

Whitewashed in the Transvaal

Twenty-Four Hours with South Africa's Ku Klux Klan

By
A. Scott Du Pree

The last vehicle that passed by was a bus for blacks, probably mine workers, and I am not black. I contemplated pressing my ears against the day-warmed tarmac, like a mythical Indian communicating with railroad tracks in the American West. Shivering in the winter air, I readjusted the ever-present weight on my back.

Reddish rays of sunset and animal sounds sifted through thick shadows on the lonely road in South Africa's Northern Transvaal. A whitewashed arch, hard to differentiate in the darkness from tall, flat-topped Acacia trees, was the first sign of habitation I had seen. "Leeuwfontein" it said on the gate in curly-cue stencils — "Lion's Fountain" in Afrikaans.

A compact Japanese car hummed by, swung beneath the arch and idled. I hollered across the road.

"What do you want?" a startled female called out.

I had miscalculated my hitch-hiking trip to Botswana and I needed a place to stay for the evening, I told her.

I felt myself surveyed from the car: the road dust, the

enormous backpack, the tired body. "Follow behind the car," she ordered as she rolled up her window and pulled quickly under the arch.

On either side of the long drive, animal-shaped shrubs, menaced plots of marigolds and exotic plants snaked up to an amoeba-shaped lawn and a two-car carport. Slamming doors and whispered voices muffled in the night. Light streamed through glass porch doors and lit the tense muscles of two excited hounds. Behind them, a man peered cautiously at me.

"Come inside," he grunted.

A television droned the evening news next to a ham radio flashing lines of roving red lights. As I rested my pack against the wall and perched myself on the edge of an old easy chair, the man lit a South African cigarette and leaned over the ash tray next to his chair, a thin line of smoke curling around his beard. "I don't think you can stay here. It's all right with me but I have to consider the women."

"I am AWB," my host, Johannes Prinsloo, said flatly, pointing at a gold-framed portrait hanging above his chair. "And that's my man, Eugene Terre'Blanche. You know him?"

I recognized the bearded, thick-necked Eugene Ney Terre'Blanche, self-proclaimed terrorist and leader of the "Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging" or AWB. Adrenalin

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shot through my veins. The AWB, translated into the Anglo-friendly, "Afrikaner Resistance Movement," was a favorite topic at United Press International where I worked that August. Sometimes called South Africa's Ku Klux Klan, the group was notorious for its wont to terrorize blacks and for the swastikas on its paramilitary uniform. The AWB demands that the government recognize its right to form an independent nation. Although less than one percent of the white population supports the fringe organization, it regularly beats up blacks and disrupts political meetings in order to foment what Terre'Blanche described as "a civil war more bloody than the French revolution."

Prinsloo fixed his eyes upon me. "We are against our government. We're the terrorists now," he declared. I nodded, wondering if it was polite to nod to a terrorist.

Like a bush captain interrogating a captured soldier, Prinsloo began barraging me with questions: Where was I from? What was I doing? What was my motive in coming to his door? I felt that if I made any blunder, said anything suspicious, I would detonate a land mine. Unsure how to answer, I decided to tell the truth. I succinctly recounted my nationality, occupation and reason for being there.

"We don't like Americans," Prinsloo said. "And we don't trust reporters. They always get the story wrong."

I smiled awkwardly. Yes, reporters often miss the point, I agreed.

This pleased Prinsloo, who took my agreement as a signal to continue. He identified himself as an officer and told me his bush troops hoped to overthrow South Africa by crushing the renegade white-run government. It seemed to me a bitter irony of South African politics. The

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same government the AWB now opposes, gave the Boers carte blanche to build up a respectable private army and to enforce apartheid in the Transvaal.

Prinsloo must have appreciated my good manners. In spite of what I was, he decided that "the women" would let me stay. Prinsloo's daughter — the voice from the car — slipped through the doorway and amended their



Lisala, Zaire

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hospitality: "You must sleep outside and we don't have any extra beds."

Marika Malan's robust figure and bobbed haircut framed her angry face. "You say your name is 'Du Pree.' That's a South African name," she said. I told her my Huguenot ancestors escaped French persecution by fleeing from France to South Africa and the United States. I did not reveal that the American Du Prees were slave-owning Southerners who fought for the Confederacy.

I had touched a magic chord; Marika's cousin married a Du Pree. She opened up to me, a prodigal son in need of instruction, and spoke of the empty expanses of the Transvaal and the fortitude of her forbearers. The Afrikaners, also known as "Boers" (farmers) trekked to Transvaal and Natal from the Cape Colony in covered wagons early in the 19th century. "We built this land from the sweat of our brows. They, on the other hand, didn't do anything. They moved here after us and now they want to take our hard work away from us," she said.

"Don't you get it," I thought. "The world is coming down around you." My eyes narrowed sadly and I

listened.

"They're not all bad. They're just lazy by nature — not like us — and they don't want to work for what they get," Marika said. "We have blacks working for us but we don't allow them in here. They don't know how to be clean. We built them nice houses with taps in every yard. Weren't they nice?" she asked her father who nodded as he drew another cigarette from its pack. "They destroyed

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everything, you wouldn't believe. They even broke the taps. How could people live like that?"

I nodded as Marika catalogued for me the offenses of blacks in the neighboring *dorp* (town): their audacity, laziness and the nuisance they caused their employers. "Then they try to take away from us what is ours. We won't let them do that."

I fidgeted, imagining Marika, the proud matron, handing keys to the black families, as they thanked her for nothing more than bare concrete walls.

"Do you eat tripe?" Marika asked. It was the first time she had looked directly at me since the beginning of her lecture. She frowned at my involuntary expression of disgust. I have no strong objection to animal intestines, but after a turbulent day in *bakkies* (pick-up trucks), my stomach spoke with a mind of its own.

"Have you ever HAD tripe before?" Marika asked defensively. I had eaten tripe many times in my home in Botswana, I told her, realizing instantly that this would cause problems.

Marika eyed me with disbelief. "You lived with them? How did you find them, what were they like?"

How could I answer that? What adjectives could I give her? Smart, friendly, fun, hard-working, understanding, ambitious were empty words. I looked at her blankly for a moment and said simply, "They were human. Like me."

Marika was offended, "You lived with them? That's why you don't like tripe. They don't clean their tripe properly, not like us. We clean it well." She crunched her shoulders and craned her head toward me. "We're clean."

I leaned back in my chair. My nods and non-committal answers caused my hosts to redouble their efforts to initiate me into their beliefs. All South Africans want to talk about the "race problem," often starting first

conversations with "I am a racist," or "Isn't it a shame, this country." A legacy of apartheid is the premium it puts on small talk.

Marika returned from the kitchen and set a dish of mutton, banana and avocado salad and a dollop of curried tripe in front of me. She was followed by her mother and two gloomy boys.

"You know, are you a Christian? Do you believe in God? Do you believe that Jesus Christ is the savior?" Marika asked.

"Yes," I said, aware that there was but one safe answer to this question.

"If you do, then how can you say you're like them?" she asked triumphantly.

"Many black people also say that they believe in Jesus Christ. They call themselves Christian," I said, trying not to show my frustration.

"They say they're Christians," she said as though posing a problem to a student and then giving the correct answer to drive in her point, "but they're not. They're not Christ's people. He's not in their hearts." Afrikaners are God's chosen people, she said.

"The Bible says you are from the ten tribes of Israel. You must know where you are from and who you are and never forget, not for a moment. Do you know who you are?" she asked.

"I think so," I said.

Marika turned from me dissatisfied. Chanting something in Afrikaans to the older boy, she smiled and shook the youngest one out from under a sleeping dog. "I told them you should never forget. It's for them that I fear the most," she explained. The two boys got up and Marika took them to bed.

The television was switched off and my lesson was

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over. Outside the road was quiet. Change was brewing in South Africa. But here behind white arches in the Transvaal, attitudes stood still; the chosen people continued to arm themselves for Terre'Blanche's bloody revolution. ■