was a sumptuous meal, with South African wine, and even a little brandy appeared on the table.

Our shock came the next day when we were handed the unanticipated bill. We said that we had no money to pay and set off for the airport, with the cooks in pursuit. We were still arguing as we passed through the barrier to board our flight.

At some point, SAFOD acquired a genuine London taxi as a means of transport, and it was in this antique vehicle that Alexander Phiri and I rattled across Zambia, with a group from the local movement. Arriving late one evening in Ndola in such an unlikely conveyance, made us very conspicuous, which possibly triggered the incident that followed.

We were given shared rooms in a derelict training centre, and it was there, sometime after midnight, that we heard heavy boots coming down the corridor and a loud knock at our door. "Where is the white man?" a voice called out.

It was Alexander's presence of mind and adroit handling of the situation that averted serious trouble. Our visitors claimed they were security guards but were unable to repeat their identity numbers after passing their cards underneath the door. Alexander then resorted to teasing and banter until they went away.

Another incident in Ndola makes for a more poignant memory. It was our meeting with an old man, Mr Chimanya,

who had travelled to see us from the remote Luapula Valley in the northern part of Zambia, his sole purpose being to extract from us a promise to visit his people and talk to them about possible livelihoods, which he thought might be fishing in Lake Bangweulu or weaving with local grasses. When we had not yet arrived in the town, he put up in a bus shelter for three nights until we came.

So, these were some of our adventures, but the point of it all was to spread the message that by organising ourselves, we could change things around us and the attitude of governments. This we have continued to do everywhere in the countries of South and Southern Africa for twenty years and more, and yet the process is far from ended.

Chapter 10

History of the World Blind Union

Changing What it Means to be Blind

The founding of the World Blind Union (WBU) in 1984 was an act of courage and imagination. The merger of the International Federation of the Blind, with its inherent activism, and the World Council for the Welfare of the Blind, based on a tradition of service provision, meant that thenceforth, blind and partially sighted people worldwide would speak with one united voice and demonstrate a unity of purpose.

As one who has attended all of the WBU general assemblies and followed the periodic reporting of the organisation over many years, I have been privileged to witness the phenomenal growth of the WBU and the unique contribution of each of our Presidents—the flamboyance and globe-trotting of Sheikh Abdullah Al-Ganim, the wisdom and experience of Duncan Watson, the workmanlike approach of David Blyth, the generosity of spirit of Euclid Herie, and Kicki Nordström, the people's president. This is not to forget our long-time and greatly talented Secretary General, Pedro Zurita. And to this list many others could certainly be added.

To mark the Silver Jubilee of the WBU in 2009—which coincided with the 200th anniversary of the birth of Louis Braille, our greatest benefactor—the WBU published a history of their first 25 years. Sir John Wall edited *Changing What it Means to be Blind: Reflections on the First 25 Years of the World Blind Union*.[1] Reading the memoirs of our leaders has therefore

1 *Changing What it Means to be Blind: Reflections on the First 25 Years of the World Blind Union*; edited by John Wall. (London: Royal National Institute for the Blind, 2008),136 pages, illustrations.

been a trip down memory lane, but equally a gratifying confirmation of what has been achieved through the hard work and determination of the collective that is the WBU.

For me, being able to lead the WBU at a time of internal renewal and during the international negotiations that have produced the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) was immensely exciting and deeply rewarding. We have, I believe, laid a firm foundation on which others will build, as the WBU continues to go from strength to strength.

Where to begin with my part in the WBU history ...

Sofia 1986—and a meeting of the Committee on Rehabilitation, Training and Employment. It is three weeks after the Chernobyl nuclear disaster and the resultant spread of radiation, and my interpreter is orientating me in my hotel room.

"Is it okay to drink the water?" I ask.

"Yes," she assures me.

We leave the room and now she draws me close and speaks very softly: "Do not ask questions in the room, they might be listening. And do not drink the water. I will bring you bottled water every day."

Later, in the Alexander Nevski Cathedral, we each light a candle and make a wish, Roumiana that her country be freed from communism, and I that South Africa be freed from apartheid.

It was that Committee that appointed Jean-Paul Herbecq of Belgium, Horst Stolper of Germany, and me—"the three blind doctors"—to write a position paper on employment. It was my first substantive piece of work for the WBU.

Cairo 1992—and David Blyth asks me to chair the first WBU Human Rights Committee. It would have been hard to find a task more rewarding. Persuading the Thai Government to change legislation barring blind students from entering university was our first challenge.

It was also in Cairo, on the fifth floor of my hotel, that I felt with my white cane for the elevator door and found just empty space. For me, all could have ended right there; but it didn't.

Pretoria 2003—and a BBC report that 60 blind people were trapped behind Liberian rebel lines, abandoned by their caregivers. It took many days, working with Beyan Kota of the Christian Association of the Blind, to obtain the official help of the European Commission and of the First Lady of Liberia, and to bring the group to safety. But it was accomplished.

At the UN in Vienna—with Duncan Watson—lobbying for the ban on blinding laser weapons. That was surely one of the WBU's finest achievements. And negotiating the text of the Standard Rules and, with Special Rapporteur Heather Butow, casually inserting the phrase "persons with disabilities" to replace "disabled persons" and all other formulations, the phrase which was to become the preferred terminology universally and in perpetuity.

And so I could continue for all my allotted pages, but that would not do justice to the work and wisdom of the team of people who have laboured with me to take the WBU to a higher level of excellence during our term of office.

Running For President

To run for President in the WBU is to run for political office. One has to wage a campaign and one has to issue a manifesto. While it is an exhilarating experience, it is at times extremely harrowing. One also learns lessons about loyalty and betrayal.

My strategy was to present a slate of strong candidates, at least for the top positions; and so it was who I invited Kua Cheng Hock of Singapore to be my running partner as First Vice President and approached the National Organization of the Spanish Blind—*La Organización Nacional de Ciegos Españoles* (ONCE)—to nominate Enrique Pérez for Secretary General.

But then a seeming setback, with Cheng Hock asserting that I lacked grassroots support and expressing his intention to run against me. An even bigger challenge, though, was the wish of the incumbent President, Kicki Nordström, to run for a second term, something that would require a constitutional amendment.

Assured of ONCE backing, I was confident of major support from Latin America. From my home continent of Africa I was receiving mixed messages, with the exception of Dr Diarra Siaka from Burkina Faso, who promised to deliver the votes of 22 Francophone countries. In Asia and Europe the situation was equally uncertain, but with a number of countries of substantial voting strength pledging their allegiance, including India, France and the UK.

To me, the outcome seemed too close to call, with the North American vote potentially able to tip the balance in my favour. And so it was that my friend and adviser, Philip Bam, and I presented ourselves to Dr Marc Maurer, President of the National Federation of the Blind (NFB), one late Friday afternoon, in his office in Baltimore.

We were cordially received, but as the evening wore on and the whisky flowed, talk became more frank, with Mary Ellen Jernigan articulating the disillusionment felt with the WBU. The organisation had failed to inspire a worldwide movement of blind people, and with dismay I realised that a breakaway could not be ruled out.

I responded by saying that I shared some of the criticism, but that with NFB support change was possible. I would work ceaselessly to make the WBU an organisation that instilled pride in blind people and which had something to offer to blind people everywhere. These, too, were sentiments later taken up in my election manifesto.

We parted on an uncertain note but met again the next morning for breakfast. The NFB owed Cheng Hock a certain loyalty, but a telephonic consultation between Dr Maurer and Cheng Hock followed, after which the much-hoped-for promise of support was unequivocally given.

My manifesto, or Future Vision paper, was issued simultaneously in English, French, and Spanish, and I quote here from the first page only to show its drift.

I am honoured to be nominated by South Africa to serve as President of the World Blind Union. My knowledge and experience and full-time commitment are hereby pledged to the WBU.

Philosophy:

The WBU must embody a powerful philosophy of blindness and demonstrate a clear understanding of its role as an organisation. This means:

- Taking pride in what it means to be blind;
- Being the sole voice speaking on behalf of the 180 million blind people in the world;
- Activating blind people worldwide in a rights movement;
- Offering something to blind people everywhere, whether in developing or industrialised countries; and
- Recognising organisations of blind people as the essential building blocks of the WBU, nationally, regionally, and internationally.

And so to Cape Town and the turbulent Sixth General Assembly in December 2004. Accreditation became a contentious process, but was ably resolved by Judge Ishmael Hussain, who had been deployed to the Assembly by the Independent Electoral Commission of South Africa. Excitement ran high and tempers flared as the constitutional amendment to allow a second presidential term was debated. However, the outcome was decisive, with 147 votes in favour and 162 against. A two-thirds majority would have been required to carry the amendment. And so it happened that I was unanimously elected President of the WBU and, to her credit, Kicki was the first to congratulate me.

This was followed by what will be, for many, their abiding memory from Cape Town, the address to the Assembly

by President Thabo Mbeki. In my opinion, it must be rated as one of the finest speeches of his presidency, and the South Africans present rose to the occasion magnificently with singing and dancing and repeated cries of "*Viva!*" Somehow it was for me an affirmation of my African presidency.

After Twenty Years a Strategic Plan

As presidential candidate, one of my undertakings was to develop a strategic plan for the WBU. While previous presidents over the past twenty years had all followed a work programme of sorts, it seemed to me that the implementation of a strategic plan against definite timelines would impose discipline and yield measurable results. It could also be a tool for renewal within the organisation and provide a road map into the future for the WBU.

Barely two months after the General Assembly, therefore, the WBU Officers gathered in Madrid to devise a strategic plan with the facilitation of Marilyn and Chris Doyle, business consultants of international stature, funded most generously by Sightsavers International. In addition to the twelve officers, I invited four individuals of outstanding ability and commitment to act as resource persons to my presidency, these being Christopher Friend (United Kingdom), Geoff Gibbs (New Zealand), John Heilbrunn (Denmark) and Marc Maurer (United States).

The essence of the strategic plan can, I think, be best communicated simply by quoting our eight strategic objectives:

- Establishing a permanent office;
- Capacity building and organisational development;
- Advancing governance and democracy within the WBU;
- Generating and managing financial resources;
- Developing and implementing internal and external communications;
- Developing and implementing advocacy and lobbying strategies;

- Achieving a world accessible to blind people; and
- Planning the Seventh General Assembly.

The task of monitoring the strategic plan was assigned to Maryanne Diamond (Australia), our First Vice President, a task she performed with diligence and critical insight. I was truly fortunate to have someone of the calibre of Maryanne to help translate document into action.

A Permanent Office at Last

By resolution of the 2004 General Assembly, and as one of the priorities of the strategic plan, a permanent office had to be established as headquarters to the WBU. The obvious first step was to choose the location, following a process seen to be transparent and fair. Maryanne Diamond was appointed to manage the project, with Geoff Gibbs as researcher.

Bids received from the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB), Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB), and African Union of the Blind (AFUB) put the cities of Toronto, London, and Nairobi in the running. Maryanne and Geoff visited all three venues and scored each bid on a three-point scale against some twenty criteria encompassing accessibility, cost, quality of life in the given city, and attitudes to gender and disability. Toronto came out ahead, and in June 2006, via a historic telephone conference, the Officers duly authorised the signing of a Memorandum of Agreement with the CNIB, in accordance with an Executive resolution adopted in Baltimore earlier in the year. The Canadian offer made generous provision for infrastructure and office space free of charge.

It is one thing to witness a technical process of assessment carried through to its logical conclusion and quite another to have to choose amongst admired friends in the appointment of a CEO; but this was the situation confronting Marc Maurer, Maryanne Diamond and me, on 21 August 2006 in Toronto, when we interviewed the three shortlisted candidates. Phyllis Gordon, a former Human

Rights Commissioner in Canada, was added to the panel as an independent assessor. Each of the candidates made a presentation and was then interviewed according to a set pattern. Each displayed necessary knowledge and personal passion, and one might even say affection for the WBU. For me it was an agonising choice, but the die had to be cast, and it was in favour of Dr Penny Hartin from Canada. Penny had a proven track record in management, fundraising, and development and was judged by the panel to be most immediately ready to transform the WBU administration.

Governance and Resourcing

While the WBU has a demonstrable record of good governance, its policies have been developed piecemeal as the need has arisen. During our term of office a committee chaired by Dr Susan Spungin of the United States systematised and supplemented existing materials to produce a comprehensive procedures manual. A further initiative commenced during Kicki's presidency was the writing of a series of position papers, in which the WBU expresses itself on any number of issues such as poverty, rehabilitation, employment, inclusive education, voting methods, and many more. As a result of these painstaking efforts, the internal workings of the WBU were strengthened and its position on a range of matters of importance to blind and partially sighted people publicly stated.

However, to operate the WBU needed not only rules, but money as well. For this, the WBU had always depended on its membership dues, from which basic admin expenses, travel for meetings, and a four-yearly contribution to the General Assembly were barely afforded. A Developmental Business Plan, drawn up by Maryanne and Geoff, envisaged the appointment of a Resource Development Officer, but in the meantime the costs of a new office had to be defrayed. It was for this purpose that I proposed a sponsorships programme.

I was of the view that the core funding of the WBU must come from its members, with major agencies in the

industrialised countries volunteering additional funds according to an agreed formula. The first to think along these lines was Dr Marc Maurer of the NFB, who some years before, proposed the establishment of a "Challenge Fund" whereby a major pledge from the North America / Caribbean Region had to be matched by other regions.

Under my scheme, major agencies were approached to sponsor the WBU at suggested levels, designated Platinum, Gold, Silver, and Loyalty and to be recognised by appropriate gestures from the side of the WBU. I particularly wish to recognise here the four Platinum Sponsors who, with their annual grants of $25,000, set the tone for the programme, these being the NFB, ONCE, the RNIB, and Vision Australia. The CNIB was also rated a Platinum Sponsor because of a monetary grant plus a donation in kind of our office infrastructure. Today, the number of Platinum Sponsors has grown to seven: the CNIB, NFB, Vanda Pharmaceuticals, ONCE, CBM, Vision Australia and Sightsavers. The WBU itself contributes to the programme from internal resources. At that time, around $200,000 per annum was forthcoming from some twenty sponsors. Special acknowledgement must also be given to Vision Australia and the Royal New Zealand Foundation of the Blind for providing the seed money for the research and travel that was required to prepare the way for the permanent office.

Our Low Vision Constituency

Although persons with low-vision outnumber blind persons by well over three to one, according to WHO statistics, they have been underrepresented in the ranks of the WBU. As a consequence, the issues of low-vision have received scant attention. The problem that this posed was forcibly brought home to me during the Vision 2005 conference in London, when I learned that there was talk of establishing a separate world body. That this would destroy our unity and weaken the voice of the WBU, I had no doubt.

At the 2000 General Assembly in Melbourne a resolution was adopted urging the WBU to cooperate more closely with

the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness (IAPB) and the Vision 2020 initiative. While Christopher Friend of Sightsavers International is himself totally blind, he was the one to insist that the resolution not be allowed to gather dust. He was requested by the Executive to formulate a low-vision policy and later invited by President Kicki Nordström to chair a Low-Vision Working Group. He therefore seemed a natural choice to continue in this position during my presidency.

Chris set about his task with verve and enthusiasm, bringing to bear both the knowledge of professionals and the ideas of partially sighted people. He insisted that the entire WBU Executive attend a low-vision training workshop and signalled that in due course he would be replaced as chair by someone with low-vision. The unanimous choice fell on Jill Wagner of South Africa. It also happens that Penny Hartin, our CEO, is partially sighted.

The Working Group delivered some practical results as well. Examples were its recommendations on print font and size for common use and its guidelines for PowerPoint presentations.

While I believe the strength of the WBU to lie in its commonality, I nevertheless think it important that it be representative of people in their diverse situations. This is why I consider the advancement of the cause of low vision to be a major achievement of my presidency.

Partnerships That Make Us Strong

Another objective of my presidency was to strengthen partnerships, thereby to bring greater cohesion to our development work and lay the ground for joint initiatives.

Our Development Committee was for a long time the key to organisational development in Africa and Asia, with the work supported by our Nordic partners dominating Committee proceedings to the exclusion of other programmes. My feeling therefore was that other players ought to be brought into the fold. Although to me this seemed quite logical, my

proposal met with initial resistance, not to say suspicion, as the Committee struggled to find new direction. However, Sightsavers, CBM, ONCE, and the WBU's Institutional Development Programme had all been added to the Committee membership, with the Norwegian and Danish associations still playing a highly valued role. My ultimate hope is that our development work will converge with that of our partners to the greater benefit of blind people.

Bilateral relations were also of importance. In furtherance of these relationships, our Secretary General, Enrique Pérez, negotiated a new memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the International Blind Sports Association, which changed its name in 2002-2003 to the International Blind Sports Federation (IBSA). A co-operation agreement with the International Guide Dog Federation was anticipated. In the case of the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness (IAPB), the WBU was granted a seat on its Board of Trustees, ex officio. But it was the MOU signed with the International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment (ICEVI) that stood out in terms of its immense potential.

Realising that, after three decades of advocacy, fewer than 10% of blind children were as yet at school in the majority of developing countries, the ICEVI, in partnership with the WBU and a range of other agencies, devised a scheme to achieve Education For All Visually Impaired Children—the EFA-VI Programme—in targeted countries. An individual agreement was negotiated with each participating government and a coordinating national body put in place to monitor levels of enrolment, drop-out rates, access to support services and learning materials, and the school performance of blind children, as compared to other learners. That comprised the "supply-side" to inclusive education, so to speak. It was up to the WBU to balance this with a "demand-side" response from organisations of blind people, parents, and communities.

The Global Task Force selected five focus countries for the introduction of the programme during the academic year

2007-08, these being Vietnam, Paraguay, the Dominican Republic, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. In Vietnam we find an example of the spirit of collaboration that we hoped to achieve globally. From the outset the Vietnam Blind Association (VBA) has been involved in the planning of the programme along with the Ministry of Education and Training and local and international NGOs. Its branches are helping to identify children not yet at school and to persuade parents and local authorities to have them enrolled. The VBA also helps young blind children to acquire basic skills in the reading and writing of Braille and is assisting in the production of the necessary Braille learning materials.

The United Nations Convention

On 13 December 2006 the UN General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). It had taken five years to negotiate the 50 articles of the first human rights treaty of the 21st century and often the formulations of text had been controversial. Kicki Nordström had acted as our main spokesperson, while I exerted influence by networking with delegations and liaising with UN officials and Special Rapporteur Sheikha Hissa Al-Thani from Qatar.

Every document of this kind is the product of compromises, but for the WBU articles of particular concern, such as those on accessibility, information, rehabilitation, and education, came out well. The provision on intellectual property was placed in the context of culture, whereas the WBU had argued for it to be included under access to information, while the article on employment could have been more strongly stated.

From the very outset it was clearly understood that the CRPD would be based on other UN conventions and that no new rights would be permitted. The Convention does, however, restate and redefine these rights in relation to the requirements of people with disabilities.

Ambassador Don MacKay of New Zealand, who in the final stages chaired the Ad Hoc Committee that did the drafting, described the Convention as the first human rights treaty of civil society, and certainly the eight organisations of the International Disability Alliance (IDA) and the seventy members of the broader-based International Disability Caucus (IDC) were triumphant in their celebrations.

Once ratified by twenty countries, the Convention attained the force of international law and became binding on committed governments. A treaty body would monitor the implementation of the Convention by governments, while an Optional Protocol would allow individuals to submit communications separate from those of their governments for the consideration of the treaty body. These could take the form of shadow reports or complaints.

The Convention will be a primary focus of WBU activities in the years ahead and hopefully the "progressive realisation" of the Convention would assist us in our mission of *changing what it means to be blind.*

The Best Part

The best part of being WBU President is making country visits and attending events that gather national membership. In Japan I felt complimented by the capacity audience from diverse backgrounds assembled to hear my public lecture, not to mention the overwhelming hospitality of my hosts. I have high expectations of emergent Japanese technology, even though the GPS prediction of the time it would take to drive to Narita airport was out by one and a half hours. Probably it is an impossible calculation and, come to think of it, GPS technology is not Japanese anyway.

In India I was deeply moved by the dedication of blind people working full-time for their organisation without remuneration and by the enthusiasm of teachers in the sparsest of village settings. When I appeared on radio, I was astonished to learn that my interview would be broadcast

via 109 radio stations and listened to by tens of thousands of blind people.

In Russia I again felt complimented to be awarded the Medal of Merit of the All Russia Association of the Blind. Under the charismatic leadership of Alexander Neumyvakin, the Association was addressing employment needs by creating its own industries. At an after-party on the day of the 80th birthday celebration of the Association, each guest was expected to propose a toast and each time one had to down a shot of vodka. I was dismayed to learn that my name appeared 18th on the list. Luckily, we were blind people together and I could sit out more rounds than I admitted to at the time.

It is my wish that everyone elected to leadership in the WBU will attend a convention of the National Federation of the Blind in the United States at least once. I have done so twice, and it was a life-changing experience to witness the fierce independence of delegates, listen to the emotive speeches, and be given an object lesson in activism. Anyone discriminating against any blind person anywhere in the US would do well to heed an NFB protest, unless prepared to end up in court. One major issue being brought to public attention was the threat to blind pedestrians of "silent cars". It was a campaign I wholeheartedly endorsed and continue to endorse, as a blind road runner once the victim of such a vehicle. It is the spirit of federationism that makes of the NFB an irresistible force, which the WBU itself must become.

Another compliment was paid to me by the ONCE leadership in the form of an invitation to attend the National Congress of Unidad Progresista, the dominant party within ONCE, which is organised entirely along political lines. The fiery rhetoric and exuberant pride in success will be for me enduring memories. The ONCE model of job creation, based on their own national lottery and commercial enterprises, largely resolved the problem of unemployment for the blind and disabled people of Spain and is almost universally admired. In my opinion, there are lessons to be learned here and

approaches that can be replicated elsewhere, including in my own country of South Africa.

Human Rights Interventions

WBU action does from time to time affect the lives of individual people, as with our human rights interventions. Such was the case in July 2007 when, for reasons of cost, the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) in the UK refused to allow the National Health Service to prescribe *Macugen* or freely use *Lucentis*, the treatments of choice for wet age-related macular degeneration. For some, this would have meant unavoidable blindness. The RNIB mounted a protest and the WBU lodged its own letter of complaint. The most effective campaigns are those where objections are raised from multiple sources, as happened here—and the ruling was reversed. *Macugen* was subsequently discontinued in favour of a new FDA-approved drug, *Vabysmo*.

A second example comes from Sudan. As is well known, some two million people were displaced and another 200,000 killed during the Sudanese uprising of 2008-2009. In such circumstances disabled people are particularly vulnerable, often being abandoned and being the last to be given relief. Realising this, the WBU and AFUB jointly registered their concerns with John Holmes, the UN Under-Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs. In his reply, John Holmes enumerated a series of measures being implemented by various agencies to address the situation of people with disabilities.

We were reassured but will remain vigilant given the ongoing conflicts in Sudan and elsewhere in the world today.

It was my privilege to write the last of nine chapters chronicling our history in *Changing What it Means to be Blind*. It is a proud record, laying the foundation for even greater things to come.

May the silver years be followed by a golden time in which a well-resourced WBU will be an irresistible force for

progress and change and when being blind in the world means being whatever you choose to be.

PART 3

The Cathedral of Seafood[2]

By William Rowland

"We meet at last," I say.

Mary Ann takes my extended hand in both of hers and holds it warmly for a moment. "Welcome," she says. "I'm going to feed you of course?"

After an exchange of e-mails from South Africa, I am actually here to interview Mary Ann, but her invitation to dine is irresistible. This is, after all, Ye Olde Union Oyster House, America's oldest restaurant and one of its most famous.

Figure 9: Ye Olde Union Oyster House, Boston, MA

We are standing next to the semi-circular oyster bar where I can hear the tap-tap-tap of oysters being shucked, a twist of

2 William Rowland, "The Cathedral of Seafood: Ye Olde Oyster House" *Sawubona* in-flight magazine of SAA (January 2013): 50-54.

the inserted knife to part the shell. We move across the room and Mary Ann pauses at the lobster tank. She cannot have been interviewed by very many blind journalists, but she has a natural sense of my needs and curiosity. She dips her hand into the tank and holds out a lobster, water running off its back. I touch the cylindrical body and spiny claws, taking care not to be pinched, then she plops it back.

Upstairs in the restaurant we find ourselves a quiet corner and I order a bowl of clam chowder – which is milk-based in New England—and a glass of Californian Chardonnay. How did all of this start for her? I want to know.

The young Mary Ann Milano—yes, she is of Italian extraction—had planned a career in theatre, but she was actually leading a tour group on a Kenyan safari when she received a message from her father Joseph. He was buying a restaurant in Boston and would she like to become his partner? That was 1970 and 42 years later she is still on site every day, overseeing her dedicated staff, many of whom have been with her for two and even three decades.

Ye Olde Union Oyster House was founded in 1826 and has only ever had four owners. It is housed in Boston's oldest brick building, erected in 1616, which is a National Historic Landmark. It is situated on Union Street, one of Boston's main thoroughfares, and across the way from the luminous glass towers of the New England Holocaust Memorial.

Ye Olde Union Oyster House is also on the Freedom Trail, sixteen historical sites associated with the American War of Independence. Against the wall next to our table are bas relief depictions of some of the landmarks. I wander over and touch the angular outlines of the Paul Revere House, he the horseman of the midnight ride to warn his compatriots of the British advance. The works are by local artist Thomas Lynch. "I like to support the arts," Mary Ann says. "There's so much unemployment right now."

Does she have a philosophy of cooking? I ask.

"Good old-fashioned New England dishes," she says. "Simple food. Fresh from the sea."

Simple maybe, but the menu amazes with its variety of choice. It boasts more than two dozen entrées, including six lobster dishes. Oysters are served stewed, roasted, fried, or raw on the half-shell. Boston baked beans are a house speciality and every meal is served with hot corn bread on the side. The desserts include New England classics such as Indian Pudding (made from fine corn flour), Apple Cobbler, and Boston Cream Pie.

The Ye Olde Union Oyster House seats more than 500 people in eight dining areas, with a catering staff of 35 producing over 1,500 meals a day. This adds up to mind-boggling quantities of seafood—750,000 oysters each year and 60,000 pounds of lobster.

Our meal at an end, Mary Ann takes me on a tour of the premises. Pre-dating the restaurant, the building was associated with early trade in the city and pre-revolutionary activities leading up to the American War of Independence. In 1797 the upper floor was occupied by the exiled Duc de Chartres who fled France after the guillotining of his father. Here he met with leading American politicians such as George Washington and taught French to the young ladies of Boston and, it is said, dancing too. Later he would return to France as the "Citizen King" Louis Philippe I.

Descending the stairs, my sighted companion notices a lobster on display against the wall. It is the largest lobster ever served at the Ye Olde Union Oyster House, at 46 pounds a tabletop-size monster.

Downstairs I seat myself for a few minutes in booth 18, the favourite dining spot of John F. Kennedy. His brother Edward wrote the foreword to the Ye Olde Union Oyster House Cookbook. More recent celebrity diners include Meryl Streep and Tiger Woods. The legendary politician and orator Daniel Webster was an early patron. He visited the Ye Olde Union Oyster House almost daily where he would polish off six or

more plates of oysters at a single sitting, washed down with copious tumblers of brandy and water.

Animatedly Mary Ann recalls the evening a motorcade drew up outside and, next moment, Luciano Pavarotti stepped through the door. Seated at the next table that evening and celebrating his birthday happened to be a native from Pavarotti's birth village Modena. The famous singer's spontaneous rendering of *Happy Birthday* was greeted by thunderous applause from the surprised diners.

A historical curiosity is that the wooden toothpick was first introduced to the public at the Ye Olde Union Oyster House in the late 1880s in response to "consumer demand". Unable to convince restaurant owners that toothpicks would catch on, inventor Charles Forster paid for a group of hard-up Harvard students to dine there and then demand toothpicks. When told there were none, they complained loudly and threatened never to return. Toothpicks have been available ever since.

Two days after my interview with Mary Ann Milano I return to the Ye Olde Union Oyster House for dinner. Munching our hot corn bread, we pore over the menu, finding it almost impossible to choose one dish above another. I settle for the Union Special Lobster, baked with New England seafood stuffing, and topped with claws Lazy Man's style. My companion decides on Ye Olde Seafood Platter—deep-fried shrimp, clams, scallops, calamari, oysters, and fillet of fish topped with onion rings.

I linger over my meal, soaking in the atmosphere and mulling over everything Mary Ann had told me. A column of yesteryear from the *New York Times* springs to mind describing the Ye Olde Union Oyster House as "the cathedral of seafood," the soapstone oyster bar its altar and the oyster shuckers the high priests. Deeply satisfied, I take another long sip from my communion wine.

Newport: Memories of the Gilded Age[3]

By William Rowland

Beauty … artistry … wealth … power … monumental scale … open spaces … whimsical places … These are the words that best describe the elegant opulence of the Newport mansions from the Gilded Age at the turn of the 19th century.

Rolling along Bellevue Avenue, the bus driver lets flow a litany of family names, house names, and industries, to left and right, of present-day inhabitants. This mile-long strip of coastal road, I realise, is still today home and playground to many of America's super rich.

Since colonial times Newport, Rhode Island, has experienced wild swings of fortune. After the American Revolution it languished into the 1820s when it was rediscovered as a summer retreat by southern plantation owners, China traders, artists, and writers.

But it was two sisters-in-law, society hostesses Alva and Alice Vanderbilt, who set the pace for Newport's transformation from a quiet summer colony of wooden houses to a legendary resort of opulent stone palaces. The first of these was Marble House, built between 1888 and 1892 for William K. Vanderbilt and his wife Alva. It was designed as a summer house, or "cottage", as Newporters called them in remembrance of the modest houses of earlier times. A Louis XIV-style villa, it was commissioned from New York architect Richard Morris Hunt, furnished by Parisian cabinet-makers, and contained 500,000 cubic feet of marble. The house cost $11 million, of which $7 million was spent on the marble.

3 William Rowland, "Travellers' Tales: Memories of the Gilded Age" *Sunday Times: Lifestyle Magazine* (27 July 2014) [online resource] https://www.timeslive.co.za/sunday-times/lifestyle/2014-07-27-travellers-tales-memories-of-the-gilded-age/ (accessed 3 July 2023).

Before I visit Marble House, I call at the offices of the Preservation Society of Newport County where I am given a press kit, a DVD, and, most useful of all, Braille guide books to the Newport mansions. In the reception area at Marble House, I add to these materials an electronic unit providing audio description.

And so my two-hour self-guided tour proceeds, enhanced by the observations of my sighted companion, and examination by touch where possible. In this way—as I pass through the Gold Room, Gothic Room, library, dining hall, and bedrooms—I am able to take in the decorative elements from Versailles, the fireplace modelled after Michelangelo's tombs for the Medici Chapel in Florence, the panels of mythological figures surrounded by the Vanderbilt family symbol of acorns and oak leaves, the portraits of French nobility, the silk drapery, the walnut furniture. The tour ends in the scullery and kitchen which was supervised by a French chef with six helpers.

But it is anecdote and incident which truly enliven such visits. It was in the Gold ballroom—now the reception area where my tour began—that one of the most spectacular balls of the Gilded Age took place. It was staged by Alva Vanderbilt to introduce her daughter Consuelo, one of the great society beauties, to the 9th Duke of Marlborough, Charles Richard John Spencer Churchill. Marital ties between European nobility and wealthy American brides were welcomed on both sides of the Atlantic. Noble blood added prestige to American families, while the resources "dollar princesses" brought to such marriages could restore the fortunes of ailing estates.

Alva's ball for the Duke was attended by 300 guests who were led into the main hall by footmen dressed in Louis XIV fashion. Dominating the scene was a spectacular floral piece comprising a bronze fountain filled with floating lotus, water hyacinths, and fairy lamps. Flitting about the blossoms were live hummingbirds and brightly coloured butterflies. Guests danced to three alternating orchestras, while French chefs prepared the repast.

Alva achieved her desired outcome when the Duke proposed to Consuelo in the Gothic Room.

For South Africa there is a fascinating Anglo-Boer War footnote to this story. As Pretoria capitulated to the British forces under Lord Roberts, the first British civilian to enter the city was journalist Winston Churchill, accompanied by the very same Duke of Marlborough. Together they liberated a prisoner-of-war camp from which Churchill had earlier made a daring if controversial escape.

But the grandest of the Newport summer "cottages" was The Breakers, built just two years after Marble House by Cornelius Vanderbilt II. The Vanderbilt fortune was established in steamships and railroads by Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt (1794-1877). At the end of the American Civil War he was the richest man in America with a fortune of $60 million, equivalent to $175 billion in today's money. His grandson Cornelius Vanderbilt II became chairman of the New York Central Railroad in 1885, and in the same year he purchased a wooden house in Newport called The Breakers. When the house was destroyed by fire, he commissioned the famed architect of Marble House, Richard Morris Hunt, to design an Italian Renaissance-style palazzo with 70 rooms, to be decorated by an international team of artists and craftsmen.

The Great Hall was modelled after the open-air courtyards of 16th century Genoese palaces. The ceiling is painted to depict a windswept sky and bears four blue-green medallions etched with acorns and oak leaves, the family symbol of strength and longevity.

Mr Vanderbilt's bedroom is decorated in the Louis XIV manner with carved walnut furnishings and red damask fabrics. The marble bathtub, like all baths in the house, has taps for hot and cold fresh and salt water. Mrs Vanderbilt's bedroom is in a perfect oval shape defined by classical columns and doors cut into the wall to preserve the unbroken oval form.

The upper loggia has a view of the breakers crashing against the cliffs which gave the mansion its name. A fresco

on the ceiling depicts three canopies stretched across a windswept sky.

Descending the grand staircase, my tour continues through the library, the music room, morning room, billiard room, and breakfast room to end in the pantry. The China, crystal, and glassware were washed and stored in this room. The kitchen is located in its own self-contained wing to prevent the potential spread of fire, cooking odours, and noise to the main house. The Vanderbilts had a staff of 40 to care for the house and grounds, headed by a butler, chef, housekeeper, and head footman.

There are eleven sites in total of under the protection of the Preservation Society, seven of them designated as National Historic Landmarks. They include The Elms with its sunken French garden and Rosecliff, where The Great Gatsby was filmed in 1974. The church where John F. Kennedy and Jacqueline Bouvier tied the wedding knot is another magnet for the three-and-a-half million tourists who visit Newport each year.

The windswept sky referenced earlier in this article turns to reality on my last evening in Newport when I join the local ghost tour. The dark streets on this rainy night are the perfect setting for the eerie tales that unfold as we follow a route that takes in a stranded pirate ship, the killings in Blood Alley, the public hangings on Washington Square, the suicide of a corrupt politician at Vernon House, the cemetery of course, and the Pilgrim House Inn where I have chosen to stay in room 11, said to be haunted. A picture is on display showing a parapsychic kneeling on my bedroom carpet, glowing orbs floating all around. "Ectoplasm," my host explains. But that's a story for another day, as is our meeting with the ghostly Jessica.

Newport: A Ghost Story

By William Rowland

The Pilgrim Inn was constructed in 1775 in the historic Hill district of Newport, Rhode Island. It is a three-storey building with eleven guest rooms and an upper deck with a glorious view of the harbour. I learned about the Pilgrim House Inn while searching for a place to stay during a planned visit to Newport and when I came across tales of it being haunted, room 11 in particular, it became for me the only possible place to stay.

The "spirit entity" supposedly "manifesting" at the Pilgrim House Inn is of a young Irish girl named Jessica. Sometime in the 1800s the Pilgrim House Inn structure was home to an Irish family, or perhaps they ran an Inn there and lived on the third floor. The Currens, who had three children, left behind a letter they had meant to send to an Irish relative describing their family, with children James, Margaret, and perhaps a baby, Jessica. Sometime after the American Civil War the navy established a base in Newport and the Pilgrim House Inn building was transformed into an apartment for navy families. The third floor would have made a nice, big apartment for such a navy family, perhaps with a little girl Jessica.

According to popular belief, when children die suddenly from illness or accidents, their spirits sometimes choose to stay in their early homes. This little entity, Jessica, may have been the victim of one of the deadly epidemics caused by sewage contaminating the water supply. Many people, especially children and older folk, died from cholera or typhoid in early Newport. Accidents around the home can also prove fatal. The little entity that stays at the Pilgrim House Inn could have fallen down the main staircase or fallen off the third-storey roof deck. She could have been accidentally poisoned, or she may even have met with an accident on a nearby street.

Guests staying at the Pilgrim House Inn sometimes hear Jessica playing or see her shadow darting about. Two photographers snapped the building from the outside and when they looked at their pictures noticed what look like an apparition or face peering out from a third-floor, corner window.

After our arrival at the Pilgrim House Inn, my companion Jeanette and I arrange to spend time with the owner, whose name I think was Peter. He shows us pictures of a parapsychic kneeling on the carpet in room 11, where I will be sleeping, with glowing orbs floating in the air. "Ectoplasm," Peter explains. Jessica likes to rough up bedding in the guestrooms, he tells us, and just a month before our visit the housekeeper was in the laundry when the washing machine of itself suddenly started churning. It gave cause for her immediate resignation.

At the Preservation Society of Newport County, Jeanette and I are given support materials for a self-guided tour of several of the mansions dating from the Gilded Age at the turn of the 19th century. I myself have use of Braille guidebooks and an electronic unit providing audio description, while Jeanette tells me what she sees and lets me touch furnishings and other artefacts wherever possible. The greatest opulence is to be seen at two houses built by separate branches of the Vanderbilt family, Marble House with half a million cubic feet of marble and the 70-roomed The Breakers with a view of the waves crashing against the cliffs outside.

Having completed our walkabout through the bedrooms, bathrooms, and other living areas on the upper floor of The Breakers, Jeanette and I take the elevator to the ground floor. Just before the door closes, a young girl steps in beside us. I greet and ask her name. "Jessica," she replies. What a coincidence, I think, but I say nothing.

"Where would you like to go?" Jessica asks. "To the shop. I want to buy a souvenir," I explain. "Come with me. I'll take you there," Jessica says.

"What are you looking for?" Jessica asks as we enter the shop.

"My family collects ceramic owls. That's what I would like, if they have one."

Jessica goes off to search the shelves and returns, saying: "Here you are. Is this what you want?"

I touch the ceramic owl. "Perfect," I exclaim delightedly. "I'll go and finish my tour and then come back to buy the owl."

I thank Jessica and we part.

Jeanette and I continue on our way, lingering at many points to take in finer detail. Sixty or more minutes pass before we get back to the shop. Jeanette explores the shelves, but cannot find the chosen piece, and so we go to make enquiry at the counter.

"I was here earlier," I tell the shop assistant, "and I touched a ceramic owl I would like to buy." I am dismayed by her answer.

"Sir, we have never stocked ceramic owls in this shop, and no one has been in here during the past hour." Arguing doesn't help and we leave the premises in bewilderment. "She was unnaturally pale in colour," is how Jeanette describes Jessica to me.

But Jessica has one more trick to play on us. Jeanette and I always travelled with our own coffee-maker machine and on our last morning at the Pilgrim Inn we rise to brew the usual early-morning cup. But somehow the lid has gone missing. Jeanette hunts high and low but it is nowhere to be found. Jessica's farewell! Of that we have no doubt.

Dining in the Non-Light

By William Rowland

I have come to this Zurich restaurant, with a sighted friend, to see how people react to temporary blindness.[4] Because this is the supposed experience offered by the Blindekuh, a restaurant where people dine in the dark.

At reception we are asked to give up jackets and handbags, and anything that can trip people up. Also, cell phones, luminous watches, and the like. When asked for my white cane I hesitate, but then, to my surprise, I let it go without a peep.

We linger in the half-light of the anteroom for the eyes of my sighted companion to adapt. Then we thrust our way through the blackout curtain into starless night.

We make a train and Rita, our blind waitress, steers a perfect course through the table chatter straight to our places. We orientate ourselves for a moment and then sit down side by side, rather than across from each other, and I notice a German-speaking couple to my left, seemingly quite oblivious to our arrival.

When Rita returns, it is to talk about the menu and take our wine order. Three starters, three main courses, and a couple of desserts—keep it simple is the wisdom at work here.

Rita delivers a Swiss red, opens the bottle, and pours a sip to taste. She does this so naturally that it could be a relaxed evening out anywhere. But this is not just anywhere: this is the Blind Cow restaurant where we are playing a kind of blind man's buff.

Our first course is an unconvincing carpaccio. In fact, afterwards my companion insists that it was fish. However, we tackle our main course with relish.

4 18 May 2006.

The situation being quite normal for me, my sliced duck with a chutney sauce and basmati rice presents little challenge to knife and fork, although I cheat with the fingers more than usual. The undissected red snapper on my partner's plate is a different story, but with hackings and stabbings she gets through well enough, and without waste on the tablecloth, which earns her my congratulations.

As we eat, I listen to the conversation around me. There is no background music, so I can hear across the room. There is a lot of laughter, I notice, but it seems to be the congenial laughter of enjoyment and not people laughing at the situation.

I introduce myself to the person next to me: Sabine is a secretary in the tourism industry, and she has found the experience fascinating. But the evening has lasted long enough, and she needs to get outside.

Then we come to the only false move of the evening, and it is mine. Rita steps around the table to collect my plate and to be helpful I lift it towards her. The plate is tilted and my fork clatters to the floor. I apologise and Rita gives a little chuckle: it's okay.

As we tuck into our vanilla flan on assorted berries, I share my thoughts. Blind people do not live in darkness. We experience the world through the senses we have, and this does not include sight. To say that dining in the dark simulates blindness is untrue. Perhaps the adventure sensitises people to vision loss, but not to blindness. We are altogether at home in the non-light.

Aptly, the evening ends on a bizarre note. The taxi driver summoned by the restaurant to fetch us has a question to ask, but we cannot understand his German. Apparently, he wants to know whether my companion is my guide dog, because he resorts to vigorous barking with a kind of question mark in his voice. And we crack up.

That was our biggest laugh of the evening.

On Touching a Coelacanth

By William Rowland

I wouldn't call it an obsession, this habit I have of wanting to touch things out of reach. Rather, it is a need that I have, as a blind person, to know what things are really like.

It is a need that has put me in touch with ancient artefacts and barriered works of art; and live things too, such as the *Welwitschia mirabilis* and the cheetah.

But one of these mysteries remained elusive, that is, until I lunched with Grahamstown friend Pam Paton, long-time alderman and citizen of citizens in the town. Did she think it was possible? Would it be allowed? And who to speak to?

And so it was that I found myself at what I prefer to call the Ichthyological Institute[5] – which has a longer and more technical name – with a coelacanth[6] on the countertop in front of me. The fish had been removed from its propanol tank specially for my visit, while Professor Paul Skelton had prepared me for my encounter with all the information a curious mind could desire.

How actually to do this? One always feels a moment of reverence on these occasions, but then you simply get down to it ...

Starting from my left—the pouted mouth, the little pool of the eye, the elongated curve of the scaly body, and

5 At the time of the visit, this was the J. L. B. Institute of Ichthyology and the Institute has since been renamed the South African Institute for Aquatic Biodiversity, still situated in Makhanda (formerly Grahamstown).

6 A large bony marine fish with a three-lobed tail fin and fleshy pectoral fins known only from fossils until one was found alive off the South African coast in 1938 by Dr Margery Courtenay-Latimer in East London. Her discovery was later confirmed by Dr J. L. B. Smith who gave the coelacanth the scientific name *Latimeria chalumnae*.

the fan-shaped tail. And then, of course, the four limb-like fins—earning it the name of "Old Four Legs"—with which the coelacanth walks or rows itself through the water.

One has to be attentive to detail when touching rare and precious specimens. Probably you will have one chance only. You cannot intrude like this at every whim.

And so you record in memory, indelibly, the shape and the feel, and the wonder of touching 200 million years of rescued evolution. I think of it as something approaching a sacred privilege.

Braille 200 : Some Reflections

by William Rowland

Presentation to conference: "Braille 1809 - 2009": Writing with 6 dots and its future
Paris, 5 to 7 January 2009

Introduction

Amongst the things we as blind persons hold dear, Braille surely ranks first. It is for us the means of education, employment, and pleasure. It is our key to independence. Because of Braille we are literate and interrelated as a global community.

Louis Braille is our greatest benefactor and as we recall the history of the ingenious script he invented, we marvel at the victory of Braille over resistance to its use, attempts at substitution, and the perceived threat of modern technologies misunderstood. The course traversed has at times been uncertain, and yet the triumph of Braille has been inevitable because of its simplicity, versatility, and germaneness to our senses.

But what about the time ahead? Will remarks such as these still be apt fifty years from now, after another hundred years, or even two hundred? The answer of course lies in the realm of belief and not of fact, but what we can say is that Braille has taken on a life of its own in the sense that there exists today an extensive system of standard-setting, teaching and instruction, production and distribution, and that if we, as blind persons reliant on Braille, continue to champion its cause, its growth and spread is likely to be assured. Let us at this celebration pledge ourselves to make it so.

Four Moments In History

In history, unpredictable events can lead to predictable outcomes; or so it seems as we piece together a series of coincidences two centuries ago without which we would not have Braille.

The first of these coincidences happened in 1771 when the young Valentin Haüy dropped in for lunch at a Parisian café. There a group of blind men wearing dunce caps and cardboard glasses was entertaining the crowd by playing out of tune on old violins. Haüy was so sickened by the spectacle that he was unable to finish his meal. But it was also "at that very instant" that he conceived the idea that blind people, given proper means, could learn to read music and spell. It was a belief he later put into practice by founding the first school for the blind in 1784.

But the most fateful of the incidents I am describing took place in Coupvray in 1812. Simon-René Braille, the village harness-maker, was at his workbench with little Louis at his side, perhaps imitating his father's movements. With one hand he grabbed a leather strap and with the other a tiny knife. The knife slipped and stabbed his right eye. The home remedy of lily water probably did more harm than good, and the infection spread to the other eye. By the age of five Louis was totally blind.

The next coincidence took the form of a conversation between two citizens of Coupvray. Abbé Jacques Palluy, the local priest, knew the Braille family well and could tell that Louis was intelligent and full of curiosity. He provided personal tuition and later persuaded the local school to allow Louis to attend classes. But in the aftermath of the French Revolution a new education system was imposed on the school, bringing this arrangement to an abrupt end.

Abbé Palluy had heard that a school in Paris provided education to blind children and taught them trades, and so it was that he approached the lord of the manor, the Marquis D'Orvilliers, to help secure a place for Louis. Fortuitously,

D'Orvilliers had once witnessed a demonstration of skills by Haüy and his pupils at the royal court in Versailles which had impressed him greatly. He agreed to write the letter and at the age of ten Louis was admitted to the Royal Institution for Blind Youth.

The final coincidence was the visit by an ex-artillery officer, Nicolas-Marie-Charles Barbier de la Serre, to the school in 1820. Barbier had invented a code of "night writing" to enable soldiers to exchange messages in the dark and he now presented it as a means for blind people to read. Based on a 12-dot cell, the various symbols represented sounds rather than letters. The code was demonstrated to the students but the director, Guillié, was unenthusiastic.

The following year Barbier returned to the school to press his case. The new director, Pignier, was of the opinion that only the blind children could judge the merits of the system. He assembled the students to explain the system to them and to let them experiment with embossed pages. This was the system which young Louis, through imagination and persistent effort, over the next three years transformed into the practical 6-dot code which bears his name.

The episodes I have recounted each formed a link in the chain of events that inevitably led to the invention of Braille. Without the concert of the blind, Haüy would not have founded his school; without Louis' blinding, we would have been denied his genius; without that conversation between priest and nobleman, Louis would have remained uneducated; and without his exposure to "night writing", Louis would have lacked the example for brilliant transformation. Such are the seemingly random events that shape the course of history.

The Genius of Louis Braille

The genius of Louis Braille lies in the ingenuity of his code. It is not an adaptation of Barbier's 12-dot code, but a fundamental modification. Reducing the number of dots to six—two vertical columns of three—produced a cell that neatly fits beneath

the finger pad. To Barbier goes the credit of proposing the use of dots, which are far easier to feel than lines and curves, but to Braille goes the honour of giving us a tactile means of rendering written language precisely. The introduction in 1832 of a number sign provided a simple basis for mathematics, while the recasting of the Braille code to express musical notation gave blind musicians the ability to read and write vocal and instrumental compositions.

The Braille code is also ingenious for its simple logic. The top four dots of the Braille cell are used to represent the first ten letters of the alphabet, A to J. By adding a fifth dot, we get the next ten letters, K to T, and by adding a sixth dot, the remaining letters U to Z. The six dots together allow us 63 permutations, sufficient for the alphabets of all languages plus accent signs, punctuation marks, mathematical symbols, and musical notes - and today computer code as well. If we use two cells in combination, as we do in many of our contractions, we have an astonishing 3,969 potential constructs for the moving fingers to interpret. And so Braille, which by nature is a closed system, actually offers us more signs and symbols than we could ever possibly need.

But there is yet one more feature bestowing on Braille superiority over all its predecessors and initial competitors, namely that it can be written, and written by the individual using inexpensive technology, and in the 21st century, computer technology.

Louis Braille Close Up

But what of the man himself? What was Louis Braille like as a boy, as teenager, as beloved teacher?

Helen Keller writes: "He was blessed with affectionate parents, and I feel sure he responded to their love as a plant does to sunlight."

Simon-René, the father, was 44 when Louis was born and Monique, the mother, 39. They thought of him as their little "Benjamin"—a Biblical reference to the youngest son

of the ageing Jacob—and Simon-René looked forward to him being his "companion in old age".

Simon-René was a master harness-maker and from him Louis would have acquired the traits of attention to detail and perfectionism. He was raised as a Catholic and Father Palluy is likely to have encouraged in him the Christian virtues of love, kindliness, and humility. We know that Louis was a clever student and that he excelled at music, learning to play the piano, the cello, and the organ. Later on, his students and friends tell of his politeness and of the great care he took not to give offence in conversation. Within his own family he was admired for feats of memory, and he actually taught lessons in mnemonics.

He had a concern for the well-being of others. In his letters, for example, he rather enquires after the health of friends than referring to his own health, even when it was in serious decline. When a talented young student was to leave the institute without prospect of employment, he selflessly offered him his own position as organist at the church of Saint-Nicolas-des-Champs. His will provided for a number of charitable bequests, and he took great pains to ensure that all money owing to him at his death was written off.

As a blind person reflecting on the life and work of Louis Braille, one has the peculiar sense of knowing him personally. Others in this conference have referred to him as "our brother" and "our friend". Perhaps it is because of the vivid descriptions we have of his character and conduct; or perhaps because he lives up to our highest expectations of him as the father of Braille; or perhaps because of our reverence for the system of reading and writing we use hour by hour every day.

Braille Today and Tomorrow

In the time of Louis Braille, most blind people lived in destitution. The few who escaped this fate did so because of family connections or because of public benevolence, which in itself was a sorry plight. One thinks of the inmates of the

Quinze-Vingts hospice, a ramshackle institution with a harsh regimen and few reliefs.

In contrast, today in many parts of the world, blind people have opportunities of education, employment, and full participation in society, as gradually we approach a time when blind people will be able to be whatever they choose to be.

But in far more places in the world, this is not the state of affairs, even remotely. In Africa—I speak of Africa because that's where I belong—less than 10% of blind children are at school, and of those who receive education less than 5% find employment. The Braille literacy rate is one to two per cent, at best, and most countries lack libraries. Blind people in these societies are isolated and have low expectations of themselves, if any at all.

In countries where progress has been notable, we can point to two contributing factors - blind people organising themselves for change, and the availability of Braille as tool of independence. Nowhere, though, does the Braille literacy rate exceed 10%. But what we do know is that 85% of blind persons employed today are Braille users.

And so we have an intolerable inequality. It has to be a matter of conscience to equalise opportunities for blind persons not only with those of sighted persons, but with each other. In Africa, as elsewhere, we need inclusive education, literacy programmes, employment initiatives, Braille production, libraries, access technology, and fierce and relentless activism. And the leading agent of change has to be the World Blind Union with its constituent organisations and worldwide individual membership, and the WBU acting in unison with its partners ICEVI, IFLA, the Daisy Consortium, and others. It is in essence a question of human rights and governments too have to be actors in this changing world, impelled by the CRPD.

And so, from small beginnings come mighty things! Is it too much to say that the impetus for change that began at the Paris school with Louis Braille and his ingenious invention in time influenced the founding of the great organisations for

the blind and in our time the establishment of organisations of the blind, and the World Blind Union? The irresistible course of history, so to speak ... Is this too much to say? I think not.

Merci beaucoup Louis Braille!

Acknowledgements

The biographical information on Louis Braille given in this presentation is drawn from the following sources:

Pierre Henri, *The Life and Work of Louis Braille, 1809–1852: Inventor of the Alphabet for the Blind* (London: Royal National Institute for the Blind, 1952).

Paula Kimbrough, *How Braille Began* [online resource] *Braille Monitor* (July 2005) https://nfb.org/images/nfb/publications/bm/bm05/bm0507/bm050703.htm

C. Michael Mellor, *Louis Braille: A Touch of Genius* (Boston, MA: National Braille Press, 2006).

Final Recollections

Near Drowning

In 1976 I was appointed head of the South African National Council for the Blind, which meant moving from Cape Town to Pretoria, where we bought a house in the eastern suburbs at 85 High Street, Alphen Park, our family home for the next 23 years. In the garden we had a private swimming pool which was fenced in. Even so, I thought it would be prudent, because of our young children, to be trained in mouth-to-mouth resuscitation (CPR) – just in case. The St John Ambulance organisation was good enough to offer me individualised lessons where I was also able to practise on a lifelike dummy.

It happened on a Saturday morning. I was relaxing in the lounge when my wife Helene came into the room and looked out the window: "Bronwyn is drowning!" she cried. Inadvertently, the pool gate had been left unlocked and Bronwyn, then two years old, had wandered through and fallen into the water.

Rushing outside, Helene jumped into the pool and handed Bronwyn up to me at the edge. I laid the limp body on the grass and checked for heartbeat and breathing. "Go call the doctor," I said, "while I work with Bronwyn."

Me and my little girl alone on the lawn. Concentrate! Perfect technique—32 chest compressions, two breaths, my lips over the nose and mouth. My spirit calling out within me: "Lord, give me this life and I'll never ask for anything again." Concentrate! Perfect technique! The minutes passing.

And then the sudden gasp, the deepest breath ever of anyone in my life. Heart beating again. Bronwyn breathing, but still unconscious.

Dr Snyman arrived soon afterwards and called the ambulance. To Dr Snyman the situation seemed under control, and he left, an act of abandonment which I never forgave.

In the back of the ambulance I accompanied Bronwyn to the hospital where we were told to wait, but I insisted on immediate attention and received it. Returning home to Helene and the other children, I gave comfort and reassurance. Towards evening I went back to the hospital, accompanied by a doctor friend, Hildegard Welke, in whom I had absolute trust. But a surprise awaited us: Bronwyn was sitting up in bed, laughing and talking like nothing had happened. She came home the next day and the first thing she wanted to do was to swim in the pool. The miracle was complete.

Running Accident

Leaving my house at 6.30 AM on our early-morning run, Dorette and I climb the hill and at the gate of my housing estate turn left into Johann Rissik Drive. Our routine is 8 kilometres three times a week, if we can, through the streets of Waterkloof Ridge. We turn left into Aries Street at a steady pace and approach the crossing with Gemini Street.

I hear the car coming and Dorette sees the driver looking into her mirror and talking on her cell phone. "*Sy gaan nie stop nie*," Dorette says and a few seconds before it happens I realise that the car is going to hit us.

After a few moments of unconsciousness I find myself sprawled on the grass verge. I get up slowly and Dorette holds on to me as I find my balance. Already we have been joined by a fellow runner who we regularly meet along the way, Piet van Hoven, head of British Airways as it happens. He takes over and instructs the driver to take us to hospital, accompanying us there.

I have only a hazy memory of that day. At some point I asked to be taken to a telephone so I could call my wife Helene to tell her what had happened and my secretary Jenny to explain not turning up at the office. I am kept under observation. No serious injuries are apparent and towards evening I am discharged and can go home.

Time passes and all seems well. Some three weeks later, though, I do consult my family doctor, Dr K.C. Mathew, because of a painful leg. An x-ray is taken, and a cracked fibula diagnosed. "It will take care of itself," Dr Mathew assures me.

A few weeks later I travel to Russia for an official visit in my capacity as President of the World Blind Union. In my Moscow hotel room one night, I visit the bathroom and am unable to find my bed again. As I search my surroundings my hand falls on the telephone, and I call my travel companion Philip to come and help me. The next day we cancel our onward journey to Sweden and fly home.

Next, I depart for Cape Town to attend a board meeting of the South African Library for the Blind. At a social gathering in the hotel that evening all is not well with me, and I ask the chief financial officer, Wendy, to assist me to my room, saying that I am tired. "I noticed you were not yourself," she tells me later.

When I am absent from breakfast in the morning, Wendy goes to check if I am okay. She knocks at my door repeatedly, but there is no response. She explains the situation to the hotel manager, and he unlocks the door for them to enter. They find me undressed on the floor in a semi-comatose condition. A few minutes later I come round, but I am very groggy, and my only concern is that my circumstances be kept confidential. The manager is sent to call an ambulance with the request that they enter the hotel discreetly. And so I am taken off to the Vincent Palotti hospital in Pinelands, with Wendy following on soon afterwards. It is seven weeks to the day since my running accident on 21 April 2005.

When the doctors at Vincent Palotti hear about the running accident, head X-rays are requested, and a cerebral haemorrhage is discovered. It seems to be a slow bleed as so much time has elapsed since the accident, nevertheless it is life-threatening. Neurosurgery follows to drain the blood and stop the leak, but the haemorrhage recurs, and more surgery is required. Altogether four operations are carried out over a period of just seventeen days before my situation stabilises and I can be discharged.

My health is closely monitored over the coming months, and I scale down my activities and cancel my international travel on behalf of the World Blind Union. Gradually we gather confidence in my recovery, but on doctor's orders my running days on hard surfaces are over.

At my final consultation with my neurosurgeon in Cape Town, Dr Kieck, I put this question to him: "When you first saw me at Vincent Palotti, doc, how long did I have to go?" "24 hours," he says.

The wonders of medical science. The Lord be praised.

Oldest Artefact

"A History of the World in 100 Objects" was a programme series broadcast on BBC radio in 2010 and presented by Neil MacGregor, Director of the British Museum. I listened with growing curiosity each week as MacGregor described each piece and discussed its provenance and historical significance. What if ...? I thought.

"I'm going to London to touch those objects," I told Jeanette at the end of the series. But my correspondence with the access officer at the British Museum was frustrating in the extreme. I could join a group of blind people on such and such a date or participate in an organised discussion. An individualised tour is what I wanted, but never has any access service given less access.

Then Jeanette came up with a suggestion. "Let's try Dr Nunn." John F. Nunn was a scholar in ancient Egyptian medicine and in earlier years Jeanette had translated scholarly texts from the German for his use. He had published a book with the British Museum. Maybe ...

And so we set up a telephone call with Dr Nunn. "Leave it to me," he said. And not long afterwards I found myself entering the hallowed precincts of the British Museum for my guided tour. I of course realised that I would not be able to touch all 100 objects featured in the BBC broadcast, as that would take forever to accomplish, while some of the exhibits would be too fragile for handling.

My host was Dr Irving Finkel from the Department of the Middle East. As a leading authority on ancient Mesopotamian script, the artefacts chosen for my appreciation mainly belonged to his field of expertise. That included a clay tablet bearing cuneiform script, the wedge-shaped letters recording the beer rations of a group of workers in ancient Iraq crafted around 3000 years BC.

My tour ended in the office of Jill Cook, Chief Palaeontologist. She placed a rubber mat before me and put

on a pair of gloves. No need for me to wear gloves though. And then she said: "Put out your hand," and, "you are now holding the world's oldest artefact." It was a 2-million-year-old pebble tool from the Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania, excavated by famed archaeologist Louis Leakey. Animal bones found with the pebble tool probably meant it had been used to prepare a meal. The production and use of the tool were explained to me in great detail by Jill.

Then Jill surprised me with a second artefact, two swimming reindeer carved from a mammoth tusk around 13,000 years ago. Words failed me. It concluded a day of intellectual reward and sensuous enjoyment never to be forgotten.

An Ancient Bible

Copied in the 5th century, Codex Alexandrinus is one of three early Greek manuscripts that preserve both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. This Book from Alexandria was presented to the ruling British monarch Charles I in 1627 by the Greek Patriarch of Alexandria.

During one of my early travel adventures I found myself at the British Library where—not without difficulty—I gained access to the Codex Alexandrinus. In a secluded room, the Codex was placed before me to touch, while an official explained to me about its preservation and described the text written in uncial script—rounded separated letters—and the fruit and vegetables representing the earliest example of book illumination.

Afterwards I passed through the exhibition halls of the library with my sighted guide, touching such objects as I could. While touching the Pillar of Hammurabi—bearing the oldest legal code ever written down and dating from Babylonia in the 17th century BCE—one of the guards accosted me with the warning: "You're not allowed to touch."

"I've just been touching one of the world's oldest parchment Bibles and now I am not allowed to touch a rock," I exclaimed.

The guard: "Okay! You can touch but don't let me see you."

Which I did.

Mother Teresa

Mother Teresa was an Albanian Catholic nun of Indian citizenship who, in 1950, founded the Order of the Missionaries of Charity. Members take vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience and also profess a fourth vow: to give wholehearted free service to the poorest of the poor. Such service has been given in diverse settings in many countries, most notably in the slums of Calcutta. The Order also operates homes for the destitute and dying.

On 7 November 1988 Mother Teresa disembarked from an aircraft at the then Jan Smuts Airport near Johannesburg, clutching a carry bag with a few personal belongings, her only luggage. After travelling to Cape Town, she founded a Mission of the Order in Khayelitsha, providing a home for HIV/AIDS sufferers.

A friend of mine, Yvonne Hugo, was a member of the organising committee for the visit and through her I got to be invited to a local gathering with Mother Teresa. Before the group meeting, I was granted a private audience with Mother Teresa where I spent seven minutes alone with her in spiritual communion. I asked for her blessing and just before I left the room, she issued a personal invitation for me to visit Calcutta. It is a matter of deep regret that I never took up the invitation.

There followed a group meeting with about twenty people seated at a long table, with Mother Teresa at the head. As she entered the room, I sensed a sudden change in the atmosphere, a kind of thickening of the air, a moment of acute awareness never to be repeated throughout my life. Together, we shared a time of quiet devotion and again, Mother Teresa gave us her blessing.

Let me quote two of Mother Teresa's most memorable sayings:

"Do small things with great love."

And when she received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979, she was asked what we can do to promote world peace. "If you

want to change the world, Go home and love your family," she said.

She was canonised by Pope Francis in 2016 as Saint Teresa of Calcutta.

The Green Tricycle

Of all the playthings in a little boy's life, none could compete with the tricycle, in those days certainly. I visit the annals of memory and in my mind's eye I see again the bright green frame, little brown saddle, black pedals, and above all, the gleaming metal handlebars of my tricycle.

On rainy and windy days—think Cape Town—riding around our two-room flat was the limit, but then there were those glorious summer days when I was allowed onto the pavement outside and could even pedal a block or two up the road under my father's watchful eye.

And so it went for several years, even after I lost my sight. Inevitably though—I was six or seven years old I think—the time came when I had outgrown the tricycle.

Then one morning my father said that it would be a good thing to give the tricycle to one of the poorer kids in our neighbourhood. Playing in the street outside our home there happened to be a group of coloured children from the nearby Tramway Road community and so my father picked one of them to be the lucky new owner.

The last of the tricycle it seemed. But no! A couple of hours later there was a knock at our front door. My mother opened and standing there was a man who introduced himself as a Christian missionary. He had this to say: "My little boy has been praying for a tricycle. Whenever he pleaded to have one, I told him: 'One day, when my ship comes in.' My ship came in today."

Figure 10: William on his green tricycle

United Nations Standard Rules and a Slogan

The Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities were adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 20 December 1993. The document was not legally binding, but it did provide a set of guidelines for governments on the promotion and protection of the human rights of persons with disabilities and offered a powerful lobbying tool to the Disability Rights Movement.

I was an adviser in the drafting process on behalf of the World Blind Union and the coordinator of the process was the UN Special Rapporteur on Disability, Heather Butow, from Australia. For several years we met twice annually in New York or elsewhere, to develop the text and it was at one of these meetings that Heather came to me with her concern. "William," she said, "what must I do with this mess? All these different terms: disabled people, people with disabilities, disabled persons, persons with disabilities, handicapped, challenged, etc. What do you think?"

After a moment's reflection I had this to say: "I think we should make it 'persons with disabilities' because it individualises the document and gives a sense of ownership. 'With a disability' because it says something about you, something extra which is not the main you."

We consulted one other delegate for his opinion, Sir Duncan Watson, chairperson of the Royal National Institute for the Blind in the UK, he also being a blind man. He agreed with our reasoning.

And so "persons with disabilities" became the term to be used by the United Nations and worldwide by persons with disabilities and their organisations. Likewise, it was the chosen term for the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities when that instrument superseded the Standard Rules in December 2006.

The slogan "Nothing About Us Without Us" also dates from the early years of our activism. The underlying idea came

to me from the trade union movements in East European countries, and Poland in particular. It was first adopted by Disabled People South Africa (DPSA) but was soon taken up by organisations of disabled people throughout the Southern African region, spreading beyond our borders to become a universal position statement not only of the Disability Rights Movement, but of other groups as well, such as the feminist movement, indigenous persons, and even the sex workers of Australia. No decision affecting my life must be taken, by government or any other authority, without my having a say.

Starry Starry Night

My mother at ease in her armchair.
A whale far out to sea.
A seagull up high.
A fire on Lion's Head.

These are a few of the visual memories from my early childhood. But there is one visual memory that surpasses all the rest.

I was three years old, and World War II was being waged. A total blackout was in force after dark in Cape Town. Any show of light was forbidden in case German U-boats chose to fire on the city.

On one such night I looked up through a split in the blinds on our balcony in wonder to behold the countless stars shining above, shimmering with a yellow-white light. A glimpse of glory never to be forgotten.

Poem

once upon a time
I was three years young
once upon a time
in a night dark with the darkness
of all the years of my life that lay ahead
a little boy looked up through a split in the blinds
in wonder to behold
the shimmering splendour of the sacred stars.

The evocation of the Vincent Van Gogh painting is deliberate.

Return to Ithaca

Rediscovering My Own History

In August 2010 I put the following proposition to my PA, Tanya, bearing in mind her remarkable Internet skills: "If you can find Linda for me, I will pay you an immediate bonus", Linda being my childhood playmate and daughter of the shooter who blinded me. It took Tanya less than five minutes. In a bulletin board post, Linda had briefly sketched her family history and was reaching out to others who could add to the picture.

Linda's re-entry into my life was the beginning of a chain of events which became a project that I named REDISCOVERING MY OWN HISTORY, which meant revisiting the people and places of my youth, a project in which I was greatly assisted by my companion Jeanette McKenna.

And so I had contact information

My e-mail sent to Linda.

Date: Sent: 06 August 2010 20:31

To: Linda Hyde

Subject: hoping for contact

Dear Linda

For a long time I have wished to contact you to know what your circumstances are, where you live, and how you are.

I write with affection. I have had a good life, as I hope you

have. It would mean a very great deal to me to hear from you, as I am sure there would be much we could say to each other.

With very special greetings

From William

Linda's Response

Date Sent: 07 Aug 2010 09:37 (UTC)

Dear William

How strange you should make contact after all these years. It was such a shock when I saw your name. Events of the past came flooding back and brought up so much emotion and tears, but not in a bad way.

You have always remained in my mind.

I am so pleased you have made contact. I feel the same way you do and often thought of seeking you out, but lacked the courage as I did not know what your reaction would be and I would not want to upset you. I know your life has been very much in the public eye with all the work you have done.

The events of that day changed my life totally and affected everything that happened afterwards, as I know they will have done for you.

I could write a book about what has happened since that day but very briefly – I have lived in England for the past 50 years, and have been very happily married to a lovely man (an Englishman!) for the past 20 years. I have three children and two grandchildren.

For all my years in England I am still very South African at heart and have never lost my love for the country of my birth.

I was last in South Africa about seven years ago.

How did you find me? I would love to know. Please tell me.

Kind regards

Linda

After that we corresponded regularly and often spoke on the telephone, until a few years later when Linda, now living in the UK, travelled down from Chester in Northwest England to spend two days with me in London.

We agreed not to dwell on the past and to limit our reflections to a single conversation over dinner one evening. Linda could remember nothing of what happened. Seemingly

the emotional trauma had erased all images from her mind, but she did have one recollection: "I started to scream like I would never stop!"

As to her mother's motive, we could reach no conclusion. Was there a rational reason? Was it premeditated? And the best we could come up with was: "It just happened."

Loreto Convent

We turned the corner into St Andrew's Road with a sense of anticipation. "The gate was halfway down on the left," I said. That brown wooden gate which I had passed through each of the three days I attended Loreto Convent Preschool. Would it still be there? Would I be able to touch it?

"Can't see any gate," Jeanette said. "What I see is a business centre with a Checkers store."

Gone. Except from memory.

"St Andrew's Church was further down on the corner with Beach Road." Expectation now became apprehension. But there it was, the church, but locked. "We went there for morning prayers, I think. Against the front wall was a large black cloth with a red cross on it. I wonder whether it's still there?"

But entry denied today.

Jeanette describes what she sees: A modest building with off-white walls, a red-tiled roof, and a buttress off to the right.

A series of telephone calls and verbal enquiries led me to the parish priest and an appointment with Monsignor Stokes at 5:30 one Saturday afternoon. A small congregation, he tells me, but regular Sunday services still take place. No black cloth with red cross though.

Just before I leave, I have a question to ask: "When I was public relations officer at the National Council for the Blind, a couple of books, pictorial histories of South Africa, raised a lot of money for us. *Joyful Errand* and *Golden Heritage* were the

titles and C. S. Stokes the author. Any relation perhaps?" "That was my father," Monsignor Stokes replies.

On our way out of the church Jeanette asks: "Would you like to light a candle?" "Yes", I say, and after a moment's reflection, "three candles: one for Mum, one for little Betty, and one for Mrs Varrie."

A Moment of Final Closure

What happened to the Loreto nuns? Most of them returned to Ireland, but I am able to identify three small communities in South Africa and Zambia. The Loreto Convent archive is retained in Ireland, and I send a request for the names of staff at Loreto Convent in 1945. Just maybe I could discover the name of my class teacher.

I draw a blank. "We are unable to assist."

Then a surprise. I learn that a small community of Loreto nuns is living at Nazareth House, just a stone's throw from where I live. Jeanette and I knock at the door, and we are invited in for tea with Sisters Emer, Eileen, and Deidre. We invite them to Jeanette's house and a precious friendship begins to develop. The nuns are guests of honour at my 80th birthday celebration and Sister Eileen, she of the naughty jokes, says grace. Not long afterwards she is called to higher service. Emer and Eileen both spent time at Loreto Convent in earlier years, but long after my attendance there, a lifetime ago.

Church of the Holy Redeemer

Starting from Ithaca Mansions, my home as a boy, Jeanette and I walked up Kloof Road, crossing Quendon Road and arriving at the corner of Kloof and Tramway Roads, site of Holy Redeemer, church of my youth. "I see a wooden fence and a garden with steps going down," Jeanette said, "and there is a parking lot to the left." That wasn't there before, I think.

I find myself in front of a wooden gate with poignant memories. We try to enter, but it is locked. "There was another gate around the corner. Let's try that one," I suggest.

But that gate, too, is locked. The church door beyond is open though and we begin to call: "Hello there! Hello!"

A cleaner, Constance, comes to the gate and I explain why I am there, wanting to visit the church of my early years. She fetches the warden, Lily, and we are invited in.

Inside the church I clap my hands sharply, using echo location to hear where the walls are and the size of the interior. I take a seat in a pew near the front, where I used to sit, and feel for the kneeler and cushion. Everything's still the same.

At the front of the church I reach for the altar rail where I once knelt to take holy communion. A thin wafer of unleavened bread would be placed in the palm of my right hand and then the priest, Father Langmore and others of blessed memory, would move along the rail from person to person allowing each of us to take a sip of wine from the chalice. I step onto the low platform looking out onto the pews and find myself in the very same place where I once stood with wings, as the angel Gabriel in a nativity play.

I ask many questions of warden Lily, but then she says: "Here comes Father Esau. You can speak to him." Father Esau and I sit down across the aisle from each other, and I talk about the past and ask more questions. After twenty minutes he says: "you'd better come and have tea," and we depart for the rectory next door.

Over tea I share a treasured recollection with Father Esau. "A little below the church in those days, at 10 Tramway Cottages, lived the Lawrence family. Charlie who worked at the docks and Francis our "washerwoman", with their children William, named after me, and I think a daughter Ursula." Father Esau's next words amaze: "Ursula Lawrence is still a member of the congregation." Just to think: more than six decades later.

Ursula is alerted to the situation, and we speak on the phone. Ursula, it turns out, is actually the daughter of Francis's sister-in-law and lived in the house opposite at 11 Tramway Cottages. She never married but enjoyed a long and rewarding career as a nursing sister.

Soon afterwards Jeanette and I attend morning service at Holy Redeemer and Ursula meets us at the door and accompanies us to our pew. At morning tea after the service, sponsored by Jeanette, I meet with some twenty members of the small congregation and chat with Ursula, who has another surprise in store for me.

Ursula introduces me to Hilary, one of Francis's daughters, and we meet for morning tea at the Vineyard Hotel in Newlands. The focus of our conversation is the Lawrence family and their life in Tramway Road. Charles, I learn, was actually a self-employed painter and handyman while Francis took in washing and ironing to supplement family income. Charles played cricket for the Sea Point Swifts and had a passion for pigeon racing. Charles and Francis had eleven children, four boys and seven girls, Hilary being the fourth-born. William, who bore my name, converted to Islam in his teens and changed his name to Rashaad. Hilary became a domestic worker at the age of twelve and changed jobs many times in a long career, always to earn higher wages, ending up as cashbook / creditors clerk at Mondi Corrugated. She enjoyed a full family life. She says: "Living in Tramway Road was the best days of our life, poor but happy." The family was forcibly removed from Sea Point in 1961. All of this was unknown to me as a child.

Jeanette and I continue to visit the Holy Redeemer whenever we travel to Cape Town. We are present at the church's 95th anniversary celebration in 2017 and we arrange to have Jeanette's god daughter, Sasha—granddaughter of my sister Denise—to be christened there in a private ceremony just for us. In the vestry we tell Sasha not to make a noise as we are at Jesus' house. As we enter the church Sasha wants to know where Jesus is, and we have to explain that he doesn't live there but that He is with us in spirit. The christening takes place at the font where Father Esau completes the ritual. Sasha is tilted over the font to be "baptised" which is perhaps why she told her little friends afterwards "I have been capsized".

Our last visit to Holy Redeemer is to attend a service led by the Bishop of Cape Town. At the end of the service there is for me a particularly special moment. At the front of the church on the wall to the left a plaque is unveiled and blessed by the Bishop. It reads:

> *In loving memory of*
>
> *Frank and Bertha Rowland*
>
> *William, Denise, Tyron and Sasha*
>
> *"And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not."*
>
> *John 1:5*

School for the Blind, Worcester

We arrive at the school by appointment at 8 am on the Friday morning for our guided tour. My intention is to revisit places and memories of my youth and to share past experiences with Jeanette. A member of staff will accompany us to the hostels and playground to ensure easy access.

We begin at the little boys' hostel. At a space inside the front door an old-time wall phone used to hang where every Friday evening I would take a call from my mother. Calls had to be booked in advance and you had to wait your turn, but unfailingly at around 7 pm the call would be put through to the hostel by the boy or girl on duty at the school exchange. I would hear the identifying ring and lift the receiver off the hook, after which my mum and I would exchange school and family news of the past week.

Upstairs we enter the sleeping quarters where rows of double bunks once stood, the top bunk being especially prized. Along the passage is another bedroom of mine where Bennie once saw two spirits carrying a coffin appear from beneath his bed. A scary experience for us all.

In another room we used to meet every morning for Bible reading and prayers. It was there that our beloved matron, Miss Barker, informed us one morning that in the night the Lord Jesus had come to fetch little Flippie, "clasping him to His bosom".

Next, we go to the middle hostel where we climb the outside staircase, turning right at the top to enter the cavernous bathroom with its three bath cubicles and the showers along the wall. It was here that Lourens and I enjoyed our midnight feasts, often with groceries taken from the hostel pantry when no one was looking.

In those days the large dormitory contained fourteen beds. Late evening the hostel father, as he was known, would come to check on us and say his peculiar goodnight, with the Afrikaans "s" being pronounced with an "sh": "*Nag menshe.*"

The totally blind amongst us refused to switch off the light. Why should we? We didn't use it.

Downstairs is a room where I once was summoned by *Oom* Dawie to be told I was about to be given a hiding for an unexplained reason. But it was a heartless joke and suddenly my parents stepped into the room. They had come on a surprise visit.

In a nearby room the boys gathered at the command of the hostel father and school psychologist, Mr Gericke, to hear what he had to say. "Little bulls (*bulletjies*) don't play with each other," he warned. His meaning was obvious.

At the big boys' hostel I touch the dormitory window where the partially sighted boys would look out in the early evening in the hope of seeing teacher Miss Hugo undress in the room across the way. I pass the nook where the Bible cupboard once stood with its 75 Braille volumes of the Afrikaans translation and at the end of the passage enter my old bedroom. Here we used to listen to *Superman* on Springbok Radio at 5:15 in the afternoon. The beds had to be made up in a prescribed manner with the blankets folded over at the bottom corners and tucked in just so. And then there is the room where we used to hold seances, calling on the spirits of the dead. One night Bennie, hidden behind a curtain, spoke out in answer with a deep and spooky voice, causing the younger boys to flee in terror.

From the hostels we go to the school building where I pass through my old classrooms and the science laboratory. Outside on the playground we cross the gravel terrain where we used to play tin cricket and kick our book ball and come to the gym around the corner. Exercise classes were held three times a week here and sometimes included walking across a raised beam, trying not to lose our balance. Once a week a thick mat would be laid out for the wrestling club and at the back was the area for weightlifting. I wonder whether I could still lift 95 pounds in a thrust above the head? In the little office next to the gym, Irene, my girlfriend, and I would meet clandestinely during morning break to cuddle and kiss.

Finally and at last we come to the "parade", the area where we were allowed to say goodnight to the girls after extramural activities on a Saturday evening—debating society, music appreciation, and folk dancing (*volkspele*). In a corner at the junction of two walls Jeanette steps aside and I am alone. "Irene, Irene, where are you?" I murmur.

Ithaca Mansions

"Rediscovering my own history" was a process that had to end with my return to Ithaca Mansions. Situated on the corner of Kloof and Kei Apple Roads in Sea Point, Cape Town, it was the place where I lived as a child and where I was blinded in a shooting. Time and again I had gone back to that block of flats during nostalgic visits to Sea Point, but no one was ever home at number 5, my early address.

Then my sister Denise put me in touch with her lifetime friend Adrienne, daughter of the Bucky family, who had grown up in the neighbourhood and still lived nearby. I asked for her assistance, and it was generously given.

The Ithaca Mansions of my seeing years had a broad and open facade which to me was beautiful. What Adrienne found was a very different place surrounded by high walls and locked gates. Soon she made the acquaintance of Claudius, the Zimbabwean caretaker, and we learned that number 5 Ithaca Mansions was now owned by a Swede, Hans Lejon, who was absent for extended periods. And so we solicited Claudius's help. If he would alert us to Hans's return, there would be an ample reward.

Time passed and we waited patiently. Then one day Adrienne's telephone rang, and it was Claudius to say that Hans was back. Immediately Adrienne went to introduce herself to Hans and to request an opportunity for me to revisit those once familiar spaces. Not wanting to disturb his peace of mind, we spared him my traumatic memories of Ithaca Mansions, only emphasising my desire to close the loop of memory and to spend a few minutes in long-lost surroundings.

Jeanette and I set out for Cape Town, where, at last, I am given access to where I want to be. I cross the threshold to be bewildered by the changes. My parents' simple two-room flat no longer exists but has been merged by staircase with the flat above where little Bettie lived with her family and via a passageway with the flat next door, home of the Varries. I do though seek out spots where beloved pieces of furniture once

stood and places where I used to play with Plasticene, Dinky Toys, and my Meccano set.

Then we move next door to the very room where it happened, and I ask Jeanette: "Leave me here for a few minutes while I commune with the spirits." And again those final moments unfold in the imagination: In front of me Mrs Varrie with the gun, to my right, little Bettie in a pool of blood, and on the bed to my left, Linda with that look of terror. So long ago. So immediate now. Journey's end where it began.

Ithaca gave me a splendid journey
Without her I would not have set out
My way has been long
Full of adventure full of instruction
At many a summer dawn to enter
With what gratitude what joy
Ports seen for the first time
To buy good merchandise
To visit many cities
To gather stores of knowledge from those who know
And if I find Ithaca poor
She has not deceived me
"so wise I have become, of such experience,
that already I have understood what these Ithacas mean."
Constantine P. Cavafy: *"Ithaca"*
(Personalised)

Figure 11: William in recent years