

# and view of South Africa

umphant boy paraded his trophy in the others' faces. I saw the same unrestrained playfulness African children enjoy without an elder's shadow. Even amidst a destiny of limited hopes, children are the most enviable of all souls; unfortunately, these boys will learn the corruptions of their home long before they outgrow childhood.

Later, I found that my unending search for food need only take me across the beach to a man named Andy. His small lodge was a gathering place for some of the small white community and deliciously prepared seafood dinners. It was surprising to find an enclave of whites in a black homeland, but from what I understood, many were original inhabitants of Port St. Johns before it was set aside for the Xhosa and Pondo people.

It seemed the business of most everyone I met to turn any conversation into a political one, beginning with the standard, "so, what do you think of South Africa?" I had learned from one particularly violent Africaner that it is in the best interest of self-preservation to be neutral on the subject until you can find out how passionately the person feels about apartheid.

Dinner was with, among others, a retired commandant and a platinum prospector. And so the standard question was put to me, the table grew silent, and I assumed my now well practiced vague neutrality. This was all the commandant needed to begin his bitter remarks on the need for a strong, white South Africa. I suppose the others had heard him go off about it before, because other conversations began again, though at a considerably lower volume in case he would get even more inflamed and would need to be restrained.

There aren't many things you can tell a hardened soldier about peace and how to keep it without a gun. I did, however, ask him why he was living in Transkei—a black homeland—where he was very much surrounded by his feared "black threat."

In a lowered, rasping voice he told me how his son (a soldier) had killed a black man during a house search in Soweto. The commandant was quite confident that the charges against his son would be dropped. When I asked why, he replied, "You don't understand, do you? The law in South Africa is for the whites, it always has been. The bloody kaffir [black] is scared... if a kaffir killed me, he would be strung up immediately. I can promise you that."

As I kept an icy stare fixed on the commandant, the platinum prospector turned to me: "So, what's it like to live in Canada?"

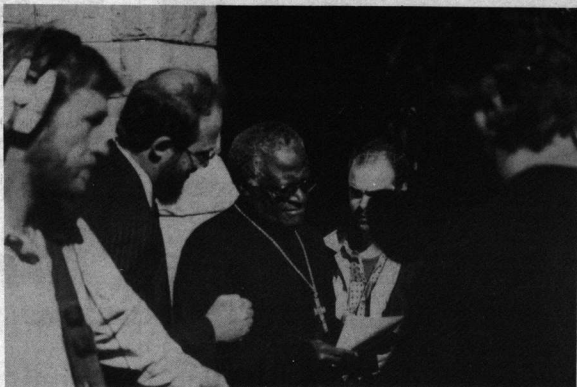
I turned to him and asked him to imagine, for half the year, everything covered under a heavy blanket of white snow. The prospector's lady-friend gave a short laugh and said, "How can you live like that? I can't imagine it, a blanket of snow would be too cold for us."

The following evening three more guests arrived for dinner, one named Michael Gavshon, from Johannesburg, a producer for CBS News. I mentioned that I especially wanted to see Soweto and Crossroads (the squatter camp that was the scene of some of the worst violence yet) but knew of no way to get to them.

Without any hesitation, Michael gave me the names of his associates in Capetown and promised to organise a tour of Soweto.

On June 12 I reached Capetown quite late but without the usual difficulties of arriving in a new city: I had a place to stay and a little more purpose than general sightseeing. I was rooming with a friend of a friend whose apartment had a magnificent view of Capetown. The city is cradled by Table Mountains and green hills, with the Indian and Atlantic Oceans meeting on the southern tip. Much of the Victorian architecture still endures, set in manicured gardens and cool coastal breezes.

The name of Michael's associate in Capetown was John Rubynthon, whose job was to take the CBS camera crew where they were supposed to go, and get them into places they were not supposed to be. I found out that I was there at an especially important time as from June 12th to the 16th it would be the anniversaries of the Sharpville Riots, the year old State of Emergency and the Soweto Uprisings of over a decade ago.



Reporters crowded around Bishop Tutu.

John and I arranged to meet that morning at St. George's Cathedral where a vigil for detainee children was to be held. It was also rumored that Bishop Desmond Tutu might address the congregation. Outside the church a Buddhist knelt in prayer. She had in front of her incense burning on a tiny, fragile table and a card explaining how children as young as eight were in detention cells. A few white children stood back, curiously staring at the woman on the ground, asking why she sat in the light rain. Some adults came and read the story of detention, but most others milled further back under the grey overcast of the city.

Two heavy-set, heavily armed policemen stood across the street, watching the people file into the stone cathedral.

One of the first to speak was a Malayan named Dehran Swart, an ex-detainee. He had been taken into detention without reason and, as detention strips one of any legal status, left open to any abuses. His first five weeks had been spent in solitary confinement. "My cell was 2½ metres long by 2½ metres. I felt it more of a cage... I was treated as less than a human. There was no toilet and after a time, the smell of waste became unbearable. I had only two things: there was a pail of water for drinking, but I dared not touch it. I was also given a thin, foul-smelling blanket, though it was utterly useless. I was never allowed to sleep long; at all hours I would be beaten and threatened with electric shock and drowning, all to sign a confession to terrorist crimes I did not commit."

After a year, he was released. The congregation seemed especially affected by Dehran Swart, as if they knew intimately of his ordeal. That could very well have been—at the time there had been 30,000 such detainees.

When Bishop Tutu took the pulpit, the camera crews and photographers instantly began filming and flashing before he had even said a word, John Rubynthon whispered that "Botha can't touch him [the Bishop] now. He's too big. Tutu even taunts them [the government] when he can."

The Bishop had the most powerfully dynamic oratory; he gave an equal amount of emotional charge to the congregation as they cheered and he damned the "democratic" laws of South Africa. "He left his speech now and the pulpit. This law does not guard against abusive powers, it is the abusive power!" The Bishop then raised his voice and his hand, predicting that there would be a permanent state of emergency

and more bloodshed if the present government did not change. The crowd yelled and clapped and the Bishop said more, but I just watched him, finding that there are few times when a living symbol is ever within reach.

When it was all over, I was the last to shake his hand. I asked if he had a moment to talk. He said no, he would be giving a statement outside. When I explained that I was from a news agency or any other organization, Bishop Tutu paused, and I stood there expressionless, paralyzed for words. "What then, have you seen since being here?" he began. I briefly told him where I had been, and that hopefully I was going to see Crossroads and Soweto with the CBS news crew.

"You will see a part of South Africa many South Africans do not wish to see or believe." He described what Crossroads and Soweto were like now; the increasingly desperate atmosphere, and the overwhelming police forces that would be in the townships on the anniversary of the Sharpville and Soweto riots. "Are you from the United States?"

"No, from Canada."  
"Ah, Canada," he said approvingly. "Your Prime Minister... Mulrony has said much on our behalf."

I agreed that he had, and as I started to say more, Bishop Tutu was called to begin his news statement. As he said goodbye, he wished me luck in finding what I came to see and asked one favor from me: that I should be a voice and tell of what I saw in South Africa.

The cameras clamored around him again outside. The Bishop gave his statement, commented on the upcoming anniversaries, the renewal of the State of Emergency, and asked for peace as he had done so many times before.

This is the first part of a two-part story by Daniel Aarons. Aarons is a University of Alberta student who travelled in Africa last summer.

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Photos by Daniel Aarons