

## A Letter from South Africa · *Jeff Probst*

I AM FROM CALIFORNIA. I am forty years old. Six years ago I met my future wife, a South African, when she was on vacation in San Francisco. A year later, having a hard time finding jobs in our fields, we decided we would go to South Africa. We came to Johannesburg, my wife's hometown. We planned to stay a year, we have stayed on. The beauty of this land—the lavender jacarandas dropping their petals in the October-spring, the barrenness of the deserts—allows the tourist bureau to proclaim that South Africa is “a world within a country.”

Before meeting my wife, I had little idea of what or where South Africa was. I certainly had never thought of coming here. Faced with actually leaving for South Africa, I wondered if there were supermarkets and bookstores and all the civilized amenities I was accustomed to. I wondered if I would feel comfortable sitting in all-white movie houses, for as we all know, there are two worlds, not one, in South Africa.

My feelings about South Africa have moved through four phases since coming here five years ago, during the South African winter. We arrived a few months prior to the white voters' ratification of the new constitution. The new constitution would allow “colored” (mixed-race) persons, as well as Indians, but no blacks, to be represented in the previously all-white Parliament. After the vote resoundingly passed, I felt it was a step in the right direction: coloreds and Indians now, blacks soon. My perception was horribly wrong.

Less than a year later, in mid-1984, the Parliamentary elections of colored and Indian representatives were held. Coloreds were legally able to vote only for coloreds; Indians for Indians. Many boycotted and protested against the elections, and those elected were voted in by a very small percentage of their respective voting population.

Whites still controlled Parliament; they had more representatives than coloreds and Indians combined. Blacks, seventy percent of the population, were more clearly than ever excluded from voting and from any effective power-sharing role. The new Parliament accomplished the further entrenchment of apartheid in the constitution.

In the black townships, rent-strikes and school boycotts took place.

Black laborers boycotted work in the white cities, where blacks may not own residential property but are now illegally renting apartments in the tens of thousands. (Many rent strikes continue, and schooling has not been “normal”; many blacks have missed full years of school.) Physical, often fatal, attacks were made on black community councillors and policemen, those seen as government representatives. Phase one, a period of being a fairly neutral observer, was due to end. Up to this time, the unrest had continued sporadically and seemed remote. It was off *there*, in the townships. It didn’t affect me personally.

Phase two began on March 21, 1985, when twenty blacks were killed by police during a demonstration in Uitenhage. (Twenty was the official count; community members report a higher number dead.)

The demonstration was held to commemorate the 1960 Sharpeville shootings, in which sixty-nine people were killed when police opened fire on a crowd of anti-Pass protesters.

I began to feel that this protest and these deaths were not just another isolated incident, seemingly of another country, divorced from where I was. I stopped viewing the uniformed gardeners and maids, the gas-station attendants and guards I passed every day, as just a sad, though acceptable, part of a unique foreign structure. I began to see them as stark evidence of the aberrant nature, the *unnaturalness*, of the South African system.

One evening, not long after the Uitenhage deaths, my wife and I were being driven home by friends after seeing a modern dance program at the Johannesburg Civic Center. As we passed through a busy intersection, we saw a black man, looking very drunk, stumble off the curb into the street in front of a car which couldn’t avoid him.

The man was knocked down and didn’t move. We kept going. One of us said to the driver of our car that we should turn back and help, to which the driver responded that there was nothing we could do. At home, I called an ambulance and identified the race of the victim as was required. My wife and I drove back to the accident site. The man was gone. We concluded that since the impact had not been so great, and the hospital for blacks was nearby, the man had probably lived. But who could say?

I decided to start volunteer-teaching English-language skills once a week. I took a training course through a local literacy organization and

was given my first students, whom I taught at a church near my apartment. My students were black African adults in service jobs. To all, English was their second, third, or even fourth language. As children, most had attended a very poor school for a few years, if at all; many left school because their parents could not afford the fees. They had come to Johannesburg to find work and lived apart from their spouses, parents, and children, who were back home in the rural areas, where they visited perhaps once or twice a year. (With the abolition of the Pass Laws in 1986, black families are now legally allowed to live together in specified black urban areas, but the lack of accommodations effectively prevents this from happening on a significant scale.)

Ellias was a young man who came to class more regularly than the other students. The cultural and language gaps between us were so great that our occasional talks made only small inroads into each other's lives. Ellias' day-to-day circumstances made even simple contact increasingly difficult. My guess is that his situation is typical of thousands of his fellow countrymen.

His wife, for whom he had paid by presenting her family with twelve cows, lived with his children by previous wives in rural Zululand. He lived in a rudimentarily furnished room on the top floor, above the elevator stop, of an apartment building in which he worked cleaning. To visit him, I'd come to the front door of the building and shout for him until he or someone else heard me and let me in. I brought him school books.

Things began to go wrong for Ellias. One of the individual apartment owners in his building tried to force Ellias out of his job and his room. The man's cousin, a white policeman, came to the apartment and beat up Ellias. This same owner had a black woman move into a room next to Ellias, accuse him of beating her up, and then had him arrested.

Ellias was held in a police station cell for a week before being released on bail. During this time the police denied to Ellias' friends that he was there. After several court appearances, the case against Ellias was dropped because the prosecuting black woman failed to appear.

Ellias wanted to move but he needed a job. I tried to get him gardening work at a municipal men's hostel, but the Pass Laws prevented job changes. He bought a used sewing machine and began taking classes. One day he showed me a dress he had made for his wife. Then he got a 6 P.M.-6 A.M. job as a guard at a shopping center. In three weeks, he was held up twice

by armed men. Vastly underpaid and overworked even by South African standards, Ellias questioned his boss about his rights and was fired. He went back to Zululand for a month then returned to Johannesburg. When I last tried to locate him, I was told he had gone to live in a men's hostel in a nearby black township; he was still trying to find work.

Phase three began in December 1985. A number of *whites* were killed by landmines placed by the African National Congress (ANC) under dirt roads near farms in the northern part of the country. Five more whites died in a bomb blast in a north coast shopping center, near Durban. Incidents of whites being stoned in cars near townships by groups of young blacks suddenly increased; the black death toll from unrest in black townships reached as high as twenty or thirty some days.

I wanted to leave. Violence, the responding repression, and right-wing vigilante action was obviously escalating; the unrest — some had begun to call it the youth revolution in the townships — was reaching white areas. The “necklace,” a tire doused in gasoline, placed around the victim's neck (blacks thus far) and set alight, has become part of the South African vocabulary. White township officials, who are often viewed, as are their black counterparts, as government collaborators, have been attacked in their homes. The vigilantes, whom many say are supported by the security forces, have killed many blacks; they have often been accused of fire-bombing homes and offices of left-wing or anti-war activists in the white areas. Landmines continue to be set. The Durban bomber, accused of killing five whites, has been convicted and hanged.

On June 12, 1986, the government declared another State of Emergency, the second since I've been here. Hundreds of people are still in detention. Estimates are that up to eighty percent of the South African Police force is deployed in the townships.

The government is far from clear in its intentions. It has pronounced apartheid dead, but has refused to kill it. Monies are spent on black education and housing, but still on the basis of segregation. Interracial marriage was legalized, but a black person must apply to the government in order to live in the same area as the white spouse. The government has turned a blind eye to “gray areas” — blacks living in white Johannesburg — but threatens from time to time to prosecute the infringers. Removals of

squatters and “black spots” have been declared past history, but many of those removed claim to have been forced. The government’s bureaucratic language obfuscates its plans and its laws for most people.

Aspects of apartheid have been done away with, but its basic structures, including racially segregated residential areas and schools, remain. And even though the government has allowed changes in certain apartheid regulations (such as whites-only movie houses and white-only ownership of businesses in the center of large cities), this government will not make apartheid or any form of racial discrimination generally illegal. It will only go so far as to allow private business and local areas to discriminate or not, as they see fit. Under the National Party, apartheid will at best become a local option.

Still, it is not a stagnant land. My wife observed, upon returning after two years’ absence, the increased number of well-dressed blacks, of blacks driving, blacks seen speaking on TV, blacks in jobs previously white. She has also noticed a greater public awareness and acceptance of the need for change. But the dualities continue.

Phase four began in July 1986. I decided to teach full-time in the English Department of the black teacher-training college in Soweto. I had not previously trained to be a teacher, but neither had I trained to be a book editor, the job I held during my first three years here; foreigners can get such jobs. I left editing because I felt it was irrelevant to edit what most people couldn’t read.

The teaching is, in many ways, no more than a desperate attempt to partially rescue a few persons from twelve years of inferior education. I am a white person exchanging bits of knowledge with those who need so much. We have discussions. Sometimes in class, the students will sing an African hymn. I tend to agree with the South African columnist who says that the white glacier has cracked and has begun to shift. None of us knows, though, what the future holds.