

Once an **EXILE...**

There were those that championed freedom and made it through the struggle, but invariably at deep personal cost. USB's PROF JULIAN SONN, one such, believes he can still contribute ...

We experienced poverty through the warmth of township life in Nuwerus, Queenstown, where we grew up.

We were five siblings of loving parents, grootmeneer and mevrou Sonn, and lived happily in a supportive Coloured community. We later moved to leafy Claremont, under Table Mountain. I cycled daily to Athlone High, a good school, with good friends, good teachers. I was a good student, good athlete: a right winger, fearless and fast.

The Separate Universities Act of 1959 caught me preparing for my matric finals. My mother crying; my father, with a strange sense of awe at the consistency and tenacity of the apartheid machine, declared: "You will be compelled to go to the University of the Western Cape (UWC), not UCT." I left the kitchen and retreated to my little room in the yard, bewildered.

Three years later, while preparing for final exams, five of us who were doing well were told: "You will not graduate, because of technical problems." It took another few years for us to re-write our examinations to graduate. Then came Sharpeville, the Rivonia Trial and the Group Areas Act. The cumulatively devastating effect made me hate apartheid unconditionally.

My opportunity to leave the country came

in 1965, but without knowing what would become of me. I spent the next three years travelling through the United States, Japan, Korea and Europe with the musical show "Sing out '65" and later "UP with People". I visited the concentration camps in Germany and Austria; they looked like the emerging housing schemes around Cape Town. I smelled apartheid.

In the American south, civil rights preachers took me in, and my education in the struggle began. I heard fiery sermons – a blend of religion and politics. The courage, talent and total commitment of people like Stokely Carmichael and Dr Martin Luther King to end racist oppression greatly impressed me.

Returning to the UWC in 1968 to finish another degree, I saw people from Hanover Park wait for crowded buses in the rain and mud. On some mornings I saw people from Nyanga being thrown into police vans. Student politics, the Black Consciousness Movement, good friends, rugby and girls sustained me.

After a pre-dawn visit by the police ... I knew I must get out.

As a student leader at UWC, I began to speak out, and surprised myself. I addressed Dagbreek students at Stellenbosch University, returning a number of times with my brother Franklin, Dennis Adonis, Dr Richard van der Ross and SV Petersen. I often spoke at UCT. In 1972 a speech I made at that university gave direct rise to the infamous Cathedral beatings of students by the police. I was warned by the police, and adversity started to dog me. I was not appointed to lecture at UWC. Others like Wolfgang Thomas, Jan Loubser, Nic Olivier, Henry Isaacs, Percy and Franklin Sonn, and Frederick Van Zyl Slabbert also spoke out. The late '60s were times of severe oppression and angry silence. I advocated the Black Consciousness philosophy and served on the organising committee for leaders in the Coloured communities to meet and interact with Afrikaner leaders at Grabouw and on Phillip Myburgh's farm. A watershed experience for me.

After a pre-dawn visit by the police, leaving my mother and siblings terrified, and forcing Franklin and Pappie to accompany me to the charge office in Lansdowne, I knew I must get out.

On a cold August day in '73, with a Fullbright Travel Scholarship in my bag, I found myself driving through the quiet streets of New York City in a yellow cab at dawn. I had never felt so lonely in my life. I did not know then that

My personal cause remains unchanged – to provide clarity about the true nature of transformation.

University of Western Cape 'being stifled'

THE University of the Western Cape was being deliberately stifled so that it would remain merely a training college for teachers, Mr Julian Sonn, brother of the vice-chairman of the Students' Representative Council, Mr Percy Sonn, said yesterday.

Mr Sonn, a graduate of the university and now a lecturer at Hewart Training College, Athlone, criticised the University of the Western Cape on a number of counts. He was addressing University of Cape Town students at the teach-in on 'South African universities in crisis'.

He said: 'The departments at Western Cape that could qualify students to enter the private sector are producing very few graduates. In fact, I want to say that the results of these departments are pitiful – the failure rate is alarming.'

'In 1970 there were 142 first year students in the physics department, and two third year students. In the chemistry department in the same year there were 164 first years and six third years.'

LITTLE CHANGE

'The law department has produced one graduate with a (Law) and LL.B degree in the chemistry department. For example, there are no graduates with little change in the presentation of the lecture in 1960.'

'Many students wanted to branch out, but in all the cases that I know of, the students were encouraged to become teachers.'

Mr Sonn's other criticisms included:

- Lack of Western Cape graduates on the staff; after 12 years only two were on the permanent staff, and there was only one other non-White on the permanent staff.
- He said: 'This is not because there are no qualified and capable graduates from the Western Cape. I can name at least 35. Of these there are three with doctorates, at least 10 with masters degrees and the others at least with honours degrees.'
- Racial tension between students and lecturers. 'This was the result of the insurmountable gulf between the worlds of White and non-White, created by the Whites.'
- Mr Sonn described what it was like to be a Coloured youth, then said: 'Now at the Western Cape you meet these Whites – if they are weak you try to get your own back; if they are strong they subject and humiliate you further.'
- 'Again there are the humans ones who confuse and shatter some of your stereotypes for a day or even two. Unfortunately the aggressive, inhuman Whites dominate and soon you are back with your comfortable, well-known stereotypes and attitudes towards the Whites.'
- Salary scales at the Western Cape were such a blatant example of discrimination that they have symbolic value.'

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the loneliness would last so long.

By 1990 I was married to an American fellow-student, had a son and lived in Washington DC. It was here, on television, that we watched Madiba walk to freedom. After the celebrations, when our friends had left, I wept new tears, old tears. My marriage did not survive the ensuing traumas. I left the States and a new desolation started in South Africa, deepened by the separation from my son.

Later that year, when Franklin led an illegal march in Athlone protesting against the State of Emergency, I joined him, and two hours later we were in prison undergoing the harsh routines of incarceration. My life had gone full circle.

Since 1994, the year of our democracy, I have watched the country change, sometimes with philosophical patience, sometimes with exasperation. I have decided to dedicate the latter part of my life to facilitating transformation processes both in the States and South Africa. In my case, once an exile, always an exile. My personal cause remains unchanged – to provide clarity about the true nature of transformation and to inspire people to become transformational leaders – to this

I have committed myself at the University of Stellenbosch Business School and further afield.

I was but one of this country's exiles; there were thousands more. Some eventually assumed power, others did not survive to see freedom. Some went down, not able to make it home or take the return.

People of the diaspora of the 70s and 80s have a resilience born of suffering. The ANC camps beyond the borders of the country, though havens, were fraught with suspicion and danger. Deep loyalties and enmities were formed there. The perspectives gained by all those who were forced to cross boundaries, into exile, are integral to the current pursuance of transformational leadership.

Being in exile helped me to discard the myth that communities are defined by space-related or any other differences. I have grappled with the joy of being included and including, as opposed to a resistance to the act of excluding. Exile has given me a real sense of what Dr King called the beloved community, a community of the heart that knows no boundaries. □

Appointed to the USB faculty in 2005, Prof Julian Sonn is a lecturer in Transformational Leadership and facilitates the individualised leadership development process for MBA students.

