

We all know, don't we, that nothing is ever as good as it was when we were doing it—falling in love, learning to smoke and all that. Nor is any workplace as much fun and efficient as when we were newcomers to its professional mysteries.

I've been asked to consider the moot question, "Is today's journalism much fun compared to those golden oldie days?" I would rather, of course, the last words were "when you were a cub reporter". But for some who've since come into the trade, those are indeed "the old days".

To consider this very serious issue and reaffirm my own belief that journalism is indeed fun — or should be and can always be for those who do not regard the trade as a high-falutin profession — let me start with anecdote. Not concerning those good old days, but my own modern experiences in a reborn country which acknowledges the possibility of black people being competent journalists. And having fun as hacks - which was my mistaken assumption.

The first outside assignment I selected after my return from foreign fields at the invitation of the *Weekly Mail*—now the *Mail & Guardian* under the umbrella of the London Grauniad—was the "summit meeting" at the Union Buildings, South Africa's ultimate centre of power on a hill that overlooks Pretoria. On that very important, and serious, day in 1990 Nelson Mandela and FW de Klerk finally agreed, after a very long vigil for all concerned—and dry for me—on what they portentously termed The Pretoria Minute in which the ANC agreed to suspend The Struggle.

On entering the press room within the hallowed grounds—only seen from Church Street in the apartheid past whose iniquities drove me out of the country—my eyes searched for what was, I learned, termed a hospitality area. But, alas, all it offered were tea, coffee and—I seem to remember—soft drinks. Nothing at all that would add some verve to the long wait. No booze, firewater and any variation of the age-old sustenance of the trade. And, yes, a hazard for the unwary which has led to journalists having a reputation as soaks.

It was bound to be a long day, whatever "media liaison officers" said, and old—no, "veteran" sounds better—hacks like myself would need the odd shot of the traditional sustenance that has floated us merrily through dull hours at other vigils: part of the fun, you see. And I realised that any bar off the official premises would be too far away to keep an eye, however blurry, on official proceedings, however slow. Worse still, I had no idea how far that haven offering quickies could be found even though Pretoria was my home town.

Such facilities didn't exist for nie-blanks in my growing-up days and, anyway, I'd been too young then, as were white kids my age.

Thus the gossip in the press room—not its intended use in Sir Herbert Baker's design—was slow and learned desultory: not enlivened by scandalous gossip or witty observation as it would've been at political stake-outs of an earlier era. Even the marathon vigils for the tardy passing away of Generalissimo Franco in Spain (and a Pope whose name is forever lost in a haze) were sort of fun, being far from abstemious. The belief, then, was that any form of liquid with an alcohol content was the only way to keep hacks happy and on their toes. That way, the leaden hours had passed lightly on tippy-toes.

But, of course there have always been those journos who do not indulge in such irresponsibility. Even in that era, they lurked around newsrooms and conferences chewing pens—didn't smoke either—and frowning in deep thought.

They regarded the trade as a profession and behaved like lawyers—or so they thought. They would've been shocked and disillusioned by the guzzling and behaviour of that profession if they'd ever deigned to enter El Vino's, a drinking hole where the trade and profession mingled opposite the Law Courts on Fleet Street.

But, fortunately, there were not many of that type with a serious mien when I was a cub reporter in the Boer republic. Shebeen queens knew us well as free-drinking heavy spenders and I'm told that the Federal Hotel's collapse started after the *Rand Daily Mail* closed down and, to nobody's surprise, there was a sudden shortage of customers in its notorious bar.

Neither is El Vino's what it was in the vinuous days of yore when, despite its old-fashioned rules (ties for all men and women could not drink at the bar but only when sedately seated) it was always crowded with journos exchanging gossip over wet lunches and suppers. As some old soaks insisted: good sustenance did gurgle out of bottles as well as slop out of pots and pans.

Nor are any of the Fleet Street pubs the same since newspaper proprietors moved their assets, lock stock and barrel, to Canary Wharf and other outlandish outposts. The old camaraderie is no more, and the community splintered.

If I sound maudlin, the cause is to be found in the first paragraph: nostalgia for the good old days by all of us. But of course those weren't all days of wine, women and hangovers. The basic fun that seduced reporters (who looked askance at titles like "journalist") into working long and sometimes dangerous hours for miserly wages was the job itself. True reporters were excited by the hunt: the search for inside stories—days of wine and scoops they were indeed—which would upset, and occasionally governments to titter even in the Boer republic. And, at a lesser but very satisfying level, scoops that annoyed rivals.

While I was a foreign correspondent for Reuters in East Africa, I was cabled the odd

herogram for having beaten the opposition by a few minutes—which was of great moment for news agencies trying to impress current and potential clients. And, like other reporters on any beat, I glowed with pride for hours on end and passed it among colleagues—inevitably, in some bar. Particularly great fun when their own newspapers ran my copy rather than "from our own correspondent" because the Reuters story landed earlier on news desks. A feat regarded as a betrayal by the colleague from the *Toronto Globe and Mail*, who wouldn't forgive me for weeks after he got a rocket from his Canadian employers.

That was years ago and in another age; but I've brought back home, and have hanging in my office at *The Star*, a choice few of the herograms sent to me from 85 Fleet Street. And, of course, I've also brought back a scrapbook I toted throughout the years of exile containing cuttings of my by-lined reports for *Drum* and *Golden City Post*—those long gone days when journalism was, for us who were without official recognition and thus no police protection, very dangerous fun indeed.

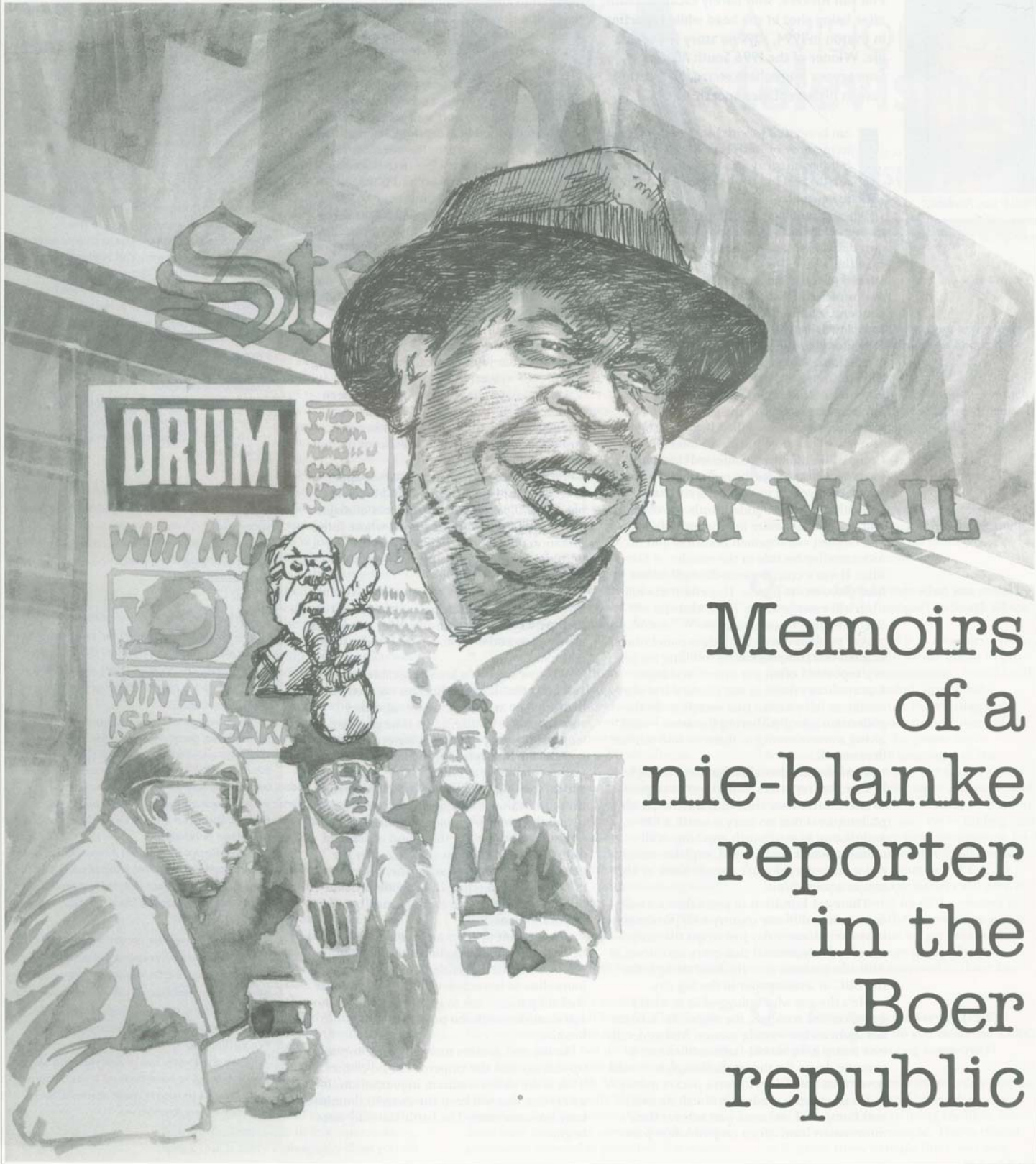
We couldn't go to press conferences and other official occasions because we didn't have the all-important Press Cards. We didn't have them because the Commissioner of Police didn't recognise that any African could possibly be a journalist. So in a riotous situation when we protested to police turfing us out that we were journalists, the bottom line was the reply: "You can't be a blerry journalist if you don't have a Press Card, boy!"

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by Arthur Maimane



Memoirs
of a
nie-blanke
reporter
in the
Boer
republic

But now press releases—reams of them from every conceivable source arrive daily—are the order of the day and what should be reporters digging into the fabric of society have become bored rewrite personnel.

Nor did we, like the current generation, ever get the press releases which have turned so many of them into re-write artists. We had to dig out the stories on our own—and surprised official spokesmen (no “persons” then) when we asked for their side of any story to balance it and so avoid a banning order. I did that almost every week when I was news editor on *Golden City Post* and the man in Pretoria came to recognise my voice. Prinsloo was Hendrik Verwoerd’s spokesman and his onerous job was justifying the workings of apartheid when the great architect was minister for Native Affairs, before the department attempted to improve its image with names like Bantu Affairs and other nefarious attempts at public relations.

I still believe that Prinsloo facilitated my passport application to avoid listening to this familiar voice asking embarrassing questions about the brutal application of apartheid—not so much the policy itself—towards the end of every week. That, too, was fun in its own, morbid way.

But now press releases—reams of them every day from every conceivable source arrive daily at *The Star*—are the order of the day and what should be reporters digging into the fabric of society, have become bored rewrite personnel. And they complain about being “de-motivated” in what was previously an exciting trade. Using civil service jargon unknown to old-fashioned hacks, they are accountable to accountants rather than their own, instinctive news judgement.

The camaraderie has gone, the accountants have taken over—the villains who have for decades been blamed for the demise of original creativity in Hollywood. In the lean days there wasn’t enough of a budget for them to interfere; but in these affluent days (the glossy new *Drum* bears no resemblance to the cheap-paper rag we created) cold-eyed logic demands balancing cost against news value. Correct guess on which wins and you too can join their chartered ranks.

And, I’m told, the new generation of editors seldom, if ever, drink with reporters. Not because the hacks would, when in their cups, tell them exactly what is wrong with their newspapers. They don’t booze, so editors are safe; but it appears they’d rather stand on their dignity than drink with their staff—again, so I’m told—except on special occasions like Christmas. But when I’ve tried to do the old-fashioned thing and “drink with the boys” it was they who didn’t think it was such a good idea.

Thus editors make many of their policy decisions in the dark since only reporters can keep them in touch with their readers. But there’s a fallacy now in even that traditional point of view since, these days, black journalists tend to live, like their white colleagues, in suburbia and are somewhat out of touch with the constituency we once served.

Not that I blame them for their choice of residence: I would certainly not have returned to the country if I was still forced to live in “locations” that have since been upgraded by apartheid’s official euphemism into “townships”.

In those good-old-bad days, it was our white counterparts (they didn’t consider us colleagues) who were in the dark. I remember young men from the *Rand Daily Mail* strolling into the *Drum* offices, looking around at us in amused surprise and then asking: “By the way, who’s this boy—I mean guy—Robert Sobukwe (or Nelson Mandela)? We hear he’s quite bright for a -you know... What d’you think, hey?”

We didn’t actually laugh in their faces, being a forgiving lot—viz, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission advocated by that other bright boy, Nelson. But we had fun putting them straight, even if we failed to reconstruct their stereotypes of

us as fellow scribes and people—and not only the surprising intelligence of Mandela and Sobukwe.

A generation later and with access to the Union Buildings—and black journalists “accepted” in the mainstream—I find what were once hacks transformed into earnest “professional” men and women who spurn the traditional hazard of my trade that created some of the fun. I have first-hand knowledge that booze has killed more journos than their covering any war zone, including Bosnia and Vietnam. My liver has survived the days of excess, but not so most of those I was wont to sip-and-fly with, in and then away from, shebeens in our youthful wild days.

But I was rather impatient with other survivors on my first return in 1990 when they only boasted about the hard-drinking days at what was supposed to be a seminar on *Drum*’s initial impact and what made it such a resounding success. Instead most of the reminiscences about “those golden days of black journalism” were about binges and blackouts.

We did gulp by the gallon to oil the ferris wheel of a merry-go-round that veered between angry resentment and hysterical laughter—and the latter wasn’t only to keep from crying into glasses of illegal, rot-gut brandewyn. But the binges weren’t all that made journalism fun.

With shebeen prices twice those at bottle stores, and paid woefully low wages, our guzzling could never have been the mainspring of the ferris wheel we rode.

We were callow youths, then, and whatever the circumstances it was that adventure into the dark which made the trade attractive: we would turn the dead-end that was black journalism into a highway that might not be paved with gold, but we’d make it as good as the whites-only variety that dismissed us as a bad joke.

We made it better, in fact: digging up stories they didn’t know existed in a world whose names were known but most couldn’t spell. We were not only cocking a snook at apartheid’s officialdom and its armed enforcers in the monthly *Drum*, and then every weekend in *Golden City Post*. Striking at

the underbelly of the monster by exposing evils that were officially not supposed to exist within the dragon. Written with gnashing teeth, most of the time—but we sort of enjoyed the muck-raking because it had value beyond selling newspapers and provided us dronkies with a professional respect. Even though, as some of our readers sneered, we were not committed political activists.

Just hacks digging up good stories, embarrassing the government and doing better than our rivals. It was an attitude accepted by Oliver Tambo, my former housemaster at boarding school where he was known as “Brother T”. On my return a generation later in 1994 Walter Sisulu remarked: “We admired you boys in those days,” but then asked, “Can we still trust you now?” And at a private audience Nelson Mandela, much older than the firebrand of yore and now head of state, made similar remarks—but didn’t ask the question.

The motto then was, quite simply, “beat the opposition”—and have fun doing it most of all. There were kudoes from “ordinary” readers which are still repeated; but that wasn’t what made the trade fun. Journalism was an adventure, not a job to make money from—nor a profession that was taken too seriously by its practitioners.

Arthur Maimane is managing editor of *The Star*. © Reserved

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