



Interviewed: Karrie Weinstock

Oral History Clip Title: A Packed Suitcase by the Door

Theme: Jewish Life in Southern Africa

Interviewer: Lisa Newman

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(Kerrie)

My father was a lawyer. He had actually originally got into his father's mattress business. He qualified as a lawyer but went into the business. Never enjoyed it and then had the experience after World War 2 of going to work in the displaced persons camps in Austria. This experience had a profound effect on him because he saw the legacy of racial discrimination. And when he came back to South Africa after the war, and actually married my mother, he decided he was going to leave business, practice law, and he became a civil rights lawyer in South Africa doing a lot of work in the area of race relations. Did a lot of trials around the Group Areas Act, which was during the apartheid years, a time which prescribed which areas different racial groups could live in. And one of his signature trials that he did was defending the Sharpeville Six, who he actually saved from the death penalty because of his work. And he was a profoundly principled and liberal man and I'd say a very courageous man. During the years of apartheid, he was one of the founding members of the Liberal Party, together with Alan Paton. And that was at a time when to believe in one man, one vote was really courting disaster and imprisonment. But he was a man who believed you stood by your principles. Never believed in a qualified franchise. Always believed that every man knew what was good for his family and could make a decision about who should run a country and what would benefit him and his family.

While we admired him tremendously, I think there was always a sense that we were somewhat marginalized in the community. There was always, for me, an element of fear. There was a time during the 1960s—it was called "the Emergency" in South Africa—my father was pretty sure he was going to be arrested and taken to prison. And there was a little packed suitcase right next to the front door. Always thinking. Preparing for that day. I think the fact that he wasn't arrested was because he was a man of such integrity that in the legal world he was known as a man who would never step out of the bounds of the law. And even those who disagreed with him politically and were on the right of the spectrum I think regarded him as a man of integrity and maybe even went to bat for him so that nothing ever happened to him. But because he was so politically active, my mother never was politically active. She said there had to be one parent who was always going to be available for the children. So I think we lived with a fair amount of uncertainty. Our home was very unusual. There were political gatherings. There were black people who were friends of my family. There were people who had been in prison for their political beliefs who came out of prison and who lived with us when they didn't have anywhere to live. So it was a very unusual household for a Jewish family in South Africa at that time.

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(Interviewer)

When you say you were marginalized in the community, in the Jewish community or the larger community?

(Kerrie)

I think only [sic] I wouldn't say marginalized to the extent that we [sic] that people shunned us. But I think we were considered very different because of our political beliefs.

(Interviewer)

By the Jewish community?

(Kerrie)

I think so. There were lots of Jews who were very much aligned with my parents but a larger Jewish community did not want to be part of that political, left-wing group because they saw the dangers. And as a lot of them were the children of immigrants who had known what it was to face political turmoil, they just wanted to, you know... Often people said when I was say growing up, "If it weren't for the blacks, it would be the Jews." And they just wanted to live a good life, make a good living, and have a good family life.

(Interviewer)

Keep their heads down.

(Kerrie)

Keep their heads down. And my parents didn't feel that way. And actually, my sister and I—in fact, my brother too—we all went to independent schools. And I didn't question being one of the only Jewish girls at an Anglican girls' school. But my mother subsequently said that that felt like a safe place for us children to be. Because we were not together with a lot of children who might know the kind of political work my parents did or who might comment or make... We didn't have to confront that because we were sort of in this kind of genteel, Wasp world where people didn't talk about things like that. So it was only when we were adults that my parents said that they sent us, in a sense, away from where the kids who we'd gone to primary school and had all followed on to the local public school. And we all went to private school.