

“LIFE UP-FLOWERS FROM THE SOIL OF DEATH”

A South African story by Michael Picardie

Jannie Marais was born in 1881, the year of the Afrikaners' victory over the British in their first war of liberation. But nearly 20 years later the Marais farm was destroyed in the course of Kitchener's, Buller's and Roberts' scorched earth policy during what the Boers called their second war of liberation, the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902 in which the Boers were defeated. The terrible and merciless battle of Majuba Hill, a temporary victory for the Boers, was avenged. The British army was beginning to understand the nature of modern warfare in relation to guerrilla fighters defending what they (not necessarily their servants) perceived as an Afrikaner homeland. A lesson full of contradictions.

Jannie Marais, like many Afrikaners, saw parallels between their Old Testament fundamentalist Calvinism, and traditional Jewish Orthodox religion.

Jews had befriended his family during the 1880s a time of terrible Boer struggle to keep their temporary advantage. He came from a *dorp* - a little town - in Kwa-Zulu-Natal where an immigrant Jewish shop-keeper and his wife and children made friends with him as a young child whilst the hostilities with the British were going on. Nearly 20 years later his mother and aunts and grandparents died from epidemic disease in a British concentration camp during the second Anglo-Boer War. His father and uncles were killed or wounded in battles with the British and were left impoverished because the farm was destroyed. He fought and survived – a miracle.

Their farmland? It was itself originally seized by the Afrikaners from the Zulus in the middle of the 19th century. And in turn the Zulus and the Boers had displaced Cape Bushpeople who had hunted and gathered before and during the 18th century. The Bushpeople were virtually wiped out in a Boer/Griqua genocide.

So that was what South Africa was like under the Dutch and the British. Kill or be killed. Occupy or be occupied. And that applied when King Shaka of the Zulus introduced an African tribal imperialism.

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After their defeat in the second Anglo-Boer War some Afrikaners managed to cling on in semi-skilled jobs on the railways, the lower ranks of the civil service or the post-office or joined the police. General Smuts and General Botha's government of "reconciliation" reserved jobs for poor whites with a colour bar against Africans and other "non-Europeans". Some reconciliation.

When he was a young man Jannie Marais left the *dorp* and his foster-family to stay with distant cousins in Braamfontein, an inner-city part of Johannesburg. The cousins worked in the railway workshops in and around Braamfontein and in Germiston's marshalling yards. Germiston was the next big junction on the main line of the Witwatersrand railways.

He trained as a teacher in Johannesburg. He had a gift for languages and was considered quite an intellectual.

John Marais went to the Dutch Reformed Church of his forefathers, married a Christian and they brought up Christian, white, Afrikaans-speaking children. But he never forgot the Yiddish he learned in the early 1880s when he was a child. In Johannesburg he made Jewish friends at the teachers' training college, and subscribed to a Yiddish newspaper in Johannesburg. Both Hebrew and Yiddish were written in Hebrew characters. He taught himself Hebrew from a textbook and the Hebrew bible.

He thought the Jews were the chosen people – anyway they had manifested extraordinary kindness to him and as well as being the progenitors, with God, of Jesus the Christ. His favourite poetry was in the book of Isaiah predicting the coming of an Israelite Prince of Peace, the light of the world.

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My father Lazar Pekarsky, named Eliezer ben Moshe at his circumcision in 1899 in Milejczyc, eastern Poland on the border of Belarus, immigrated with his mother and younger sister Sonia-Jeanne to join my grandfather Mr Moses Joseph Pekarsky (who had relatives Milejczyc, in but had moved to Kaunas in Lithuania which the Jews called Kovno). They were all bound for the fabulous sounding city of gold, Johannesburg.

They lived on the Witwatersrand in small mining towns or suburbs of the city like Malvern, Cleveland, Randfontein, Krugersdorp and finally Kensington.

As was common, the main breadwinner, usually the husband and father, preceded the women and the children to establish an occupation, to earn and save money for a house and furnishings, sometimes to set up a retail, wholesale or industrial business, sometimes to practice a trade or a profession.

The Randlords, people like Cecil Rhodes, the famously rich and powerful Kimberley, Johannesburg and Rhodesian imperialist when he was Prime Minister of the Cape encouraged Jewish immigration from eastern Europe.

At the end of the Anglo-Boer War in 1902, the Transvaal, and the whole of South Africa was under British control. Jews were needed to build up the secondary infrastructure around gold and diamond mining on the Witwatersrand and Kimberley. The Jews had to learn the lingua franca of the great gold-mining metropolis, English. Many of them were already shopkeepers and merchants and had established trade routes and learned how to get on economically and master other languages in the Diaspora for 2000 and more years.

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Moses Pekarsky started off as a *Kaffereatnik*. A *kaffer* was Afrikaans for *kafur* which was Arabic for an infidel, who could by convention, be enslaved and beaten and even, if the master could get away with it, killed.

Because used abusively by the English and the Afrikaans whites, the term *kaffir* or *kaffer* was most offensive to Africans to whom it was applied by usually racist or economically and culturally threatened whites.

Nevertheless, it was common parlance: a *kaffereatnik* was usually a Jew running a “*kaffer eating-house*” which was a part of the gold-mining compound where the African miners would pay for and be served “*vleis en pap*”, meat and mealie meal, with a vegetable sauce and even “*kaffer-beer*” made from milk and sorghum but in restricted quantities because spirits and bottled beer above a certain alcohol level were intended for whites and forbidden to Africans.

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Mr Marais said to the dumbfounded Jewish boy and his younger sister whom the headmaster of Cleveland Primary School brought into the classroom:

“Lazar, und Sonya-Jeanne nokh shule ikh vel qebn ir lektsyes in English. In der derveyl kuk di Niu Testament - ober beser nisht zogn deyn eltern In fakt, ir zol beser onheybn mit di Tanakh “

“Lazar and Sonya-Jeanne, after school I will give you lessons in English. In the meantime look at the New Testament, but better not tell your parents. In fact, you had better start with the whole Bible.”

He smiled: “You can tell them your Afrikaans teacher speaks Yiddish!”

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John Marais’ stock of bibles (he taught English, Afrikaans and Religious Instruction) had pictures in them, etchings and photographic plates of oil paintings of sacred scenes from originals done during the Italian Renaissance by masters like Leonardo, Raphael, Michelangelo, Tintoretto, Caravaggio. As if the children did not know it already, “graven” images, let alone of biblical characters, angels and especially God (the Sistine Chapel) were forbidden by Jews, and even by Calvinists like Marais, although he took religion, all religions, with a pinch of salt.

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Lazar who was now 8 and Sonya-Jeanne who was 6 hid the borrowed book at home and studied the translation from Hebrew to English secretly – secretly because of the pictures.

Lazar had already been to the famous seminary, the *yeshiva* in Slabotka in Kaunas, (Kovno to the Jews) and knew Hebrew which he could translate into Yiddish for Sonya-Jeanne and thus they learned the English on the opposite side of the page.

John Marais admired the liberalism of another Marais to whom he was related, a genius, so it was said, Eugene Marais who wrote this kind of *Kafferboetie* (literally “Kaffir-brotherly”) poem roughly translated by John Marais. He gave a typewritten copy of it in English and the original Afrikaans to Lazar and Sonya-Jeanne. Translated it read:

The Dance of the Rain by Eugene Marais

Oh, the dance of our Sister!

Only at the top of the mountain does she stumble,

and her eyes are shy;

and she laughs softly,

And from afar, she beckons with one hand;

her bracelets shine and her beads sparkle;

she gently calls,

She tells the winds of the dance,

and she invites them, because the terrace of the house is huge,

to the greatest wedding.

The big game chase in the plain,

their dam is scooped from a hilltop,

wide they stretch their nostrils

and they swallow the wind;

and they stoop, to see her fine traces in the sand.

The little people deep underground

hear the drag of her feet,

and they creep closer and sing softly;

"Our Sister! Our Sister! You have come! You have come!"

And her beads shake,
and her brass rings shine in the sun.
On her forehead is the fire plume of the mountain vulture;
she steps down from the height;
she spreads her kaross with both arms;
the breath of the wind subsides,
Oh, the dance of our Sister!

It read far more subtly and somehow was more muscular and more onomatopoeic in Afrikaans.

Dans van die reën deur Eugene Marais.

O, die dans van ons Suster!
Eers oor die bergtop loer sy skelm,
en haar oge is skaam;
en sy lag saggies,

En van ver af wink sy met die een hand;
haar armbande blink en haar krale skitter;
saggies roep sy,
Sy vertel die winde van die dans
en sy nooi hulle uit, want die werf is wyd
en die bruilof is groot.

Die grootwild jaag uit die vlakke,
hulle dam [is] op die bulttop,

wyd rek hulle die neusgate
en hulle sluk die wind;
en hulle buk, om haar fyn spore in die sand te sien.
Die kleinvolk diep onder die grond
hoor die sleep van haar voete,
en hulle kruip nader en sing saggies;
"Ons Suster! Ons Suster! Jy het gekom! Jy het gekom!"

En haar krale skud,
en haar koperringe blink in die wegraak van die son.
Op haar voorkop is die vuurpluim van die berggier;
sy trap af van die hoogte;
sy sprei die vaal karos met altwee arms uit;
die asem van die wind raak weg.
O, die dans van ons Suster!

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Much to my grandfather Moshe Pekarsky's annoyance the children, respectively Lazar 8 and Sonya-Jeanne 6, brought this poetry home, which was, the parents thought, irrelevant and too hard for them. The Pekarsky parents soon discovered Mr John Marais' illustrated copy of the Hebrew and the Christian Bibles translated from Hebrew into English on the page.

The introduction to this bible actually explained that the New Testament, so-called, was originally written in Greek. The editor of this illustrated children's bible stated the real Jesus the man, who was the literal Son of God, of course could speak Hebrew, which was God's own language, although most ordinary people spoke Aramaic or Greek or Latin. The vernacular, Aramaic, was written in Hebrew characters.

My grandmother Fanya (actually Fanny although even in 1907 this name was acquiring "rude" associations maybe from the music hall songs one heard on records and at the Standard Theatre in Johannesburg's Market Street) was the traditional, moderating wife and a gentle mothering type,

and decided to explain to my father and aunt that the Christian bible was not *kosher* and even the Hebrew bible *with pictures* was ritually unclean even though she realized the children needed to study English from a familiar text. Their father would even pay Mr Marais for extra-lessons for the children in English and Afrikaans. “But don’t look at the pictures, especially of Jesus and the Apostles, let alone Moses and (God forbid!) God.”

There was an expression they used: “*past nisht*” to describe breaking a taboo. That’s what “*past nisht*” meant in Yiddish: that which was repugnant to Jewish conformism and religious orthodoxy which was equated with common Jewish decency, let alone *kashrut*, ritual cleanliness and order.

My father, Lazar, called in Hebrew “Eliezer”, meaning “God has helped”, was also the name of the man Jesus raised from the dead, Lazarus of Bethany. My father began to write poetry by the time he was a pupil at Krugersdorp High School and Moses Pekarsky was shocked by his son’s religious unorthodoxy. He was religious alright but becoming a mystic. He actually thought God existed literally in nature. Moses called Lazar an Epicurean, a Greek kind of philosopher when he struggled through Lazar’s nature poems in English. Then Lazar, only 16, left a collection of all his poems in a manuscript folder lying around in the family home. Moses could read enough English to know Lazar was becoming a Christian:

“Believe not the blind priests who corrupt the truth

And veil my teachings when they say that I the Nazarene

Was crucified to purge your sin and win you paradise.

The changeless Law forbids that I should die for you,

Nor eat or drink or live for you.....

I only showed the wonder way of God:

Life up-flowers from the soil of death.”

When Lazar came back from playing hockey at Krugersdorp High School on the west Rand his father drew the revolver he normally kept in an outfitting shop which he could now afford to rent and run after being a *kaffereatnik* in Cleveland on the east Rand.

“Aoyb ir zent a kristlekh, aoyb ikh vi fil vi leyenen oder hern fun ir vegn Joska Pandera, ir vet farlozn meyn hoyz!”

“If you are becoming a Christian, if I so much as read or hear from you about Yoska Pandera, you'll leave my house!”

Frightened, Lazar ran out and pondered his fate.. Sonya-Jeanne distracted herself from this family *broigus – a feud* - by putting on a record of Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* and practising the ballet and the singing she had been learning from private teachers in Johannesburg which she reached by train, paid for by the Pekarsky parents as part of a decent up-bringing for a nice Jewish girl. They had a wind-up gramophone.

Jesus for Orthodox Jews, on the other hand, compared to Tchaikovsky was not nice. Thousands and later millions would die at the hands of baptised Christians, which happened when Hitler and the Nazis came to power from 1933 onwards. Hundreds of thousands of Jews emigrated to the west and to the British empire where the Africans would be on the lowest tier of the social order.

Whereas previously they were the like the Africans in South African - on the lowest tier of the Tsarist empire, almost a scapegoat class liable to *pogroms* inspired in part by the priests of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Tsarist secret police.

In Germany Luther himself wrote a book “On the Lies of the Jews” and called for them to be purged from Protestant Christendom.

So, Jesus was called “Yoska” by orthodox Jews which is a Yiddish diminutive for his Hebrew designation Yeshua. Jesus was indirectly blamed for anti-Semitism generated by the gospels themselves which, as in the gospel of John, he was quoted calling the Jews children of the devil, words put into the mouth of Jesus, the literal Son of God.

To call him Joska Pandera was of course blasphemous in Christian eyes. Pandera was supposed to be the name of the Roman soldier whose servant Jesus cured, and scandalously so the Jewish Orthodox implied, this human being Pandera was Jesus' father.

The Jews learned how to hit back. At least, the decent Jews didn't sell alcohol illegally or worst of all for Jews, run brothels except some renegade Jews who trafficked unprotected girls living in poverty in eastern Europe with false promises of decent employment in the now “pacified” post-Boer War South Africa.

Africans, educated Africans and pagan migrant workers watched from the side-lines.

In Europe and Russia, Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin also watched for the next turn of the death-mill of history.

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Lazar gratefully accepted pocket-money from the Pekarsky parents who were perhaps secretly pleased by their son's poetic ability despite their shocked reservations about his religious eccentricity.

Lazar had heard of Freud. He went to the public libraries and the bookshops. With his *bar mitzvah* money he travelled to the biggest Johannesburg library which had a reference section and read Freud whilst Sonya-Jeanne looked at serious volumes about dancing and singing. She was being taught how to read music and practiced her choreography at home in between ballet and singing lessons.

Lazar discovered something amazing. Others referred to Freud as a fraud, and his own religiosity and sexual inhibitions tempted him to do the same. But reading Freud and Breuer and Freud himself at the beginning of the 20th century one had to acknowledge certain psychoanalytic insights about the wars and persecution with which all Jews were familiar: we project our repressed inner life into the world to kill it in the Other in phantasy and then in reality. So he went on with his poem:

Life up-flowers from the soil of death....

Heaven's shining gate may lead through

The gate of hell. I the Nazarene

Played the Titan's tragic role, Prometheus like.

In the aeonian play of God, St. George

Destroys the dragon in himself...

Perseus the horror-haired Medusa,

To free the inner spirit bound.

St. George

Destroys the dragon in himself...

Perseus the horror-haired Medusa,

To free the inner spirit bound.

But for him, Christ was the Messiah who delivered freedom or rather autonomy to all humanity:

“Believe not the blind priests who corrupt the truth

And veil my teachings when they say that I the Nazarene

Was crucified to purge your sin and win you paradise.

The changeless Law forbids that I should die for you,

Nor eat or drink or live for you.....

I only showed the wonder way of God:

Life up-flowers from the soil of death.”

All I can say is to thank him for his wisdom and revere him as man of moral courage born and growing up in cruel times.

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