

Chapter 9 My Reminiscences

The previous chapter ends rather abruptly and I'll tell you why. A couple of days ago I started the computer in the normal manner and it booted as far as the window "all rights reserved" AND NO FURTHER. No cursor, no response to the normal delete procedure – nothing. Briefly, there was nothing left in the computer other than I had previously saved in a file. Fortunately I had taken the precaution of saving my work on Chapter 8 in a file and thus saved myself considerable re-typing.

We have just arrived in Pretoria, after two days of moving, to Julius Jeppe street in Waterkloof, where accommodation is available for six months, sufficient time we thought, to find a permanent home. Coincidentally a colleague who had also been transferred from Cape Town, but a while before us, had a 6-cylinder Vauxhall for sale at an asking price of 700 pounds. The said colleague, named Saayman, a nit-picking pedant was the first owner of this well-maintained and cared for easy-to-drive little vehicle.

Easy-to-drive was important because Mam would be the main user of the car, though she then had no driving license. Pretoria is a pleasant place to live – the streets are wide, the shops attractive, the climate beats that of Cape Town, and Mam was comfortable there. Pretoria people, overwhelmingly Afrikaners, detested Johannesburg, and, at the time Pretoria was modernising and expanding both residentially and commercially, to the extent that an ex-mayor lamented the change and yearned for a bygone era. The conservatism of the population was something to behold.

I expected huge hassles with getting a driving license but it went surprisingly easy. My old Dutch license was the key, it converted effortlessly and once Licensed I could commence teaching len (Mam).

Now it is one thing to be married and to support your wife in every normal way, but it is something else to teach her to drive. We found, as others have, that this doesn't work, partly but not entirely due to the character of the teacher, (though he admits this with difficulty), and it took a professional driving instructor to get her licensed. That the instructor was amazed by how well she had been taught by her husband goes without saying. With the license, and the vehicle, we experienced the kind of freedom I had last enjoyed in Surabaya.

Mam was still wearing her hair in the "Hilversum style" at this time, though there's nothing wrong with that. Nevertheless she chose to visit the hairdresser at the end of Julius Jeppe street, taking the car to celebrate her independence. For some reason I went along for the ride, possibly to patronise the shopping centre. Since I was present I offered the hairdresser my opinion on possible new hairstyles for Mam, who affected a very casual attitude over this.

The hairdresser, who was a Hollander, opined how unusual it was that this husband took such an interest in his wife. Most, he said, would drop their spouses at the door and inquire at what precise time they should return, punctuality being very important in these situations..

Thinking about it now I recall the fuel pumps at a nearby filling station, which look much the same today as then. Your tank gets partially or completely filled, your tyres get checked to your specified pressure, your radiator level is checked (mostly I didn't do this since the radiator may be under pressure), your oil and battery levels are looked at, and your front and rear windows are cleaned.

By reverting to the *lullig* European norm we could reduce the price of fuel but, at a stroke, render 100,000 people unemployed. There was an inquiry into this since it's a question you ask yourself every time you fill up. The answer was a resounding "No". But I digress.

Mam suddenly looked completely different – more like a super-annuated schoolgirl. I was more dependent on Mam than I realised and I remember having to get used to the new look. We had brought from Oma Rie in Holland a ladies bicycle that we'd used in Plumstead (Cape Town). On the back was a basket for children, and Mam was quite a spectacle on the road – she actually enjoyed the bike more than I. The hills in Pretoria made cycling impractical and it was in any case stolen out of the garage one night despite being locked, though only to itself, the slight weight being insufficient to deter Transvaal thieves.

I continued to commute to my office at the bank by bus while Mam had the car and was confident enough to drive it around. Pretoria was an attractive and clean city with many parks, the larger of which were very pleasant for walking. Our time in Julius Jeppe however was limited. One early evening we received an unexpected visit from a certain Professor Oberholzer as well as a Dr. Oberholzer, who appeared to be Oberholzer Jr.

It quickly transpired that they were welcoming us in the name of the Dutch Reformed Church of Pretoria. We chatted a while and then soon left, in the typical style of Church visits, but it got me thinking: a professor *and* a doctorate from the University, 'a little much of a muchness'. And then we thought: 'You know what? These people think that being a banker living in Waterkloof I must be some big shot, which I wished I was but, sadly, wasn't.

And so we lived there peacefully though it soon became clear that people in the Transvaal worked a lot harder than their cousins in the Cape. The Netherlands Bank was an ineffectual little bank due to the shortcomings of the CEO, named KakeBeeke or, more fittingly 'Kak 'n Bietjie' as the Afrikaners called him. He was an unambitious miser committed to mediocrity as, sadly, was the manager of the Pretoria Branch who sank into dementia at his end. The same was true for Kakebeeke and many of my senior colleagues.

All this happened early in the year 1953. Our life in Pretoria was otherwise peaceful. Mam enjoyed Pretoria for good reason – it is a pleasant well-wooded city with very wide streets, so wide, one hears, that you could U-turn a wagon with a full span of oxen attached. Necessary since, unlike a motor car, an ox wagon has no reverse gear. The mobility conferred on us by the car made a great improvement. Though I continued to commute to town by bus, Mam was unshackled and could move round freely.

There was one serious problem: The Standard Banker; his wife then had a maid, an old and rather heavy woman and a condition of renting the house was that we were to keep her employed. This was hard to grow accustomed to though I hoped we would succeed for the sake of the future, because for Mam there was now no housework to do at all, leaving her free for other things.

But as 1953 progressed Mam brought forth news: there was another baby on the way, due towards the end of the year – just when we need to move out of the house. Shu – nothing is permanent and I could see Mam was fretting over the coming move. This was also very soon after the arrival of Saskia, Mam was not fastidious about maintaining a calendar and that duty was usually shunted onto my shoulders. The cause of the pregnancy is also clearly me, though Mam often felt the ‘urge’ without admitting as much!

So, lease termination and house-buying is what we did in mid-1953, moving a little closer to the city. We acquired a house that I from the start did not like, but choice was limited. It has a garden full of huge rocks, but it was big enough and Mam felt satisfied with it. The corrugated iron roof, widely used in Pretoria, which was noisy in the rain and, during thunderstorms which are common in the Transvaal, quite deafening.

What do you do about meter-sized rocks in your garden without dangerous explosives? You heat them up with a day-long ultra-hot coal fire, and then of the day attack them with a sledge-hammer. The rock breaks into pieces along cracks caused by the heat.

Annemiek and later Fyk attended an English-speaking nursery school to learn English, which worked well. We, Mam and I too, wanted to avoid at all cost raising little Afrikaners. All of these chores like finding nursery schools was handled by Mam. The period around 1953 saw the powerful rise of Afrikaner Nationalism aka Apartheid which was pursued relentlessly. Children of Afrikaners that were not happy with the political direction of the country were sent to Afrikaans schools for indoctrination and kept out of English schools. And Mam was determined as I was too that our children not become little Afrikaners.

The dire need to get Annemiek and Fyk into a preparatory school was driven by the tendency to test the English-language skills of new entrants at English schools, and those that fell short even slightly were relegated to Afrikaans schools.

That was about the time that that Afrikaner started to dig his own grave with serious intent. No concession against their dogma was possible, and they refused to see that the relentless striving for Afrikaner hegemony was their own death sentence. Hence, Mam’s zeal in this regard saw Annemiek and Fijko registered at an English school.

We soon received another visit from Oberholzer Jr. The ridiculous thing was that a dominee was regarded as so important, by himself as well as others, that they would arrive unannounced and expect you to drop everything and attend to them. And so it was this time too, the difference was that Mrs. O came along as well. I remember Mrs. O firstly because of her fat thighs and, secondly, her outsized bosom.

They arrived at 6pm, while Mam’s hair was in disarray, and sat themselves down. I remember thinking when Mrs. O sat down what a tight fit she was in the chair, and my own negative attitude towards them was minor compared to what Mam was feeling. Their first question was how was it going with the children? And were they going to school yet? Yes indeed, we said. Oh, and where would that be? Just down the road, we answered. But that an English school!! Yes it is, we agreed.

Immediately Mrs O turns to the Doctor and says Let’s get out of here. And they stand up, head for the door and disappear into the dark night. That’s when we realised that the Dutch Reformed is no Church at all, but an Afrikaner Nationalist club with a hair-thin ecclesiastical veneer. And I’ve never been back. Later, in Johannesburg where there is

Netherlands community, Mam got involved with some enthusiasm and even joined some club that served after-church coffee.

But we're still in Pretoria where, on the 9th December 1953 Marion was born in a special maternity hospital, 'De Moedersbond'. What I said about the Dutch Reformed church previously applies equally to the other churches, Afrikaans or English, the English possibly slightly more liberal, but never anti-Afrikaans. Clearly a complicated country, a complication that has led to the current state of affairs, on which I'll deliver more commentary later. The Roman Church stood apart from this mess.

This put everybody back to the grindstone with all the limitations that a new baby brings, particularly for Mam. It became clear that the future in Pretoria was not looking too bad, and Mam too was not at all unhappy there. We lived at the very beginning of Brook street where the garden was non-existent, just a house in the centre of an un-made piece of veld. The terrain was very stony to deep below the surface. Why buy there? Pretoria was also well-known for its poor-white Afrikaner population. Pretoria North was out of the question because you didn't want to raise your children in that kind of neighbourhood and in the south there was not much on the market. There was a further limitation – a house should not cost more than four year's salary. Since my salary had risen lately we had no problem there.

For the garden we had a remarkable little chap who claimed to be able to make the big rocks into small rocks - and without the explosives which would have destroyed the house. I was pretty sceptical when he brought out a sledge-hammer because I'd already tried that with no success, but then the 'tuinspook' as we called him asked for a sack of coal, and it dawned that we had just the right guy for the job here.

He picked a large rock out of the multitude and built a fire underneath and around it. The fire burned all day and as evening settled he turned to hose onto this hot rock which developed lots of hairline cracks. These cracks made the sledge-hammer immediately effective and reduced the large rock into small bits very quickly. Nevertheless we had a serious disagreement with Tuinspook, who wanted to heat only one rock per day, thereby securing life-long employment, while we thought in terms of many rocks each day, since each fire largely takes care of itself.

We experienced a lot with this little man. One Sunday we noticed a strong smell of fish in the kitchen area the source of which was difficult to trace. It seemed to come from the garage or, more likely, servant's room which had a steel door and a single window high in the wall, the better to deter night ghosts. Ascending a ladder I found the source of the stink on the window sill – a large pile of fish skeletons, the residue of fish being filleted at the nearby Cafe cum fish and chips shop. Tuinspook delved into the garbage cans behind the Cafe and salvaged these skeletons, which still had considerable meat between the bones, and dried them in the servant's quarters for transport to the townships 'Cafes' where soup was made from the dried residues..

At length I managed to establish the semblance of a garden around this house., but planting a lawn was impossible with so much stone. Then I discovered a species of lawn grass that grew mostly above ground. Walking on this quasi-lawn was difficult since your toes would snag the runners, so I laid flagstones in the walking areas as well as in the driveway to keep the car out of the mud. The stony ground however prevented the flagstones from embedding, and I always heard Mam returning when she made the paving wobble.

Around this time the bank bought holiday accommodation for use by the bank employees in Doonside on the South Coast. The Afrikaner contingent mostly took their holidays at the family *Plaas*, but Doonside became our regular vacation destination, until the bank bought other accommodations – a boon for Mam.

These things were the doing of Dr Holsboer who was determined to erase all trace of Kakabeke and convert us into a real bank, in which he succeeded admirably. In retrospect Kakabeke was a dull, bland character, miserly and lacking any vision and when he at last was to be pensioned off he was nowhere to be found. It turned out he's secretly fled to Amsterdam to prevent the nomination of Dr Holsboer as his successor.

Holsboer had the wild ambition – which he realised – to build a new Head Office. He was a shy, dour man with no charisma, but for that purpose you can hire people. Mam liked Pretoria better than I, but this came from my recognition that there was no action at the Pretoria office.

And we decided to apply for overseas leave, which was already somewhat overdue, and Marion was no longer a new-born infant. The exact date escapes me now but we went by ship since flying was not usual and extremely expensive. We travelled outbound on a Dutch ship the *Zuiderkruis* and the return timetable meshed nicely with the schedule of the *Athlone Castle*, one of the ships of the Union Castle Line. Mam was against this due an experience of Rie Runhaar, who had also travelled on Castle line and made a very stupid mistake. On arrival at Southampton she was unaware that onward travel to London was by boat-train and had consequently missed that train - something that Mam would never do. So Mam and the children would return on the *Waterman*, which was like the *Zuiderkruis*, a converted Liberty ship and hence not very comfortable. The cabins accommodated 6 and Mam had an annoying and tiresome woman foisted on her. I returned on the *Athlone Castle* however.

But that was leaping ahead of the story of the holiday. Through Leo Vuyck (a bosom buddy from my schooldays), an aged Chevrolet was bought for our account. Second hand cars are cheaper in Holland than here, and that was really lovely. We stayed with Mam's parents, which was a huge imposition to make on the old people, but unavoidable since making alternative arrangements, such as renting a house. would have caused huge offence.

We ran up a heavy mileage in the car which consumed huge amounts of engine oil. On one of the first excursions, travelling down the *Elzenlaan* we came across some workmen pruning trees, removing entire branches. Fyk, who liked to ride in the back standing on the prop shaft tunnel says: "Look, *real* (echte mensen) people work on the trees here", which pained his grandfather, who was a mealy-mouthed anti-racist, as it would any other Hollander to be declared a real person on the basis of being white.

The remarkable thing is that none of our children show inherent racist trait other than Fyk (at age 5! Ed) who is currently in the middle of it, and sails his yacht up and down the east coast of Africa without indulging in racial genocide.

Thanks to the car we could do all sorts of things and take people all over the place. We had a great time and we could get to lots of place in short order since the country, unlike South Africa, is very small.

The roads in Holland then were a lot different from today. A traffic jam was a rarity and it was an "undivided pleasure" to drive around there. There were lots of attractions for the children like Efteling and Madurodam to visit and we admired the bulb fields and the nearby botanical gardens De Keukenhof. Things in Holland are often done on the cheap -

it is not a country of cities and wide thoroughfares and public squares. Holland is notable for its neatness, simplicity if you want to be more specific. Government buildings and Parliament are not grandiose, but well-maintained.

Rotterdam, which justly claims to be the largest harbour city has a monument commemorating World War 2 bombing which left a large gap in the city's centre. The monument is striking and exceptional but is not prominently placed.

I made the mistake of saying to len and her father that a particularly unsightly section of a canal-side in Amsterdam, old, decrepit and decayed near the old Mint tower, should be demolished and redeveloped. OY the reaction I received! No sense of history! Clearly not a Hollander at heart! But not many would disagree with me: the whole area was putrid, the canal walls collapsing, the stink overpowering - you cannot image the degree of decay, and all of it totally unused and unusable.

There are indeed plazas, but these are of small size and when there are monuments on these they are located in a corner and are used as public conveniences by the 'long-haired'. You want to stay away from the cities, but the rural areas -which are exceedingly flat - are very charming and attractive, and offer good food as well. The so called 'sandlands' of the Veluwe, a particularly beautiful region were not accessible due to the business of mating deer who need a peaceful environment to do that successfully. We never ventured outside of the Netherlands borders.

The region of Friesland has a unique and singular character. There you can still clearly see the historical reality of rich farmers and their lowly peasant labour who lived separate from the landowners. Large, stately farmhouses barns for the expensive coaches and stables for the teams, and outbuildings with facilities for paying the peasants. Some of the manors with surrounding moat to emphasise their owners huge wealth, earned partly from agriculture, but also shipping and trade.

Historical trends still extant are seen in the smallness of the villages of peasant cottages centred around a church. The cottages stand on higher ground named a 'terp', which exist since the Middle Ages when there were no dykes to protect against high water. The terps were raised from surrounding clay beds, often by monks of the Roman Church, that being the only church at the time, and monasticism a sought after spiritual ambition, where you strove for the Heavenly Kingdom on earth. The monks exercised a wide influence of many aspects of life, not just, as often depicted, just making copies of the Bible, even today the term 'monks work' recalls the hard work performed by the monasteries.

We visited the Vuyk family in Voorburg, near Den Haag. Leo Vuyk always claimed to have convinced len to accept my marriage proposal. The summer that I was away in Surabaya he went camping on Texel, an island north of Holland, where len was also camping close by. He took the time to recommend me to len, telling her what a fine fellow I was. Sadly both Leo and his wife are now deceased.

The time arrived for me to return to South Africa on the Athlone Castle that sailed from Southampton. That meant crossing by ferry to England, taking the train to London, transferring to another station, and another train to Southampton; which sounded complicated but was actually very easy. Mam had let Rie Runhaar, who was no genius by anybody's standard, fill her head with nonsense and therefore wanted to sail directly from Holland to Cape Town on the Waterman, which was a converted wartime freighter called a Liberty ship.

Mam used the extra time in Holland to do the rounds of all the uncles and aunts for extended farewells, which I afterwards thought was the actual reason for staying behind. I suspect Mam correctly anticipated that I was not up to such a circuit of ceremonies.

The passage on the Athlone Castle, on which I had a private cabin, was most comfortable despite this being a very old ship. Mam on the other hand did not have it so good. She was in a cabin for 6 and, since there were only 5 of them, was forced to share. The sixth occupant was a nasty old woman, added to which the fact that converted freighters are never the least comfortable, and upon arrival in Cape Town there is not the convenience of a boat-train to complete your journey. The whole journey was unpleasant due to the shortcomings of the ship, on which the fare was actually the same as the much superior Union Castle ship

But that just made the homecoming in Brook street the more welcoming. This was the only time we as an entire family travelled overseas together. Later, in 1961, len went alone with Irene by Trek Airways to Hilversum, Mam and I went together once, that was in 1975 and we were in Haren, Groningen with Rob and Mur (Mam's brother and his wife) in August when we were phoned by Georges to announce the birth of Dominic.

But I'm jumping ahead - we're still in Pretoria, and after our homecoming the Pretoria office of the bank was subjected to an inspection, which had everyone on pins and needles since and fault or wrongdoing would affect your chances of promotion. No fault was found with me but I remember some unpleasantness that made Van Wieringen decide: Now I have to get rid of van der Molen - he must be sent somewhere else. I seem to recall it was over some piece of paper where the amount was not repeated in words, which was sufficient reason, in the absence of a better one, to get rid of me. Shortly after this I was transferred to the Fox street branch in Johannesburg. At that time the Head office was still in Pretoria, though Holsboer had long held the opinion that the head office should actually be in Johannesburg, as did most banks, with the exception of Volkskas, which as an Afrikaner bank could not afford the moving costs.

So that meant selling a house again, which was no problem and returned a profit, though not as much as in Cape Town. The largest profit we ever made on selling a house was the with the last one we sold, in Wilde Amandel street. There we sold for three time the purchase price - though that was much later and inflation played a role.

It is not easy buying a house in Johannesburg. Your first decision is the area where you want to live, which need not be in the vast area of Johannesburg itself but may be one of the dormitory satellite towns to the north, south, east or west.

Initially I commuted from Pretoria by train while we spent weekend house-hunting without much success. We found several new suburbs being built high on hillsides, far from the city and far from shops, which we decided against.

On a Saturday we arranged meet at a spot on Louis Botha Avenue after the office closed. Mam would come from Pretoria in the car and we would continue from there to hunt for a house. And oh how terrible - after a short wait here comes len on a city bus with the children. The car had broken down in the middle of Louis Botha Avenue with a non-functional clutch, fortunately near a repair garage to which the car was towed on the understanding that the vehicle could be retrieved on Monday afternoon. So far so good, but here is Mam somewhere on the very long main road to Pretoria and catches a bus to our meeting point, but then is unsure exactly where the garage is. Indeed a very long and busy street in a totally strange city, and nor does she remember the exact name of the garage. So we walked the entire length of the street, down on one side, and up on the

other, but nothing looked familiar, until I spotted the green rump of the car protruding from behind a hangar-like workshop.

The problem with the clutch, which was cable-operated, was that the bead had pulled off the lower end of the cable, a measure of how badly made cars were in that era. I remember being a little short with Mam over this and the longer we searched for the car the more confused she became exacerbated by the fatigue from all this walking. I remember calming her with: Not to worry Mam, the car is here somewhere and I bet when we find it we'll say that if only we'd started on the other side we'd have found it sooner. And that is the way it turned out.

Well, the problem was sorted out by us taking a taxi to the station and returning to Pretoria by train, and then another taxi home. On Monday after work I retrieved the car and all was well again.

And where did we at last establish? In Blairgowrie, the new suburb we'd seen several times in the distance but declared 'too far'. On the Standard Drive, which had not yet been tarred when we moved in. And we were there for many years, the primary school was nearby, and right across the road when one was built there a few years later, the high school some distance further. We lived there for a long time - long enough to fill another chapter.

