

Down Memory Lane

Riebeekstraat, Wynberg
during the 1950s

John Boje



Mercury House



I grew up in Riebeek Street, Wynberg. Today it's an upmarket area but in the 1940s it was not a sought-after neighbourhood. In the 1940s, apartheid expelled one group of residents, and after Wynberg Village, or Little Chelsea, was "discovered" in the late 1950s, those who remained succumbed to gentrification.

On our side of the street were semi-detached houses. We were tenants of No. 1 and on the other side of a partition wall lived our aged landlord, Mr van Eyssen, who was looked after by his daughter. After we moved, the dividing wall was broken down and the property provided with a quasi-Cape Dutch façade and a new identity as "Mercury House".

I remember how pleased old Mr van Eyssen was to receive a telegram from the king on his hundredth birthday. Despite his advanced age, on Sunday evenings he would struggle on to the Dutch Reformed Church, supported by his daughter. For us, the church was only a short distance from our home; to him it must have seemed miles away. When I caught up with them and greeted them in passing, the daughter would shout, "It's John, Dad." Then he would say, "Evening, John." Once when I had a broken leg, it was, "It's John along with his crutches, Dad." I was amused at the thought that he might have responded, "Evening, John. Evening, crutches."

The people in No. 3 were the Hudsons. Not only were they English; they were Roman Catholic to boot and therefore doubly alien. The Longs in No. 4 were only English. I can't remember whether Dr Resnekov lived in No. 5 or No. 6. Either way, he was conveniently

nearby. At a later stage we were able to rely on Dr Cohen in Erin Cottage, just around the corner in Wolfe Street. Next to 6 there was a block of flats (Was it called Rumona?) where my eldest sister Susan and her husband Mattie le Roux later lived.

Across from us at the top end of the street was a shop where Indian music played and incense sticks in a potato burned and we could buy sweets wrapped in a cornet of brown paper: gobstoppers (four for a penny), motto kisses, rubbery fish and liquorice, which, according to children's lore, was made from dried dog's blood. Outside the shop was a battered old man known as "Rooibaard." He would come to attention with a stomping of feet, salute and say, "King George". As a child, I was terrified of him; now I know better.

"Old Emmie" lived next to the shop. If my hair was neatly combed and parted, I imagined that I looked like King George and she for her part acknowledged me as her "white king". My mother liked to have a chat with her, but my father disapproved because he didn't mix with "other people."

After Emmie's family had to leave, my uncle James lived there for a while. He and my aunt often visited us to play cards. Once there was an altercation when one of the men was accused of passing a card in his shoe to his partner across the table. Whenever my father received a letter from his union, the Building and Allied Workers' Union, he took it across the road to my uncle. The letter always started "Dear Sir

and Brother" and it amazed me that the union knew about my father's brother and saved tuppence on postage.

Directly opposite us was Gurbakh Singh's cottage and his ginger beer factory. He sometimes slipped me a sixpenny bit (5c). For a child who didn't get pocket money, it was a fortune. Besides, 5c then was worth much more than now. It's the amount my father gave me when he sent me to buy him a roll of "extra strong" (peppermints) and a Cape Argus. When I was a student and had to sell rag magazines and raffle tickets, I could always knock on Gurbakh's door. The premises of his factory are now the headquarters of the Crankhandle Club for vintage car enthusiasts and restorers.

My older brother and sisters attended Simon van der Stel Primary School, but in 1943 I was enrolled at the Lutheran School next to the church in Waterloo Road. The school was managed by Pastor Ernst Fitschen, who lived across the road from the school. Like the houses in Riebeeck Street, the classes were also in pairs, each pair under a single teacher. In Sub A and Sub B it was Ms Scholtz; Standards 1 and 2 were taken care of by Mrs. Binnedel; 3 and 4 by Miss Eulitz; and 5 and 6 (then still part of the primary school) by the principal, Mr Johl, and later by Mr Veldhuizen. The medium of instruction was English but those who wanted to could attend German classes before the start of the school day. In these classes I learned many German songs.

Once when Mrs Binnedel was off ill, we had a Miss Lawrence as replacement. She was very English and taught us a song that we solemnly sang,

standing to attention:

"We'll fight that Great Britain shall truly be great,
Great Britain with God in command... "

What an absurd situation. See how adults mess with children's minds!

Of my contemporaries among the pupils, I remember Gus Bosch, Oscar David, whose father also manufactured ginger beer, Ronnie Henry, Allan Patterson and Arthur Clifton, with whom I'm still friends. Among the girls were Rita Harmse, Ida Ziegler, Annie van Wyk and Geraldine Eksteen. With regard to the latter, my father admonished me: "You must never allow a mere girl to outclass you."

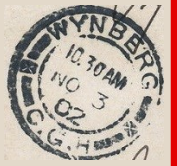
I must also mention another classmate, Robin Barens (not his real name), as an indication of the disturbing things that happened at that time. Robin quietly disappeared from our midst one day. No one told us, yet we knew: his hair was too frizzy. He was weighed and found too light.

There were other indications of dramatic change. The post office around the corner was too small for two entrances, but the counter was provided with a partition. At the station, the de facto separation that had prevailed for many years was replaced by de jure segregation. The benches were inscribed: "Nie-Blankes / Non-Europeans" and "Slegs vir Blankes / Europeans only".

A joke to conclude. At some point, some government official must have decided that that the "Slegs vir / Only" was discriminatory and the Department of Public Works was instructed to delete it. At the subway there was a notice "Cross the line by

subway only." The "only" was painted over but years later one could still see it peeping out from under its thin layer of whitewash.

Some Wynberg bits



- "In 1683 land along the Liesbeek River was granted to Herman Weeckens by Simon van der Stel. The farm was named De Oude Wijnbergh (Old Wine Mountain). A wagon route linking Cape Town to Simon's Town went over the hill adjacent to De Oude Wijnbergh estate. "
- "The famous astronomer John Herschel lived at Wynberg between 1834 and 1838, where he set up a telescope to study the southern hemisphere skies, and also did some botanical work on South African flowers together with his wife Margaret. In addition, it was in Wynberg that the young Charles Darwin met Herschel in 1836, a meeting which considerably influenced Darwin's later work."
- "One of South Africa's first electric power plants was built in Wynberg on Electric Road in 1893. Opened by the mayor of Wynberg, James Bisset, to provide power to a local tram system and public streetlights. "

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wynberg,_Cape_Town