



### **AUGUST 1982**

**Chris van der Merwe** was always larger than life. Especially at his funeral. Unexpected ex-wives, an unexpected son, a huge picture of macho man on a mountain top, Tarzan with a Grizzly's chest, far too hale for a heart attack. But the old anti-apartheid crowd weren't around. The question-mark, no doubt. What a horrible effect of misrule; a guy branded a spy keeps the label unto death. When the new government finally discloses the old government's spy-list several suspected people will rest in greater peace. But that may not be soon, perhaps through fear of unsuspected names causing surprise

# Suspect!

*Everybody in the newspaper business ‘knows’ that **Chris van der Merwe** is a spy. Quite how they know is a different matter – usually because everybody else knows. Van der Merwe has had a gutful. This is his story. . .*

**T**his is the kind of story I never wanted to write, because I thought it would merely focus on an individual without solving his problem or anybody else’s. The problem is ‘being suspect’ a ‘Government spy’ in a time of revolution when everyone is suspect. Is there any point? Perhaps there is. There are special dimensions to being born an Afrikaner White, more or less – and contributing for a living mainly to Black magazines in the dying days of Colonialism and apartheid.

The final prompting to write the story was a coffee with a clearly perturbed magazine editor. I knew something was amiss. I thought he was intending to criticise an article I had written. I was wrong. “Chris,” he said, looking at me hard, “are you a spy?” My response was bit a tired, outwardly. Inside I felt resentment and disappointment. Was the damage perhaps already irrevocable? As in ‘Lesson from Aloes’: once the ex-political detainee had found it necessary merely to verbalise his doubts about the bona fides of his old friend rumoured to be a police informer, neither of them was afterwards capable of undoing the ugly fact of the question having been asked. But I simply said,

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“no”. Of course. Simply because ‘no’ was the truth.

“I know! I know!” he said. “But I had to hear it from you. I keep on having these people coming in, day after day, and saying: ‘How can you have anything to DO with that guy. Don’t you know!’” Know what! I was showing my exasperation, Suddenly I was angry, a rare display, for me.

“What! What! Who are these bastards! And what do they say!” He naturally declined to identify my accusers. But he did say: “They tell me there’s a fat file on you in Botswana. But apart from that, you’re so obviously guilty, they say, because you don’t get upset when people say you are. . .”

Accuse a man, and if he fails to respond in anger, then he is guilty. Such stunning logic! And I have always thought self-control to be a virtue in both the guilty and the innocent. Wouldn’t anger be like spitting against the wind, anyway?

“I’ve been hearing this for years,” I said. “What do these people expect me to do? Assault everyone who gets his kicks from calling me a spy?”

He grinned wryly. “That’s one possibility,” he said. “The other is to set out your story. Tell us what it’s like to be constantly under suspicion, and why it is you at whom the fingers point.”. . .

The ‘spy story’ of Chris van der Merwe starts in Mozambique. I had been planning to travel to Australia and the Far East when – ‘unexpectedly’, I think, most South Africans had thought – the Portuguese colonial empire finally collapsed. Before the collapse Southern Africa had seemed a rather dull place generally. More specifically, the Afrikaner Republic had seemed fit enough to last another thousand years.

Instead of heading all the way East, I stopped, and stayed, in Mozambique. While Frelimo and the Portuguese had been jointly running that country I had been left alone to do my free-wheeling thing: making a living as a journalist. I had, in fact, been leading a charmed existence. . . ‘interviewing’ representatives of Western technology about such ‘key issues’ as the future of the giant, South African-sponsored Cabora Bassa scheme, while chasing around a tennis ball; or American diplomats (CIA, naturally, All of them), about ‘sinister’ developments such as the arrival of grey-suited little men from Red China (out on the palmy patio above the Polana’s swimming pool, every single one holding aloft a Taiwanese transistor radio so as to hear with maximum clarity the Voice of Peking); or once-wealthy Portuguese, now suddenly without a future in their never-never land, bitter and twisted, plotting ‘economic sabotage’ and lively

variations of political assassination.

I enjoyed the endless intrigue of this ship of fools over long lunches, wrapped in the langour of chilled Dao in the tropical sun . . . No-one ever questioned my right to mobility before and during the time of the joint Frelimo-Portuguese transitional government. Neither the losers, nor the winners. I was as free to make my once-a-month trip to Johannesburg for a few days' break and to pick up editorial cheques as I was, once back again in Lourenco Marques, to enter Frelimo's 'liberated zone' – the canicos, or shantytowns – continuing to squat behind their barricades against the sawn-off shotguns of white rightwing revolt. Of course there were many White Portuguese who saw me – this was the lot of many other foreign pressmen – as an agent of revolution, and hated me for it. Others saw me as a sympathetic friend', a white South African member of that good, solid race who would never allow that which was happening in Mozambique to happen at home.

Mozambique Blacks, on the other hand, quite unconsciously, bent my still lingering Afrikaner sensibilities in the most startling way. For the first time I was meeting Blacks in Africa who cared less about my skin colour than my politics. And even in politics they were prepared to give me the benefit of the doubt, it seemed. For the first time I was sensing what appeared to be a total lack of racism in relations between Black and White. And I was discovering that, even in Africa, it was possible for me, too, to respond to Blacks without an active awareness of what had always seemed to be ingrained, racially-based priorities.

"They' seemed to have no difficulty in relaxing with me; suddenly I found myself relaxing with them'. It was exhilarating. And, unbelievably, it also seemed to be real! Once Frelimo took over, though, I soon became a 'problem'. I just had to be political', and, naturally, being a white South African, my politics had to be sinister. No-one by the name of Van der Merwe could possibly be having such a good time under Comrade Machel without any ulterior motives.

That, in essence, was why I had ended up in jail, cooling my itchy feet for six weeks. Once the new security police had sorted out their pecking order – a number of White Portuguese/Mozambicans had been made inspectors – everyone was determined to make an impression on the revolutionary regime, if only to obscure, through their own brand of *kragdadigheid*, a blotted past.

Carlos Rocha – now late, reportedly having been murdered in a Joubert Park [Johannesburg] flat by vengeful expatriate Portuguese was one of them. Roam-

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ing around in a purple beach-buggy, allegedly nationalised in the name of the People, this man, declared a habitual criminal in South Africa, became the scourge of the ex-patriate 'reactionaries'. I made the mistake of interviewing him, in his favourite coffee shop one morning, and writing a story about his remarkable 'rehabilitation' for the Sunday Times. Rocha told me all sorts of things about himself, including the claim that he had been re-educated at Nachingwea, Frelimo's major wartime establishment in Tanzania.

The story was fed back to him, presumably by a South African-based Frelimo informer. I was arrested at the annual Industrial Fair of Mozambique. I was snapping away excitedly – angling, I must confess, for a saleable picture showing Mozambican and Russian VIP's together, their triumphant show of solidarity counterpointed by Kalashnikofs and hard-eyed plainclothes heavies – when, suddenly, I picked up Rocha's face, staring straight into the lens. That was to be my last picture of the day.

Afterwards, in the interrogation room of the Judiciary Police, I was to learn that the chief charge against me was my interest in Mozambique security. Threatened the towering Rocha, obviously terrified about possible repercussions for his faux pas of having allowed himself to be interviewed by an 'I agent' of the enemy: 'Yes, you even wrote about Nachingwea in that story about me you sucked out of your thumb!' So this was the explanation! Misuse of office to compensate for earlier lack of judgement. But also all part of getting rid of 'undesirables' generally. So off I went to jail.

Rocha and his colleagues would spend much time the next six weeks thinking up the right reasons for their wrong move. And – this was one of the greatest revelations to me, personally, of the whole affair – I would in due course become guilty because I was in jail. Today, six years later, I realise that mine had not been a unique predicament. It had happened to others before; it has been happening to other victims of paranoid establishments, whatever their ideology, since. Still, at the time, it was a traumatic realisation that the dividing line between guilt and innocence is not necessarily drawn by justice.

Perversely, Rocha and his friends received timeous – yet, one can only believe inadvertent – support from an unlikely quarter: the remaining South African diplomatic representatives in Maputo. One went to inquire about me at the Mozambican Department of Foreign Affairs soon after my detention, but took his time getting back to the office.

A very junior colleague, unable to find him, jumped to the conclusion that his boss, too, must have been arrested. These communists, you know, anything is

possible . . . He phoned the Mozambicans, without any pretence at protocol, sweating with horror and indignation, demanding to know why his chief had 'also been arrested'. Well, when the South Africans got themselves in such a knot over a journalist, I could well imagine my hosts saying, rolling their eyes and chuckling in self-congratulation, we simply must have caught the big fish.

In the end, I was released back onto the paranoid streets of Maputo, without my captors making as much as a check on my flat or issuing a deportation order. According to the chief investigating officer, a pompous, swarthy, well-offed New Broom named Costa, the police had 'investigated the case, thoroughly', and had found 'nothing against' me.

I've tried several times in the last few years to get back into Mozambique but without success. I don't know the reason. But I guess this is because a suspect absolved by the establishment remains guilty simply because he'd once been considered guilty.

'You must be making lots,' colleagues have been remarking for years, at least some of them, I believe, in real innocence. Well, I haven't been, and I've said so, often. But this has probably been the worst thing to say: spies with a journalistic cover – would not need to make that much money from publishing their work anyway . . .

I've marched with revolutions since usually running backwards, bathed in sweat, occasionally stopping dead for a moment's focus on a face, a fist, a banner, a weapon, or whatever sparked in my photographer's eye. Sadly, in Angola I would miss the marches completely. Because, within hours of clearing through Luanda's grimy airport I was in jail once more. Naively I had taken PW (then minister of war) at his word-, that we would never dream of invading neighbouring soil; that, 'strusgod,' our boys were just up on the border sitting by the big dam, watching over the Dry Country's water supply..

I had obtained a visa from the Portuguese Consulate in Johannesburg. They did seem a bit reluctant to give it to me, but I'd applied in good time, and the answer from higher up was 'yes'. What the Consulate could not, of course admit, was that Portuguese control over the Angolan capital was at best only de jure; de facto the MPLA was already 'in charge' . . .

I arrived in Luanda at midnight to learn that the whole South African press contingent had checked out of their hotels a day or so before. I would soon learn why. I was woken at four am by a loud banging on the door. It was the police: a young coloured in plainclothes and a black companion with an auto-

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matic rifle in a camouflage suit and wearing a white helmet bearing the letters 'PM', 'Polícia Militar'.

A fellow journalist, Roger Sargent, who had arrived with me and was staying down the passage, had also been woken up by his own pair. We were aggressively ordered to get dressed and into separate cars waiting downstairs. A long winding road lead through a moonlit suburban abstract of destruction, the ruins located in time and space only by the sectarian graffiti of uhuru's internecine struggles. Unita and FNLA had been blasted out of town, but their presence lingered in grotesque scrawls on the bombed-out walls.

The drive would have been an almost unreal experience, like a trip through a long-abandoned movie set, were it not for the plainclothes man spitting out a seemingly limitless stream of abuse: 'Racist dog!' he was shouting. '*Mercenário!*' Don't you ask me where we're going! You'll know soon enough! '*Filho da puta!*'

I soon did shut up. I stopped thinking, in rational terms, about place and purpose, trying only to visualise, if execution was inevitable – and by now I'd had no doubt at all that it was – how I would go about dying. Would I fight, or just stand up to be shot, quickly and neatly. But I'd had no time to decide before we arrived, about fifteen kilometres out of town, on a steep coastal hill, at the Escola Ingles de Luanda . . .

Forty-three desperate days later I was released. . . once again, with an official apology. The last three weeks I spent with a Columbia Broadcasting Service (CBS) television team in a new jail, separate from the others.

It appeared that the MPLA were now giving us special consideration and better food – because they were having second thoughts about detaining people who could not be proved to be anything but what they claimed to be: journalists.

Webster and Mutchman were, predictably, accused of 'being CIA'. Both men of wide experience, they were arrested, according to themselves, after sending a telex to head office in New York requesting the despatching of 'a few crates of coke, for shaving purposes'. 'Decoded' by the paranoid MPLA this meant: 'Good show, lads, you've knocked out the Commies' water supply. . .'

But the network men packed a heavy punch. They had been serving '60-million people in 23 countries' when they were arrested. And our captors, still nervous about America's vacillating stance (and underhand support for South Africa) evidently felt they had to take note of public opinion at least in the US.

I would learn in Lisbon, after my release, that Kissinger himself had interceded with MPLA representatives on behalf of the CBS team. And 1, their cellmate of several weeks, simply had the good fortune of being a passenger on the Trade-off Express.

I still had no idea that the 'hero' who arrived back in Johannesburg on the Day of the Covenant, 1975, would henceforth have to carry an ever-mounting weight of 'being suspect'. Perhaps I should have guessed what lay in store. Particularly after a brief biking holiday stopover in Windhoek a few weeks later. I had scarcely arrived in town when I was asked to please drop in at the local security police headquarters. The officer in charge wanted to know if I had seen any Cubans in Luanda. I hadn't, and I told him so, reminding him that I had not had too much opportunity to survey the scene beyond the prison walls.

I was once again made aware of 'being suspect' in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe during the week before independence. I had just finished taking a few pictures broadly captionable on the lines 'multi-racialism in the New Zimbabwe' – at a Zanu victory party when it happened. A senior South African journalist, nursing an expense-account beer, sideswiped in my direction. 'Going already? Got everything you want and now off to tell your boss?'

Fighting talk? Easily. He was asking for it, I thought, the bastard. Press establishment prima donna versus lonewolf freeancer! Expense account versus shoe-string! My head swirled in resentments that had been there for a long, long time. Hit the man! Hit him! But I didn't. Not the sort of thing you did at a party of revolutionaries when someone starts crying Spy! Spy!

I would get him, though, back home, I thought bitterly, as I was weaving the rusty little hulk of my borrowed Morris 850 through the revellers thronging the township streets. . . . But I never did. Not even when he was sitting only four bar stools away from me at the Johannesburg Press Club. Maybe because I felt the man was probably having a tough time himself, an Afrikaner working for the *Engelse Pers*. Was not he, too, 'suspect'? And was attack not the best form of defence?

I thought I'd had my share of future shock when I returned home from Zimbabwe. 'South Africa next', everyone in Zimbabwe had been saying. Oh, there was still Namibia, but that would just be a year or two... Few, including myself, challenged this hot consensus. I had by now little doubt about the inevitability of majority rule for South Africa.



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The founding of Treurnicht's new party – all those “lions” together in Pretoria's *Skilpadsaal* – was yet another event that sharpened my sense of personal contradiction, while doubtlessly fuelling the rumours about my “clandestine interests”. I'd been a bit worried about going. The Kappiekommando was going to be there, too, I was sure. And they hated me for an interview I did with their leader, Marie van Zijl I had no idea they didn't know Pace was a Black magazine! When they found out I was threatened with a fate that “will make Floors van Jaarsveld look like *kinderspeletjies*.”

So, awaiting any terrible fate, I went to the Treurnicht meeting. But, instead, I had a rather good time, hearing the lions roar and properly taking pride, of course, in the fact that there were namesakes two of them – in the Treurnicht think tank, willing to stand up and be counted on the side of the righteous.

What would they have said if they knew who was taking their picture, and to what likely end: selling their show to a Black magazine read by those they have determined to keep permanently on the outside. They, the other Van der Merwes, would probably have no difficulty at all in identifying me very clearly as an agent of The Forces of Evil.

Ludicrous. . . But all the lunatic possibilities of rampant paranoia are with us. It is a manifestation of the same species that had got me into jail and therefore pronounced guilty. It is akin, too, to the paranoia of those who have declared me ‘suspect’ since . . .