

CIRCUMCISION

An historical fiction

According to my mother my circumcision was performed by a “mole”.

I must have been 7 in 1943 when we had this discussion. This operation occurs when the male child is 8 days old. Nowadays an anaesthetic jell is applied. This medication is absorbed into the child’s body so that the little boy is asleep when the surgery occurs.

On August 21st 1936, 8 days after my birthday this holy rite was performed on my body in my grandparents’ house in Berea not far from Johannesburg’s city centre. Jo’burg – South Africa’s answer to Babylon – in terms of its pagan ethos, its materialism, its worship of the gods of success and money, and post-apartheid, its sheer criminality.

The most my mother would say about medication 7 years later after my “brit milah” the covenant of circumcision was that I was given a wad of cotton wool soaked in sweet red sanctification wine to suck during the ceremony. In other words like millions of Jewish circumcisees I was drunk 8 days after the trauma of birth being drastically injured genitally “into the covenant of Abraham” which means obeying the law of God” said my father: “believing in the one and only un-graven image of God, [who is addressed as “Elohim” – gods – all condensed into the one YHVH] not worshipping other gods, respecting one’s parents, keeping the Sabbath day, not murdering, stealing, bearing false witness, or committing adultery.” He had studied anthropology and Freud before he went to university after the war and understood the mechanisms of the unconscious mind like “condensation” – all gods subsumed and transcended by YHVH Adonai.

He was going backwards and forwards to Pretoria and up North to fly planes for the South African Air Force on reconnaissance missions, which would lead to bombing and artillery and tank battles to kill Germans who were brainwashed into believing in the exact opposite vis-a-vis the Jews – as announced by God to Moses in terms of the 10 commandments. Perhaps for Nazi Germans Jews were not the proper descendants of Abraham but “the children of the devil” according to the evangelist John’s quotation of Jesus’ actual words in the fourth gospel.

And yet the same John probably learned from a Jew Philo Judaeus of Alexandria that “in the beginning was the Word...” [Logos in Greek]. In other words, language is the means whereby understanding creates an idea of God or, as I learned to call it ‘Being’.

Hitler obviously knew his New Testament. Unless the gospels were propaganda, why would a good Jew from Galilee which produced charismatic healers, call his own people, children of the devil? Why had they bothered to conceive me in a world like this? And then subjected me to a “mole.”

Good God, I thought, they have taken leave of their senses! A Rabbi obtained a mole to circumcise me?

There must be cages full of poor blind moles held captive by the Witwatersrand rabbinate at the “Beth Din”, the rabbinical court in Johannesburg, in cages, plunged in perpetual darkness for the

poor creatures so as to simulate their visually blanked out world, but how did they simulate their highly pungent underground life, so as to make them ready to be hired out for circumcisions performed by touch and smell?

My father at least explained what circumcision signified. But both parents had suddenly descending into apparent insanity about moles despite the fact that he was a successful men's tailor and she was an eminently loving and rational mother and at the same time a fine musician the same woman who taught the piano to the daughters of Afrikaner miners and the offspring of English-speaking mine managers, expressing the artistry and passions of Bach, Mozart, Hadyn, Handel, Chopin, Brahms, Beethoven, Rachmaninoff, even Stravinsky and Shostakovitch.

At 7 I could more or less identify the composer in a radio broadcast but was partially ignorant about the exact details of how it had come about that my penis glans stuck out more than my pal Phakamisa's.

Phakamisa and I and my sister Esther came across molehills in the veld when we went on holiday to the Magaliesberg mountains. Here they were, the blind circumcising innocent creatures, the instruments of torture of harmless male babies. Fortunately my sister Esther was, at 16 practically a grown woman. She was brighter than me and taught herself Hebrew under the supervision of our father, Lewis Pekarsky. If anybody knew the scandalous truth about moles chewing at foreskins, she would know.

It was Esther who clarified the position about my genitals being partially eaten, trimmed, as it were, by a mole at the age of eight days, held to this ghastly task of eating away at a drunk male baby's genitals by a man of God, a rabbi, probably.

I had to clarify the mole business, otherwise I would reject the white Jewish world as utterly crazy. At last to my additional amazement, and relief, Esther told me that what my mother, Minna, meant was not a mole but a "mohel"! Which is Hebrew for circumciser!

Much later I came to realise the function of religion and art in the bourgeois and respectable working class: it is to cover up the truth of raw passion forbidden to would-be civilised society. Hence the attack on the penis and what it signifies in religion. Especially in Africa, where we were supposedly "surrounded" by people they called "primitive".

Actually I loved my care person Alina Mtwana and her son Phakamisa who was my age, my mate and like a brother to me, as much as I cared for my parents and sister Esther.

So some rabbis and certain doctors were trained circumcisers, who, to the accompaniment of many prayers and blessings, wine, songs, eating Jewish food, these sacrosanct officials shed innocent infant blood from the most vulnerable part of the male body, and by this ceremony initiated him into the covenant of Abraham. "Mohelim" not moles.

But what in God's name did they do with the foreskins? Did they hoard them in bottles of formaldehyde? What if I wanted to un-circumcise myself? When reaching the age of reason my infantile foreskin would be much too small to be stitched back onto an adolescent penis, surely?

Fortunately Esther was a prodigious reader and researcher into forbidden or taboo topics like psychology, sex and religion. She would go and look it all up in the Central Reference Library in Jo'burg, but she would say she was going to deepen her knowledge of South African history. It was agreed that Alina would be keeping an eye on us and Alina would be with her son Phakamisa in a grey "native" tram from Bellevue East into Jo'burg. Esther and I were not brown Semites, but white Ashkenazi Jews and therefore had to travel in the red European tram.

I wanted to hear more about the whole question of circumcision and what Esther, quite unprompted called castration anxiety, because, she diagnosed, that's what I had.

It was probably the fault of hearing "mohel" as "mole". A stop had to be put on what she knew had been induced in me by the fantasy of moles performing circumcisions. We dared not admit that what Esther was going to research at the Central Public Reference Library in Johannesburg was castration anxiety. The excuse was that I and Phakamisa would join the junior library in the Central Library building and Esther was going to read more South African history in preparation for her Transvaal Senior School Certificate, the final matriculation exam.

So an expedition in search of knowledge was decided upon in the summer – the December holidays of 1943. My mother was rehearsing for a concert which would take place that very night. They couldn't take us to town by car. Besides in the afternoon Lewis my father was training for the South African Air Force preparing reconnaissance maps in Pretoria (actually at Palmietfontein military airfield), before flying up North again – the ultimate purpose of which was to win battles by killing Germans in Libya and the Western Desert. Certainly a just war. But what if the Germans were not Nazis, just Germans? Thank God Rommel was not a Nazi. He had nothing to do with killing Jews because they were Jews. When he started losing the war in North Africa, Hitler dismissed him and ordered him to commit suicide or be shot.

All this was going on 5000 miles away in Europe and North Africa.

But Esther, still only 16 but very fierce and very responsible, and I were able to get our parents' permission to miss synagogue that Saturday at the Observatory Hebrew Congregation and travel by tram into the hitherto Forbidden City. We would visit the Johannesburg Central Public Reference and Junior Libraries.

Esther's teachers and our parents recognised that she must be some sort of genius able to grasp concepts far in advance of her years. Our mother gave her a letter asking the chief reference librarian to let her use the catalogue to find books of interest to her on whatever subjects she wanted to research, noting that although she was 16, she had a tested Intelligence Quotient of 140, and assuring the librarian that Esther was accompanied by Alina Mtwá, an ex-primary school teacher, and would wait on the (unsegregated) marble steps of the library whilst Esther researched, but Alina would accompany Phakamisa and me who hoped to join the junior library.

She must have been worried that I, Mordechai Pekarsky who was 7 and Phakamisa Mtwá, aged 7 and especially an adult black woman who had been a primary school teacher but worked as a domestic servant needed their presence announced to the authorities.

This was central Johannesburg where anything might happen at any time: a racist reaction to Alina and Phakamisa, an incidental murder going on by the way, a robbery of a nearby bank, even a political demonstration in the vicinity with police out and their weapons drawn.

I can imagine my mother going to bed before the concert with a nervous headache, managing to play the "Emperor", but waiting anxiously to receive us on our return.

There was another letter to the Junior Librarian asking for me and my "African friend" Phakamisa Mtwá to be allowed to join. No one had ever seen an African or a mixed race or an Indian person in the junior or senior library or the reference library in 1943 or ever, as far as I could tell.

Having read these anxious and solicitous letters, the librarians must have gone into a huddle and decided, presumably, that this family visit had to do with an anxious, liberal, Jewish mother living in the wilds of Bellevue East, and a special effort should be made to accommodate this eccentric visit to these hallowed halls of learning. The Junior Librarian got round the apartheid problem, which was actually a colour bar in those days, by allowing Alina who announced she was a primary school teacher, which she had been, and allowing her to supervise me joining but giving me three extra library ticket – a total of seven – and whispering to Alina that Phakamisa could use half of those tickets even though they were in my name and with my address on it. Alina saw to it that we took out easy-to-read vividly illustrated young children's versions of "Gulliver's Travels", "Treasure Island", "King Solomon's Mines," "She", "The Jungle Book", "Jock of the Bushveld" and "Alice in Wonderland."

It was only when I was 13 and Esther 24 that she let on that she had browsed through our uncle Jeremiah Himmelstein's copy of Havelock Ellis's "The Psychology of Sex" in about five volumes in his study in Sheridan Court in Bellevue East in Johannesburg which our mother Minna Pekarsky had built in the early years of the war. There it all was, everything from "Auto-Erotism" to "Sexual Inversion". But nothing on circumcision.

When we got to the library Esther disappeared into the reference section. We sorted out the borrowing of books accompanied by Alina, who was partly Zulu, married to a Zulu/Xhosa man, Matthew Mtwá who was partly San (descending from the Bushpeople who took refuge from the 18th century genocide in the Cape by escaping to the Drakensberg mountains overlooking Zululand).

Alina was a primary school teacher by training but had fallen foul of the native education authorities in Greytown, Natal, whence the Mtwá family originated. What they objected to was her lessons on the history of the Zulu and the San given to the older children by insisting on teaching in a way which indicted white colonialism and was unsuitably "political".

It must have been obvious from her demeanour and conversation that she was eminently better educated than the average domestic servant and was in fact "in loco parentis". She was allowed into the library and helped us find suitable books for Phakamisa and me after which we decamped to a bench in the main pathway of the library gardens.

In keeping with her San genetic inheritance Alina was only 5 foot 2 inches tall but built like a rugby hooker. Matthew was also partly San and short.

She had a lethal Zulu/Xhosa knobkerrie which could be used as a walking stick or a weapon. On the way to the library gardens she sauntered, flourishing it at cowering passers-by. Once we had joined the junior library and got out books she ignored the “Europeans Only” signs on the benches, sat down and watched over Phakamisa and me playing in the pathways through the library gardens, whilst Esther furthered her education inside the grand neo-Romanesque building.

Alina was given a “kasher” (that is a ritually pure) packed picnic lunch and money for ice-creams to keep herself, Phakamisa and me fed and happy, after all three of us played soccer with a tennis ball and Esther consulted authoritative works.

Food was saved for Esther’s tea-time whilst in between soccer Alina would read her well-worn copy of the Christian bible and when we rested she would sing hymns quietly with Phakamisa from the Anglican Book of Common Prayer used in the Church of England congregation where on Sundays black people sat separately at the back unless the Bishop was visiting or some “liberalist” clergyman was taking the service and insisted on everybody mingling in the front seats facing the altar.

With some trepidation the Reference Librarian at the desk of the great hall, the centre-piece of the city’s public library, showed Esther who asked not for South African history but where reference books on Greek mythology were kept. This is what she wanted to read about since she knew from looking up articles in our Encyclopaedia Britannica at home, the whole subject of castration which was related to the Jewish custom of circumcision figured strongly in Greek mythology. She also knew this because our uncle Jeremiah Himmelstein had an open shelf in his study in Sheridan Court in which Freud’s collected works were kept including the early studies in hysteria written by Freud and his collaborator Breuer and the later anthropological works, “Totem and Taboo”, “Civilisation and Its Discontents”, “Moses and Monotheism”.

And so we waited for Esther who had already read the Freudian interpretation of Greek and other creation myths in “savage” and pre-modern hunter-gather society, to research circumcision, castration and Greek mythology. Secretly she ventured into the African Anthropology section and read up on initiation ceremonies amongst the Zulu and Xhosa.

To our relief Esther finally emerged mid-afternoon looking triumphant and tucked into her share of the picnic before we walked back to the tram terminus in Market Street and we all caught the segregated trams back to Bellevue East, as I used to say in my primary school essays, “tired but happy.”

It was the summer holiday of 1943 but the dead of winter in Europe. Our younger uncles Mendel and Alex, a doctor and a dentist, had joined up to serve in the South African medical and dental corps of the Eighth Army under Field Marshall Montgomery who would confront Field Marshall Erwin Rommel still in charge of the Afrika Korps. My father left his tailoring shop in Springs on the East Witwatersrand in the care of his Indian tailor friend also in Springs, Mr Krishnamurti who was only too happy to have two businesses to run.

My father was made a wing-commander and received a salary from the SAAF. He spent all his time studying reconnaissance air maps, how to fly a Hurricane, a Mosquito and a Spitfire, and if shot down, how to bale out before getting burned alive, how to land by parachute, and how to use a revolver to defend himself from the enemy if he ended up within range of the Afrika Korps.

Meanwhile – what had happened to my foreskin? Never mind about the oncoming war and the utterly certain facts about what Hitler was doing to the Jews, communists, trade unionists, gypsies, the Jehovah Witnesses, the sick and the handicapped. What was going to happen to Phakamisa's foreskin when he reached puberty and had to be initiated by an old man who hadn't washed his hands and might be using a rusty razor blade?

Fortunately the genius Esther could speak Zulu to Alina and having researched the matter in the Johannesburg Public Library reference section in the African Anthropology section warned her in the public library gardens about the dangers of non-medical circumcision. Being a primary school teacher Alina already knew about hygiene and antisepsis, but Esther's and my sexual awakening had now become dangerous sources of disillusion and even subversion of the established order spreading knowledge left, right and centre. One could see that Alina's Christianity was under threat and she grumbled sub voce about what little boys should be told and when.

Before our parents' return from the concert, which we duly listened to on the radio, admiring Minna's rendering of "The Emperor", Esther, prompting herself from notes and translating into Zulu for Phakamisa and Alina who were by turn amused and devastated by these revelations, told us about the tenuous basis of white civilisation.

Esther told us about the myth of Uranus, Chronos, Zeus and Gaia and, in simplified language, what conclusions Freud drew. In fact Alina was stunned and on the point of removing herself and Phakamisa from the sitting room in disgust announcing that no wonder the white people took up Christianity if this was the religion of Greece if not the whole of Europe before the missionaries from Rome introduced a decent form of worship. She was evidently a high Anglican. She stayed to hear Esther out.

Esther kept the story simple but made no concessions in cleaning it up it for our little-boy (my and Phakamisa's) ears ignoring the fervently Christian consciousness of Alina.

Before Christianity and during the period of ancient Israelite religion, and quite apart from the Eastern religions, the sky-god of Greece was called Uranus. His name came from the urine that he peed out of sky in the form of rain. He descended at night and under cover of darkness made love to his mother, Gaia, the earth itself (Uranus was the son of Aether and Gaia). Naturally Uranus hated his children, who, as I learned many years later were like Oedipus's – also his siblings and therefore a threat to the man who monopolised their mother/sister. The mind boggled at the confusion of kinship relationships entailed in the early days of chaos and void (in Hebrew "tohu v'vohu") in the early universe where astrophysical and cosmological events were symbolised by gods and goddesses acting them out.

Uranus confined his rebellious children/siblings in Tartarus (a kind of underground hell) which was in the depths of Gaia, giving her pain. Gaia provided a stone sickle for Chronos ("time") the only son who, given his name and attribute, understandably volunteered to castrate Uranus. Time ends tyranny, if only to install another tyranny. Other offspring of Uranus sprang up out of the blood issuing from his castration included the Titans and other monstrous creatures like the Furies, who pursued sinners, the three one-hundred-handers, and the one-eyed Cyclops.

Chronus threw the actual genitals of Uranus into the sea where they made foam out of which Aphrodite goddess of love was created. Sea marinates genitals producing love. Wonderful idea. Was it sexist? It was a patriarchal myth, so naturally it was sexist. So, in circumcision, which is a symbolic castration, the law and bonds of love and mothering waiting in the sea of Aphrodite's love, are inscribed metaphorically or as a story on the penis in circumcision which is a warning against total castration for failing to deal with incest. Coming back to the sexist myth: the threat of castration keeps the sons in order, so that they can properly institute patriarchy, especially amongst Jews, Africans and Muslims, because they have had a taste of it symbolically on the foreshortened foreskin. This I couldn't have fully understood from Esther's account at 7 but it is perfectly explicable now.

Perhaps in retrospect, this seemingly preposterous myth, was the crux of the inter-generational strife which fuelled European human society, made it dynamic, threatening every established order with revolutionary successors spurred on by the Mother Earth herself, all womankind, and Aphrodite, to castrate and symbolise and thus avoid metaphorical and real castration which is marinated into love.

Chronos, in turn, the castrating hero, became Gaia's husband and her leading son, but Chronos also hated his sibling/children and swallowed them (into "time" which is death), until Gaia hid her son Zeus on an island, giving Chronos a swaddled stone to eat as a substitute for Zeus. What indigestion if he swallowed a stone – poor fool! Zeus finally led a rebellion of all the sons in the primal horde and killed Chronos - "time" - endowing immortality on himself, Zeus, and creating another pantheon of gods and goddesses, many spawned by Zeus himself in various guises - swan, shower of gold, bull. All the brothers then vowed never to monopolise the women but to share them out equally and thus to minimise jealousy and establish paternity, patriarchy and law with one unchanging God ruling the whole damn show.

Time was invested in the eternal God. It would take Darwin, Heidegger, the cosmologists, Einstein and Freud to disinvest time from God and Zeus, and reinvest it in physical and biologically evolving Being: in our universe - this is where it started - where space and time started approximately 13.75 billion years ago, or in the oceanic bliss of the timeless unconscious mind at peace at the mother's breast which is how space-time appears at first to the infant.

Freud put the tin lid on it: there was an epigenetic memory inherited by homo sapiens over the 300,000 years of human evolution (now we know about the millions of years preceding when there were hominids or ape-people): the primal father of the primal horde was now resurrected from his death by murder at the hands of the sons who also ate him to strengthen themselves but restored him to heaven as a high-god who, they vowed, would never be killed and eaten again, except symbolically, as during the Christian communion ceremony.

Thus circumcision commemorates Abraham and his son, Isaac (whom he nearly kills, and nearly eats, presumably would have partially eaten, leaving the rest of Isaac's body as a roasted sacrifice on Mount Moriah for Elohim who has tested him).

His grandson Jacob actually had the nerve to fight God in a wrestling match all night long whilst escaping with his wives and children from his ghastly father-in-law (who was also his uncle Laban)

and was given a new name Yis'ra'el, the defender against God who nearly incapacitates Jacob by getting him to strain his thigh sinew, dangerously close to the genitals.

God and the laws of his society are venerated when the Jews drink wine and eat bread and say blessings in honour of Elohim or Adonai (YHVH) on the Sabbath, the Holy Days, and in ceremonies where through fasting and praying, singing and swaying, ecstasies are achieved including union with God's wife, the Shekhina, the feminine aspect of "I Am That I Am"

Not even adult males who convert to Orthodox Judaism are spared the rigours of the circumcision that warns of total ostracism for breaking the law – the equivalent of being without any social power – entailed in inscribing God on the penis – God Who Is What He Is. His main job is to inspire the tribes of Israel to conquer Canaan, killing man, woman and alien tribes by the hundred-thousand so as to realise this holy mission. This is de-mythologised in a new discourse about Israel and the rights of the Palestinians. As Jacob cheated his first-born twin Esau of their father Isaac's dying blessing and his birthright, so Zionist Jews did not cheat but conquered their "first born twins" the Arab and Muslim Palestinians for the land of Israel in 1947 and 1948. No wonder Israeli Zionists fight their more indigenous brothers and sisters with a sense of righteousness – the power of the strong has already been established in the Jacob/Esau struggle. What about the commandment "do not steal?"

Who is the rapist and who the castrated is ancient and political. Thus circumcision, I discovered years later was a pharmakon / pharmakos, a Jewish equivalent of Plato's and the ancient Greeks' cure the alternative to which is the full punishment of the "illness" of sexuality drastically cured in the servile fully castrated male, the eunuch whose job it is to look after the Sultan's or the Caliph's women without sexual threat to the women or to the royal owner of the harem.

So by the time I was 16, I was convinced (by Freud) that art was in part a purely aesthetic expression, intrinsically beautiful or satisfyingly horrible or ugly, and in part sexual sublimation. There was foreplay (the overture) the erection (analogous to the establishment of a main theme) the culmination of vigorous quasi-musical often dance movements, leading to one or more orgasms (musical or dramatic climaxes) and an artistic unravelling, a denouement, de-tumescence. The plot conceals the story which imparts the satisfying mystery shrouded by the Eumenides, the Fates, the Furies, the Delphic Oracle and her python. Above all the Sphinx must hide her mystery in her monstrous combination of animal and human characteristics.

Our father was a religious and learned man, at first a tailor who after being a reconnaissance pilot in the war did a degree and became a school-teacher. He had a tailoring and clothes shop in the centre of Springs. In downtown Springs, near the African township, he had a friend, as noted, a tailor, a Mr Krishnamurti who was an equally devout Hindu who catered for the skilled African workers and black tradesmen (and anonymous criminals who had cash in hand) all of whom had the money for fashionable trousers, sports jackets, and "zoot-suits" in bright colours like orange. Our father made sober suits for serious white businessmen. There was no apartheid law about shop-keeping being segregated in those days, just a racial convention, anticipating the Group Areas Act.

Transcending ethnicity, my father was fascinated by Mr Krishnamurti's Hinduism, which Lewis likened to Jewish mysticism – Kabbalism – the link being through yoga. Mr Krishna taught my father yoga and my father (secretly) taught Mr Krishna Kabbalah, aware that he was violating a Jewish

taboo about revealing this esoteric doctrine to a non-Jew. He was so convinced about Mr. K.'s genuine religious sincerity that he felt an exception should be made.

It confirmed in me that religion was certainly dangerous to one's physical and mental health, and possibly totally mad. Much later when I found myself in a world lacking in moral structure I would return to an enlightened Judaism – if there is indeed such a thing premised on the total absence of God in the world of the 1940s, when millions were being murdered or killed in a war apparently without limits: it came down to saving civilisation from a madman ruling Germany, and his Italian and Japanese allies.

The only philosophers to face up to a world without God would be the Germans Nietzsche and Heidegger, although Sartre faced the same problem until he slipped into a kind of Marxism which also bred totalitarian monsters behind what Churchill would call the Iron Curtain.

Camus emerged from this dilemma by relocating an existentialist myth as a philosophical basis for literature. Hence Mersault in "L'etranger" cannot remember anything, even the actual day on which his mother died except that every day is like every other day, having to roll an enormous stone up a hill, like Sisyphus, only to watch it roll down again, an absurd horror calling for the utmost courage. By contrast to this negative example Camus remembered his poor-white pied noir French mother in Arab-French Algeria in the 1950s whom he would choose to protect in the actual anti-colonial war, condemning Sartre's rational and politically correct duty to support the FNLA. But as yet in 1943 we were barely aware of what horror was unfolding in Europe and the Far East.

African society was in certain respects, traditionally, somewhat intact. Phakamisa, also 7, told us shyly he wouldn't be "initiated" until he was older and would go to a circumcision school in the mountains of the Transkei where his Zulu/Xhosa father came from and here was the truth at last – African "mohelim" to initiate Xhosa boys into the mysteries of their tribal identity through an ordeal of quite conscious pain.

The next coming-of-age ordeal would be my bar-mitzvah. I was 13 and Esther now 24 and, God help her, not yet married. Not only that she was studying clinical psychology at the University of the Witwatersrand and treating lunatics at the private Tara Hospital, wealthy white lunatics, she was seeing black lunatics at Baragwanaeth Hospital in Orlando Township, later Soweto, and Coloured, African and Indian lunatics at the General Hospital on Hospital Hill near the dreaded prison, the Fort where prisoners, some of them political lunatics, might also need clinical psychology especially after the Special Branch tortured them now that, in 1948, the Afrikaner Nationalists and the apartheid ideologist in chief, Hendrik Fransch Verwoerd would come to power representing the whites in the national (whites only) parliament in Cape Town. My father Lewis and my uncles Mendel and Alex had returned alive from the war up North in Libya, Egypt and Italy.

Anguished discussions took place behind Esther's back about the unwisdom of being a clever girl who had penetrated the largely male, white world of psychology and psychiatry. Would any respectable man want to "touch her" after all the stigma involved in getting mixed up in the lunacy business? Esther sought to redeem herself with the Jews by coaching me for my bar-mitzvah which would entail me chanting a portion of the Law, for the middle week of August 1949, from Deuteronomy the fifth book of the Torah, with the correct cantillation and which I would perform in front of an admiring family, friends and in the presence of Rabbi Dr. Horowitz our presiding religious

leader, who would address me instead of giving a sermon – giving me helpful hints on, what? How to survive in an apartheid society without selling out on good Jewish principles including that we are all made in the image of God? Like the minister of native affairs, Dr Verwoerd had sold out? Or Stalin, or Hitler had sold out or, being psychopaths had nothing to sell out?

Phakamisa, Alina Mtwā and Mr Matthew Mtwā, I said to Rabbi Horowitz, would come up from Natal, as life-long friends of the family. Phakamisa and Alina had left us when we moved from Springs to Sheridan Court in Johannesburg, my mother's proudly built block of flats on the corner of Delarey and Hopkins Streets in Bellevue East. The Mtwās would be invited to attend the synagogue service and the reception in the Orange Grove shul to which we had transferred our membership. Plenty of white non-Jews would be there – musicians and Minna and Lewis knew ex-servicemen who had fought Up North.

Now for the coup de grace: of course Rabbi Horowitz welcomed all friends of the family, but naturally non-Jews could not be "called up" to pronounce blessings from the reading platform or handle the Torah scroll as it was paraded through the synagogue, or open and close the Aron Kodesh the holy ark where the scroll in its vestments was kept. But, I said, Phakamisa was actually at this moment, converting to Judaism. The old man paled visibly, then laughed, "How? It's impossible! Under this present Afrikaner Nationalist government? Soon it'll be illegal for Africans to even live in or visit white (and that means Jewish) areas – not like during the war when there was a united front against fascism! What synagogue would dare to oppose segregation - apartheid - they were already using the term, so that South Africa for blacks will be like a Jewish ghetto in the middle ages! I had a Sephardi woman from Israel visit her cousin in Parktown North, so dark that she was asked to leave the restaurant of the His Majesty's cinema! Because it wasn't kosher food, I only had coffee with the Goldstein family at His Majesty's cinema, but not even a rabbi wearing his yarmulke could stop this outrage against human rights!"

The oncoming of apartheid had caused a small revolution in the Mtwā family. Matthew Mtwā who was a trained book-keeper in Greytown in Natal had been approached by the ANC organiser in the area to become treasurer of the local branch. One of his clients, Mr Ahrenson, a general storekeeper in Greytown, who knew all the local Afrikaner farmers, warned him that a Mr Van Wyk's cousin, Captain Van Wyk, was a notorious torturer and an ex-Nazi supporter previously interned by Field Marshall Smuts during the war, now with the Durban Special Branch. Mr Van Wyk had mentioned to him that Matthew Mtwā was being watched by police spies in the Greytown area and the same applied to Alina Mtwā who, with Phakamisa left domestic service with us to join Matthew and go back to teaching at the Anglican primary school, furthering her own knowledge by self-education - reading extensively books on politics, languages, anthropology, history so as to help both husband and son Phakamisa. This was a dangerous family, clearly marked out for trouble by the Special Branch.

Not only that, Phakamisa, obviously impressed by the radicalism of the Jews he had met when staying (illegally) with us in Springs and then Bellevue East where Alina and Esther and I educated him through the primary school years, using our own school textbooks and my parents' and Uncle Jerry Himmelstein's libraries ranging from languages to history to the humanities, wanted to become Jewish. For Phakamisa, which in Xhosa means "resurrected" the idea of Jesus and the Christ, the literal Son of God, annoyed him as implausible. My father Lewis gave Phakamisa a potted version of

Soren Kierkegaard to read to draw him back through existentialism into Christianity. My father was himself now managing a clothing factory for a cousin Yonah Glazerman in Forsburg, having sold his tailoring business to Mr Krishnamurti before the Group Areas Act forced the Indian tailor out of the centre of town, to whom the old white customers would reluctantly go even though it meant a walk downtown towards the African township in Springs. Lewis suspected the South African communists of dominating the ANC and joined Alan Paton's and Patrick Duncan's Liberal Party. We even shifted synagogue now becoming members of the Progressive Jewish Congregation also in Orange Grove. The rabbi there, Isaac Blumberg, had no doubts about converting Phakamisa to Judaism, to become one of the first officially black Jews in South Africa.

All this caused a sensation in Johannesburg. Whatever next? Black Marxists, even black Freudians – yes – possibly but wasn't it enough being black in South Africa, without the additional disability of becoming Jewish? Good God! Phakamisa and I had our bar-mitzvah services on the same Saturday morning in Orange Grove Progressive Synagogue! We both chanted the Torah and the Haftorah, extracts from the prophets. Black and white, Jews and non-Jews attended the service and the reception with a sprinkling of atheists from the liberal and left political parties and movements. Captain Van Wyk the Special Branch officer waited outside in Louis Botha Avenue in his Volkswagen car making notes of car registration numbers and surreptitiously taking photographs of guests, which duly found their way into files kept at the headquarters, The Greys, in central Johannesburg with faxes sent to their Durban offices.

Phakamisa and I responded to Rabbi Blumberg's address to us in the Orange Grove Progressive Synagogue with a jointly composed speech which we read in unison. Rabbi Blumberg had avoided all reference to Phakamisa's conversion and ethnicity. But of course he had to mention the proud parents, Alina and Matthew Mtwa. They sat next to Minna and Lewis Pekarsky and me and Phakamisa in the front row. Phakamisa and I in our joint bar-mitzvah speech of course had to refer to a South Africa where it was difficult to exercise one's human rights. And there in the congregation was Captain Van Wyk, taking notes especially when it came to Rabbi Blumberg's address in which he referred with pride to Phakamisa having chosen to become Jewish and what an honour it was to teach two boys who exemplified what, no doubt in some future time, what South Africa would become: a tolerant multi-racial society.

Later, after all the fuss with Van Wyk and my grandfather Philip and the Golem in the veld, my father explained Kierkegaard to Phakamisa and me. And every year he introduced us to a new philosopher. It was unheard of in South Africa to talk philosophy to adolescent boys. I asked him, after all he had seen during the war, escaping a terrible death by burning, "Is there really a God?"

"Our reason tells us 'No.' ", he replied. "But enjoy life and try and be good. Even so, you come to a kind of cliff edge, gaping into – a great ravine, a *kloof* – which is "tovu, v'vohu" as it says in the first verse of Genesis – 'chaos and void'. You see on the other side Moses speaking directly to God and God speaking directly to Moses on Sinai. It's a story, a legend *but you have to make it true*. That's what I do. God didn't make me. I make God and then He makes me in his image."