

A refugee orphan in Kwazulu-Natal

Jan Heronim Zacharewicz

Editor's note: Jan Heronim Zacharewicz was born in 1930 in Rykonty, an obscure village not far from Vilnius, the present capital of Lithuania. Before the Second World War, it was an historically important city of Eastern Poland. Following the Russian occupation of Poland during World War II he landed up, at the age of nine, in one of the Russian Archangel labour camps with his mother and five siblings on 10 February 1940. Both his parents died of starvation or disease in Soviet Union labour camps. Adopting various disguises, travelling with different people, Jan Zacharewicz made his way across the Soviet Union to Uzbekistan and Iran. From there he was relocated by the British to South Africa where he continued his interrupted education at a Polish Children's Home in Oudtshoorn where he had to learn to read, write and speak English. At the age of 13, considered sufficiently proficient in his early school studies, he was sent to Pietermaritzburg to attend the technical college and learn a trade.

TEN OF US, chaperoned by a gentleman from the Polish Consulate in Pretoria, left Oudtshoorn station on the afternoon of 8 November 1944. I do not remember his name because I never saw him again after he deposited us at our final

destination. Unlike during my previous train journeys, I was thrilled to be in a compartment for six passengers. Other surprises were: a wash basin with hot and cold water taps, a folding table between the seats, separate bunk beds above the seats pulled down in the



Jan Zacharewicz's first South African ID

evening, and a bundle of blankets with spotlessly white sheets and a pillow in it. A Coloured man, who said something in a language which sounded like German, carried the bundles in. We did not understand him. He gestured with his hands for us to get out of the compartment and go to “dinner”. When we returned the beds were made up neatly.

The journey was breathtaking and exciting, especially when the train wound around hundreds of conical hills as we crossed the Orange River into the Free State. Despite a long wait in Harrismith (where we changed from steam locomotives to electric units) the scenery became even more enthralling. Van Reenen’s Pass and the steep descent made me shudder with nervousness. The sun set quickly and we journeyed in darkness. We had dinner again with repeated instructions on how to behave at table, and then we were told to go to sleep.

I could not sleep for a long time because I tried to imagine what the place where we were going would be like, hoping that it would not be a camp. I also wondered what the technical college would be like and whether we

would be taught in Polish. After I had fallen into a deep sleep, I was woken by a voice saying, “Wake up, wash and pack up. We are near Pietermaritzburg.”

Since I was sleeping on the top bunk, I lowered my head towards the window and saw thousands of flickering lights far down in the distance. The train was rumbling and winding slowly into a valley through a thick mist and a slight drizzle.

It didn’t take long for us to get ready to get off the train, but it took at least an hour before it stopped at the Pietermaritzburg station. By then I stood in the narrow corridor of our coach and watched the flickering lights appearing and disappearing, coming closer and closer to the train. Finally we stopped. We shoved our way to the door and stood on Platform One. I looked up and saw an unusually large clock hanging from the roof. It was two o’clock in the morning of 11 November.

My journey towards the new life together with nine companions, all older than me, began with a long walk to 290 Longmarket Street. We followed our guide, first along Church Street, and then turned sharply towards Longmar-

ket Street, east of Church Street, but parallel to it, in a thick mist and slight drizzle. It was quite warm, but by the time we reached our destination, I could hardly go any further because I was so sleepy.

I did not pay any attention to the old colonial buildings and the larger-than-life statue of Queen Victoria in front of the Natal Provincial Council's Legislature, or gaze at the City Hall clock, which boomed its quarter-hour chimes. The streets were deserted except for a few rickshaws in the Market Square in which dark figures sat motionless under canvas covers.

I don't how long it took us to reach our destination. Tall palm trees, planted on both sides of the street, dripped droplets of rain on our heads. We stopped at a small iron-mesh gate in the middle of a very high privet hedge. The light was on in front of an old tin-roofed house with bay windows on each side of the entrance door.

As we filed through the gate, the door opened. I noticed an old woman standing at the door. She was short, rotund, and grey-haired, with thick-lensed glasses on her nose. A short, thin and timid-looking man stood next to her. They introduced themselves as Mr and Mrs H...ate. The name sounded like Hole-in-a-Gate. Then, in a sharp high-pitched voice, Mrs H said something. I presume it was "welcome" or perhaps "how do you do". She then led us to our bedrooms. I took a bed next to the window, sat on it for a while and without undressing climbed into the sheets and immediately fell asleep. In my sleep I heard the tick tack of the train wheels and saw the strange cone-shaped mountain peaks standing like chess pawns on the never-ending Free State plains.

The clapping of hands and Mrs H's sharp voice rudely awakened me. I had no idea what time it was, but the sun was shining brightly and it was already warm. A few minutes later she reappeared to make sure that everybody was up. Then she showed us where the bathroom was to wash our faces.

The bathroom had a bath, a washbasin, and a toilet but there was no sign of a shower. At breakfast we discovered that, in addition to the 10 of us, there were also eight "English" boarders in the house. I called them "English" simply because they spoke English. Five of them were youngsters attending Merchiston Primary School. The other three attended an old and select government school by the name of Maritzburg College. It rivalled private schools for boys such as Hilton College and Michaelhouse.

The bathroom was away from the bedrooms in an annex to the old building. To get there, we had to go through the dining room, pass the kitchen and a padlocked storeroom. There were hot and cold-water taps, but the hot water tap ran cold because it was not connected to the house geyser. It had a small tank outside with a wood stove underneath it. We had to light the fire ourselves in the evening to have a hot bath. We had to share it, two at a time, and have a hot bath only once a week.

Our first breakfast was a new experience for me because I had never been in a house which had a separate dining room. When we were ushered into it, I noticed its bare white walls. It was also narrow, squashed between two small bedrooms and a large kitchen. A bulky family table occupied the area between the walls facing the lawn. There was also a long rather flimsy trestle table placed in the middle of the narrow space

and covered with white tablecloths already set for a meal. As soon as we were seated, two Coloured maids served us with a typically English breakfast. We ate in almost complete silence, feeling out of place and rather claustrophobic. When we went into the courtyard after breakfast this feeling intensified.

The courtyard was certainly not designed as a playground for 16 boys and definitely not for another 20 who were to join us later. It was grassed, but its area did not exceed 200 square metres. It was bordered by a garage-cum-servants' quarters that looked like an elongated box. A huge mulberry tree shaded the eastern corner of the property, and there was a small, rectangular, thatch-roofed shelter at the northern edge of the courtyard. This was to be our entertainment area during our stay at the boarding house.

Two run-down garages on the eastern side of the property separated us from the neighbours. The right hand one was reserved as the servants' quarters for two African house-boys. There was hardly any furniture on the cold concrete floor except two rickety iron beds. The men had to wear outlandish short white pants and open-neck shirts with two red strips on the sleeves and legs. I could not understand how anyone could call adult men "house-boys" and force them to wear such humiliating garb. We were told that that was the accepted manner of dressing male servants. Whenever we saw them cleaning the house they were always barefooted.

Later in the morning we met six "English" boys. I could hardly communicate with them because I could not speak English. Even sign language did not work. They looked at us as if we were from outer space. That morn-

ing they went to school so we were left alone twiddling our thumbs in boredom.

We did not have to wait too long. The unwritten laws of the boarding house were not like the routine I had been used to in Oudtshoorn. There were set times for everything, but no bells or whistles to summon us to the proceedings except for the bell for "lights out". It was the sound of the bell at 10 o'clock, a distant ding-dong like the muffled sound of a broken bucket. I thought it was a church bell summoning the whole town to prayer. I was mistaken. It was a town bell that rang from a small tower on a colonial-style municipal building at the corner of Commercial Road and Longmarket Street signalling a curfew for the "Natives". They had to get off the streets of the city and stay off them until morning. The curfew was introduced as far back as 1846 and lasted until the end of the National Party's rule.

We had to attend Mass on Sunday at St Anthony's Church just a block away from where we stayed. It was the church reserved for the Coloured and Indian Catholics living in the segregated area below Retief Street that stretched northwards to Mountain Rise. The interior of the church had a section reserved for "whites". The parish priest, however, was an Indian. This did not matter to me because in my journeys south from the Soviet Union I attended Masses celebrated by priests of at least four Eastern Rites in their own liturgical languages, which were not Latin. (Note that there are 22 Eastern Churches in union with Rome). A few weeks later, we were informed that our parish was to be St Mary's in Loop Street not far from the station. Father Joe, the assistant priest at St Mary's, was to take charge of our spiritual welfare at the beginning of 1945.

Another surprise was when we were told to line up to see “Madam” in her lounge. The place was strictly out of bounds to us. The first to enter this sanctum were the older boys. To my astonishment she came out with piles of clothes. She told us they were “Tech’s” school uniforms, black shoes and some underclothing. When my turn came I was also given the same as the older boys except for the trousers. Mrs H declared that I was too small to wear long trousers. My uniform was thus a pair of grey shorts, two white shirts, long grey socks, black shoes and the Technical College navy-blue blazer.

I was not a stranger to uniforms. I had seen my father in one and I had seen Polish and Russian soldiers in their military outfits. I had also worn an oversized British army uniform at the age of 11, but I had never seen one as class as the one I now held in my arms. I had to see how I looked as a privileged pupil. I was disappointed that there was no mirror in my dormitory for me to admire myself. The opportunity to do so would come only some weeks later in January 1945 when we were enrolled as students at the Pietermaritzburg Technical College.

In the meantime, we had practically nothing to do except wait. We had no books to read or games to play simply because we came with only small bundles of clothing. Luckily, the “English” boys soon got used to us. A week later two boys by the name of Adams befriended me. They helped me to learn English. By the time their school year ended in December I was able to burble intelligent sentences before they went home to their farm somewhere near Kokstad.

Left to our own devices, we were allowed to explore the city. It paid off.

We found a large open field along the Msundusi River whose banks were overgrown with gnarled mulberry trees weighed down with ripe berries. There were two open fields where we played soccer and stuffed ourselves with mulberries. Later on this spot became our refuge from boredom and hunger.

While we whiled away our days waiting for the New Year to arrive, we were told that some of us would have to sleep away from the Longmarket Street house because a room had to be built along the southern side to accommodate 20 more Polish boys. They were expected to arrive before the schools reopened in January. I was one of those “some” having to walk to the new “sleep over” quarters in Loop Street not far from the City Hall. This nomadic move irritated me because, since our arrival at the boarding house, I had been told to move rooms three times. I had hoped that, at last, I would have a bed which I could call my own.

It did not take long to complete the new addition to the house. However, it was not a room, but a veranda with a plain concrete floor about two and a half metres wide. It ran along the southern wall of the old house, separated from the neighbour’s house by a narrow drive to the garage. A corrugated-iron roof without a ceiling covered this extension. At the playground end of this veranda, was an enclosed cold-water shower with open toilet. Next to it was the entrance to our sleeping quarters. If one stood at a particular window, one could see what ablutions were going on. We soon discovered the reason for this architectural design. Mrs H could and did put her head through the open window to make sure that each boy went under the cold shower.

Between the brick columns of the veranda was thick wire netting. Canvas blinds were eventually fitted to protect us from the elements and to give us some privacy from the prying eyes of the neighbour's teenage daughters who had an unobstructed view of us from the windows of their house. None of us ever met them or attempted to make contact with them, but we heard their giggles and the endless playing of a scratchy record of Bing Crosby's "Don't Fence Me In". It must have been the hit record of the time. No wonder I still dislike Crosby's singing.

When the framework of the veranda was completed, it was furnished with five iron bunk beds and two single beds. Coir mattresses, coir pillows, one blanket and rough sheets were placed on each bed. The space between the beds was so narrow that only one person could fit in it. A tiny cupboard was placed between the beds. There was also very little room between the beds and the veranda opening. The new dormitory could accommodate only 12 newcomers. The other eight had to be put up in the other available accommodation with the same furnishings as on the veranda.

In the meantime, a Polish farmer heard about us and arranged for us to spend Christmas with him on his farm. It was a wonderful experience, not only because we were not marooned at the boarding house, but because we spent it in the "Italian Style". To our astonishment, the POWs, who organised everything and enthusiastically welcomed us, were the Italian prisoners of war from the camp outside Pietermaritzburg. Half-a-dozen of them were employed by the farmer as labourers. When they saw us they greeted us with smiles and tears in their eyes. I imagined that they

were thinking of their children suffering the horrors of the war that was ravaging their country.

We were charmed by their singing and dancing, and eating typical Italian food for the first time. At the end of the meal we were served the most delicious chunk of panatone, an Italian Christmas cake. We soon learnt to say "*bon giorno*", "*grazie*" and "*arrivederci*". Little did I know that 14 years later I would be sent to Italy armed with these three phrases.

At the beginning of 1945, 20 more Polish boys joined us. Most of them came from Oudtshoorn, but there were some from other refugee camps in Africa. A 21-year-old came from Angola. I remember him because he had great influence on me, not because he was older, but because of his skill in narrating stories. I always loved to hear stories about things I never imagined existed in the world. He entertained us a great deal before we had to attend Technical College, which to me was always "the Tech".

Only a few "English boys" returned in the New Year. The Adams boys invited me to spend the Easter holidays on their father's farm near Kokstad. We left on a Thursday night to catch an early train and spent most of the night in the coach at the Pietermaritzburg station. It was the first time that I overindulged myself with sweets and chocolates without realising the consequences.

In the afternoon of the next day, their father met us at some siding and we drove to the farm in a gigantic van. During the journey there, I gazed at the limitless landscape, filled with all kinds of animals, horses and cows and enormous maize fields. Our farm in Poland seemed like the tiniest dot of nothingness in comparison with this

huge expanse of fertile land. It was something to admire. Later, I went on a solitary walk over the green rolling hills, valleys and streams hoping they would go on for ever. Then I slept so heavily that I found it almost impossible to get up. On the second day at the farm I had an upset stomach and was so embarrassed that I wanted to bury myself under the bed.

When the time came to go back to the boarding house, I wanted to hide in the bush and stay there forever. I could not express adequately my gratitude to the Adams boys and their family for their hospitality. I was the luckiest Polish boy in Pietermaritzburg, for I was the only one who had such wonderful opportunity to enjoy a normal family life in a first rate environment.

During the July holidays of the same year, I was also invited to spend two weeks on a wattle plantation near Greytown. The invitation came from a new "English" boy at Merchiston School. He became my close friend although other boys spurned him because he had a badly deformed chin and mouth. His father was the manager of a wattle plantation for Natal Tanning Extract Company (NTE).

I appreciated the holiday, but on my return, I felt that I had done something wrong. For some unknown reason, I could not remember what it was until I recalled a walk to the local trading store. One of the African workers gave me a few shillings to buy him some stamps. When we got to the store, I completely forgot about the request and spent the money on sweets. When my friend reminded me about it, I could not do anything about refunding the money to the worker. I still regret this misdemeanour and wish I could recompense the poor man.

At the end of the year, Father Joe organised a two-week Christmas holiday for all of us at Hibberdene, on the South Coast. I would not have bothered to mention it were it not for a peculiar happening. I did not know what it involved, but years later I was shocked.

The place where we stayed was close to the beach. There was only one cottage, which could accommodate only one person. We were provided with tents erected amid thick bush, slept on the canvas-covered ground and very often we had to get rid of the snakes and lizards. We also took turns to help with the preparation of meals.

Father Joe organised his own kind of entertainment for us: boxing and wrestling on the beach. We attributed his preference for these games to his Irish bullishness. I hated both and did everything to avoid them, usually hiding in the bush until they were over. In spite of this, we had an enjoyable time, except one evening when Father Joe ordered us to line up and strip. He then called each one of us to walk naked into his room. He sat in a chair with a dim lamp on the side table. In his hand he held a torch and as each boy approached him, he shone the torch on their genitals and stared at them for a long while. Older boys refused to go in when they realised what he was doing, and ran out of the room. I was too afraid to follow them. When we returned to our tents we tried to find a valid reason for Father Joe's actions. Some thought that he wanted to check how many boys masturbated. Others thought that he was trying to see if anyone was infected. Some thought otherwise, but did not know the English word for a paedophile. Father Joe was sent to Australia a year or so later.

In January 1945, our Tech schooling began as planned. A few days before

the school started we were led to the Pietermaritzburg Technical College to register as standard seven pupils. The principal and the teachers greeted us with pomp and ceremony, probably because we were the first foreign pupils at the College. After that we were shown our classroom on the first floor of the main building. We were also shown the workshops in Temple Street.

We all remained in the same class. I thought that the arrangement was wrong because it prevented us from learning English quickly and socialising with local boys because breaks between lessons were very short. Then we had to walk to the boarding house for lunch during the mid-day break and be back at the Tech on time for afternoon classes.

Walking to lunch had a funny side to it. We had to pass a small café in Church Street on the opposite side to the Tech. I was often tempted to go in to get some sweets, but I had not even a penny to spend, for we did not receive pocket money at that time. A poster in the window however, caught my attention. On it was scribbled in large red letters, “Don’t complain about our weak tea! You may be weak yourself some day.” The owner succeeded in convincing me not to complain, but being “weak” for sweets did not go away.

As had often happened in the past, help came from an unexpected quarter. It came from a humble Polish nun in the Convent of the Holy Family, Sister Mary Aurelia, who had come to South Africa at a very young age as a nun to work among Africans, but found herself working at the Convent School for white girls. She heard about us, contacted us immediately, and did everything in her power to help us feel loved. Although she was restricted in her movements and unable to spend time with us, she would

collect all kinds of sweets and snacks from the Convent School boarders, sneak out of her convent in Loop Street and hand them over at the workshops during our lunch break. I once met her accidentally and from that time on I was the “bridge” between her and the other boys. Then she was suddenly moved to Johannesburg. She did not forget me nor did I forget her. Years later I went to see her and she remained my mother-friend until her death.

The second week at the Tech introduced us to the local pupils’ monkey business at the workshops. I learned later that it was an introduction to the initiation ceremonies. As we walked into the corridor leading to the various workshops we were greeted by what sounded like the groans of the senior pupils lined up against the wall. They were obviously those “further up the ladder” who immediately began to form a picket line. As we passed through it, some of them began to laugh, but did nothing to upset us. I think they did not dare to attack us because most of us were bigger and stronger than they. Therefore, we passed them without an incident. The other new pupils were not so lucky. As the first boy entered the picket line, the senior boys let fly with their fists, slapping the cringing boys on their heads and then brutally roughing them up.

Apparently, the “roughing up” was the first stage of initiation. This was followed by forced wearing of outrageous hats and fagging for the senior boys. I discovered what fagging meant only when I saw one of the boys carrying his senior’s school bags and other equipment. We were eventually told that initiation was accepted as part of long tradition in all English-medium schools in South Africa. For me that

kind of tradition amounted to hounding of helpless youngsters.

The Friday of the same week launched us into the world of a South African military ritual: the cadets, inherited from the British. I presumed that the practice was introduced in South African schools to prepare youngsters for military service and the defence of their country. I learnt later that the cadet idea originated in England in 1634. In the United Kingdom, a cadet was a younger son of a noble as opposed to an heir. Younger sons were expected to join the military to train as officers. In South Africa, cadets became compulsory as part of the high school curriculum at the beginning of the Second World War.

Our introduction to cadets took place after the last Friday morning lesson. We were ordered to go down to the Tech's sport fields on the left bank of the Msundusi River that flows through Alexandra Park. On arrival there, we were met by two army officers and ordered to take off our blazers. Then they lined us up in a column of threes, the tallest in front and shortest at the back, and made us run towards what looked like a pile of long sanded planks. These planks were shaped like rifles which we had to place on our shoulders, ordered to march and halt, turn left, turn right. This went on for more than half an hour. By the end of it all we were wet with perspiration in the almost unbearable January heat. Happily, this was the only cadet exercise we had to attend.

After the cadet flop there was another education episode: compulsory sport. We were told that according to South African tradition, we had two choices: cricket in summer and rugby in winter. Soccer, which we often played before going to the Tech, was not on the menu.

Since it was summer, we had to be introduced to cricket.

I had never heard of cricket before in my life. At first, I thought it might be a game of jumping like a cricket or a hop-scotch-and jump. When we went to the sport field and saw what they told us was "a pitch", three sticks (wickets), a hard red ball in the hands of the umpire and a number of bodies scattered around in the field, I knew that it resembled a softball or baseball game. We were forced only once to attempt to play the game, but we refused to play because one of the boys, who batted first, swiped at the ball, missed it, and lost all his front teeth. The sport educators did not attempt to introduce us to rugby because of our abhorrence of cricket.

Also at the beginning of that year, we had a visit from "Ouma" Smuts. It was a political move by the Prime Minister, General Smuts, to show how he cared about the poor refugee orphans. I was one of the boys chosen to present Mrs Smuts with a bouquet of flowers. I felt embarrassed and somewhat humiliated because I always thought it was a role of a girl to present flowers to dignitaries.

After Ouma's visit, our daily routine changed. A retired English teacher was to teach us on Saturday mornings. In addition, an elderly Pietermaritzburg Polish gentleman kept us in touch with Poland's history, constantly reminding us that we were to be educated in technical skills to help rebuild our devastated homeland when we returned after the War.

Our English lessons were futile. We had no real opportunity to communicate with the local English-speaking children for, as I have already said, we lived in isolation from the rest of the Pietermaritzburg community. Consequently, I could not cope adequately and

understand what we were being taught. Then, after constant agitation about the return to a *Free Poland*, we were told that it would depend on what would happen when the War ended.

The Tech's workshops were well equipped, although our teachers had no academic skills. They were tradesmen with little knowledge of how to communicate theoretical fundamentals. However, their practical experience gave us a very good idea of what woodwork, mechanics and electrical work involved. Of the three, electrical training helped me most in later life. When the time came for me to begin work, I wanted to become an electrician. I never forgot those men's contribution to my ability to handle domestic electrical problems.

During 1945 our living conditions at Mrs H's deteriorated and our food became so meagre that if I were now to say a prayer before a meal, I would use the words, "Lord, teach me not to thank you for the least of your mercies." The "mercies" dished out to us were: one slice of bread and maize-meal porridge three times a day with a small piece of unpalatable meat on Sundays. Her excuse was "shortages" and "rationing". In addition, one of the house maids by the name of Bonty, used to go around with a large tin of watery conserve, banging a large spoon against the tin and asking if anyone would like some. To please us she wanted to say it in Polish and someone told her to call out "*guwno*" (shit) as she offered the preserve.

We could not tolerate this diet. We sent a petition to the Polish Embassy, requesting urgent intervention from authorities to save us from our "Oliver Twist" misery. Some enterprising "technicians" did not wait. They managed to break into Mrs H's storeroom and steal

all her provisions quite regularly. She never did find out how they managed to make duplicate keys for every replaced padlock.

When a representative from the Polish Embassy came to see what was going on, Mrs H told him that we were lying. She made sure that during his visit the tables were laid perfectly, and that our meals varied: meat or chicken served at least once a day while he was there. When he left, the old regime reappeared.

We continued to attend the Tech, a fruitless exercise, because in the end of the year examinations for the National Technical Certificate only one Polish boy passed. We continued to attend classes until the war ended although we knew that most of us would soon have to leave the Tech. I had to go on until I turned 16 in October 1946. Boys older than 16 had to make decisions as to what to do, because Britain and the USA withdrew their recognition of the Polish Government in Exile. The new Polish Provisional Government was to take over, but South Africa refused to establish diplomatic relations with communist Poland.

We were given a chance to decide whether to return to Poland or stay in South Africa. As far as I know, none of the 30 of our group chose to return. This decision had its consequences. Those under the age of 16 would be subject to the South African Social Services Department. Those over 16 would have to find work and would be subsidised by the government at the rate of 12 pounds, 10 shillings a month. In trying to find suitable employment the older ones found themselves in a predicament as Pietermaritzburg did not have vacancies even in trades. Returning South African soldiers were given priority over young-

sters. The only opportunity for us was to find work on the goldfields on the Witwatersrand. Consequently, only a few of us remained in Pietermaritzburg. Those of working age soon found other accommodation, but I and six others had to remain at Mrs H's.

By September of 1946, we had had enough of Mrs H's boarding house deprivation. We decided to flee and find a place to stay not too far away. We found one at 37 Boshoff Street. It was a double-storey colonial-type house with spacious bedrooms. One of the rooms could accommodate four boys. We could afford to pay for board and lodging because the price was the same as we had to pay Mrs H.

The plan was simple. We hired a rickshaw to carry our meagre belongings and left on a Sunday while Mrs H enjoyed her midday family dinner. We sped out of the gateway and rushed towards our new home. I thought I was free at last.

My supposed freedom did not last long. Three days later, the Social Welfare Department ordered me to return to Mrs H's to stay there until I officially turned 16 and found employment. It meant until 30 October. The other boys had to pay her eight pounds 10 shillings in lieu of notice, but they were not forced to return.

I stayed at Mrs H's all on my own and tried to find employment. I had an interview with *The Natal Witness* for a typesetting apprenticeship. It was a miserable failure because I could not produce even a standard six certificate. I had to wait for another opportunity.

When I turned 16 I was compelled to become an apprentice at a building construction firm, Booth and Clark, for a period of five years. My pay was two pounds 10 shillings a week, but I was

allowed to leave Mrs H's. I immediately joined my friends at 37 Boshoff Street, where I shared a room with four other boys. Although it was not terribly comfortable, I did not have to sleep on a cold veranda. I also could enjoy a hot bath instead of having constant cold showers. The *Oliver Twist* experience came to an end.

I disliked bricklaying because I was forced into it. Furthermore, my social circle considered bricklaying an occupation reserved for dunderheads. I had no option but to work without much enthusiasm. It was not the kind of work I wanted to do or was capable of doing well. I also did not think that completing it would give me the necessary sense of independence that I needed to have, but like the other Polish refugees, I had to accept what was on offer. I therefore accepted it as a temporary way out of the trap. I had, in the meantime, to eat the sandwich I had not made.

To become an apprentice bricklayer I had to have a medical fitness examination. That embarrassed me because I had to undress and allow a complete stranger to look at me and touch me all over. I passed this medical examination and was duly apprenticed to the firm of Booth and Clark for a period of five years. It was a very small enterprise consisting of the owner, Mr Clark, two qualified bricklayers and some 10 black labourers. The bricklayers were demobilised soldiers who had been stationed in Egypt.

My apprenticeship was wearisome. I was told to report to a building in Pietermaritz Street, the site just across the street from Booth and Clark. They were building a block of three-bedroomed flats for the firemen. When I arrived there at seven o'clock in the morning, I was given a chisel, a hammer

and a brick. Then I was told to cut the brick into two smooth halves. If I did not succeed, I would have to try again and again. This went on for a while and then I had to cut the brick into quarters. Eventually, I was shown how to use a trowel and how to lay bricks. I was not terribly good at laying them in a straight line.

This experience was disheartening. Instead of being helped to become an expert builder, I was sent to supervise and walk along the demarcated line to watch a trench being dug by African labourers. They dug miles of trenches for a sewerage pipeline from Scottsville to Mkondeni on the outskirts of Pietermaritzburg. The upshot of this was that I wasted a year without laying one brick. In due course, however, I did lay bricks on two building sites.

During that time I was also introduced to sex as something that until then was unimaginable. It was because I was ignorant about life's realities in a world unfamiliar to me in spite of having lived through the horrors of war.

That "something" was presented to us apprentices as a launch into life by one of the ex-soldier bricklayers. He displayed a number of photographs, which at that time I did not know were classified as out-and-out pornography intended to subvert the morals of "pure and uncorrupted youths to evil and sin". The photos were taken in Egypt and the models were South African soldiers with Egyptian male and female prostitutes in all kinds of poses. There were also detailed shots of them with animals. My companion and I looked at them in horror. The ex-soldier laughed at our innocence and proceeded to encourage us to "try it out". He said he hoped to awaken our curiosity.

It might seem that until this point in my story I have described my life as full of pain. Happily, I did experience happiness for a brief period of time. I suppose one could say that it was thanks to what men call love. I soon learnt, however, that love demands commitment, which I was not prepared to make. I thought that I had fallen in love with Janina, a girl about my age. I had known her in Oudtshoorn, but in 1949 she lived in Durban. I managed to see her occasionally and soon recognised that it was pointless. I had nothing to offer her as an apprentice bricklayer and ended my romantic non-beginning.

I continued my apprenticeship until November of 1949 and I was bound to attend classes at the Technical College to study Brickwork, Building Construction and Plastering. The reward would be a National Technical Certificate (NTC) in these subjects. If I were to complete NTC II, I would be exempted from one year of my apprenticeship and would become a qualified bricklayer sooner. To achieve this I was given a day off work to attend classes and in addition I had to attend three night-classes a week in the above subjects. Although I did not expect a miracle, I did pass the three subjects and obtained a National Technical Certificate Part II in the November 1949 examinations. That was the only school certificate I had from an English-medium school. This meant that my apprenticeship would end in the November of 1950.

Then a startling event helped me to make a decision to end my apprenticeship. It was an opportunity that I could not miss although I could not envision its consequences. Nevertheless, I felt like a fledgling capable of flight and of leaving the hated line of work. The event was a church mission at St Mary's

during which I believed I received a divine call to assure salvation for myself and the salvation of the heathen. I decided to become a missionary priest but I found myself in an almost insoluble predicament. I could speak hardly any English and did not have the education which would allow me to enter the religious life. I would require a matriculation certificate. In the meanwhile, I had my first taste of South African politics.

The country held its first post-war parliamentary elections on 26 May 1948. When electioneering began, Mrs Reed leased the lounge at the entrance of the house to the National Party, known as the Nats. The place became its headquarters for the Pietermaritzburg city constituency. Its first candidate was a well-known and respected Afrikaner medical doctor, who happened as well to be my doctor. His name was Dr Richter.

I discovered that the idea of Afrikaner domination did not appeal to the English in Natal, but the offer of a white South Africa was heartily supported by many English speaking South Africans. Another ridiculous ploy became more popular than the apartheid slogan. It was “white bread”, obviously for whites. The white people believed that they had had enough of brown bread, which was all that was available during the war and post-war years. When the Nationalists narrowly won the 1948 elections, they fulfilled the promise of white bread almost immediately.

Another lure that also appealed to the Natalian whites was the promise of repatriation of Indians. Many Natal (white) businessmen considered Indians as “coolies”. The Natalians also deemed all Indians to be “sleazy”, undesirable business competitors to be got rid of as soon as possible. The Nats swore

to oblige in the belief that this would help them gain power in Natal. This did not happen. The Nat candidate in Pietermaritzburg did not get more than 500 votes and lost his deposit. In 1949 the Nat anti-Indian campaign had disastrous consequences. A Zulu group in Durban stormed into the Indian business quarters and went on the rampage. It resulted in 142 people being killed and well over 1 000 injured.

Some South African historians blame the outrage on the “bitterness” felt by many Africans toward Indian traders, on their “black-marketeering, shacketeering” (letting of shacks to Africans) and the preferential treatment of them by the whites. The Indians were also accused by Africans of racism, but it seemed to be an example of “divide and conquer”, a policy the Nats used until the 1990s. White Natalians tried to find excuses for the violence, blaming the Indians for “unfair” treatment of the blacks even though there was plenty of anti-Indian legislation, both by local and provincial governments since 1874.

The 1949 riots began after a rumour that an Indian shopkeeper had killed a Zulu boy near the Emmanuel (Roman Catholic) Cathedral in Durban. Zulu attackers vandalised property, smashed shop windows and looted Indian properties in Durban and other Indian areas. I witnessed one such attack on an Indian man near where I lived in Pietermaritzburg. The poor man tried to find protection from the assault in a corner café owned by an Afrikaner. The owner shut the door of the shop and watched the beating of the man by knobkerrie-wielding Zulus. I stood there helpless, shouting at the attackers. Many Indian families sought refuge at Catholic mission stations around Durban and Pietermaritzburg. Moreover,

when the riots broke out, the police were very slow to intervene.

Another election issue was the immigration of Europeans to South Africa. The Nats were worried that if uncontrolled immigration continued, Afrikaners would become a minority white group. They promised to limit immigration from Europe, and if there was any unavoidable immigration, they would insist on the exclusion of Roman Catholics, even if they were Hollanders or Germans. The Nats and the three Dutch Reformed Churches considered all Roman Catholics as *die Roomse gevaar* (the danger from Rome). My fear was that if they did come to power, I would not be able to obtain South African citizenship. This fear proved to be justified, as I later encountered this discrimination as a teacher when I eventually left the religious life. Nevertheless, I decided to end my career as a bricklayer and become a priest at the end of 1949, despite not knowing how I was to deal with the problem of citizenship.

My priestly prospects were slim. I did not have the required matric and I had no idea how I would manage to get it with no money at my disposal. But it seems that fortune does favour the brave, though one can argue that the difference between foolishness and bravery is a narrow one. I decided to talk to Father Chris Kelly, the curate at St Mary's, about my calling. He belonged to the religious order of Oblates of Mary Immaculate, a missionary congregation of priests and brothers. The Order's members were stationed on the mission stations and parishes throughout Natal, Johannesburg and Lesotho. To my surprise, he encouraged me to pursue the idea of entering the priesthood, but on one condition: I had to learn Latin for

a year in my spare time. He would give me Latin lessons twice a week.

Father Chris also said that he would send me to St Charles College to do my university entrance matriculation exam. I would have to find employment for at least a year to support myself. I agreed and told him that I would look for office work rather than continue with my bricklaying apprenticeship.

To my surprise, I had no difficulty in ending my apprenticeship at the beginning of the "builders' holiday" in December 1949. By that time, I had found employment as a bookkeeper clerk at Anderson's Bakery on the corner of Boshoff and Pietermaritz Streets, just a stone's throw from where I lodged.

My bookkeeping beginnings were as wearisome as bricklaying. All I had to do was to record the number of loaves of bread delivered to the bakery's customers. Eventually, I stood behind the counter to serve customers. The only good outcome of the new employment was my semi-independence from the Social Welfare Department. I was going to be in its care until I turned 21, even though my wages exceeded 12 pounds a month. But then came a shock. In order to continue with my new career I was required to obtain permission from the Department of Labour to end my bricklayer apprenticeship. I had to apply to the Immigration Department for permanent residence and an Identity Document. It was eventually issued on 12 May 1950, stamped with "*The holder is not entitled to follow any other occupation other than that of Bricklayer for the period of three years from 2nd May 1950.*"

I refused to return to bricklaying and tried to persuade the Immigration Department to allow me to study. I was fortunate that Father Chris Kelly

assisted me to find an attorney to write a letter to the Department stating that I intended to further my education. After some delay, the Department allowed me to continue my studies. I could now work as a clerk and learn Latin until the end of 1950. I climbed the ladder of a new life, struggling, sweating, and climbing very slowly.

I was to begin at St Charles in the middle of January 1951, but first I had an interview with the Principal of the College. He was a very kind old French Brother who was very sympathetic and accommodating. He did not object to the fact that I was 20 years old. Brother Patrick replaced him at the beginning of the school year.

While I waited to begin at St Charles, Father Chris provided me with the school uniform, shoes, and rugby boots. He instructed me about my future religious life. I had to be prepared to make three religious vows – of obedience, poverty and chastity.

I became a boarder at St Charles College in the middle of January 1951, although I worried that I might have serious difficulties in adapting to the new way of life because of my age. I did not like to be considered as an “oldie” among the youngsters and be subjected to the same discipline as they were. I should not have had any reasons for apprehension. I had the advantage of not looking older than 16 and enough experience in regimentation. I was not the only 20-year-old “boy” at the College. There were two other “boys” of my age, a Madagascan and a local day-scholar. Hence, I had immediate company well able to deal with the adolescents.

When I arrived at St Charles in the afternoon I was greeted warmly by Brother Ralph, in charge of the seniors’ dormitory. He was a South African from

the Eastern Cape and the senior Afrikaans teacher. He showed me my bed and introduced to two Std 9 “inmates”. They were Denis and Mark Boule. Their parents were French-speaking immigrants from Mauritius. We immediately established a friendship that would last a long time.

My new academic endeavour began in a class of 22 boys. I had to take seven subjects, but I did not have to take Afrikaans as the second language because the examinations I had to write were with the Joint Matriculation Board. I was going to write Polish as the second language. I was allowed to do this because I had Latin as the third language, but I had to sit through the Afrikaans lessons.

Those lessons were a revelation. Brother Ralph used an exceptional method of teaching his pupils the language. He distributed extracts from Afrikaans newspapers and made his pupils recite them accurately in front of the class. If any hesitated or made a mistake, he heard this warning: “*Ek sal jou kolf.*” I presumed that it meant that the Brother would play golf and I was not wrong. The golf ball in question was the pupil’s rear. He would receive a strike with a cane for every mistake the pupil made. This tactic seemed to bear results, as failure in Afrikaans in Brother Ralph’s class was rare. I escaped all the Afrikaans torture but not his wrath. It happened when we were caught smoking. Six of the best was the punishment. It did not stop my smoking, although I had to be more careful.

Teaching methods at St Charles were ones common in other schools. Textbooks and past-examination papers were the order of the day. Brother Cyprian, Archbishop Hurley’s brother, and Mr Savory, both teachers of Eng-

lish, were the exceptions. They were not afraid to take chances and used innovative methods which today are considered sophisticated. They taught us to use our imaginations, logic, and above all, our critical abilities in our studies and apply them to our daily lives. Their approach inspired many of us to love poetry, creative writing, all narratives, and fiction, and to study other languages.

Thanks to them, we created a literary group to analyse other works in addition to those prescribed by the Joint Matriculation Board. This encouraged me to try to express myself in written English. I started to publish a St Charles' monthly newsletter with the Latin title of *Ave atque Vale* (Hail and Farewell, or Hullo and Goodbye), but it did not last after I matriculated.

There were other teachers, such as Brother Ezekiel, my History and Latin teacher, to whom I owe my love of history. It was his teaching that led me to major in History. It became my main subject throughout my teaching career.

The other feature of my adult schooling was sport. My feelings about sport were to remain similar to a chemistry professor who asked a football devotee: "What is the chemical formula for salt?" The student replied: "I don't know!" The professor responded: "Correct! I give you 10 out of 10". The Chemistry professor's reward for ignorance of a chemical formula for salt was applied to my knowledge of sport. At St Charles, however, rugby, cricket and athletics were compulsory. Brother Ralph was the coach of these sports. Every pupil was obliged to take at least one team sport. Since I intensely disliked cricket, I was forced to play rugby. Since it was a winter game I did not have to bother about other sporting activities, except

that I did take part in a 400 metres chase for my house and came almost last, unable to breathe from exhaustion.

Rugby left me with a life-long reminder of its viciousness and South African private schools' fixation on winning every game. In 1951, I had to learn its rules and how to push and shove with all my strength. I earned a place in the School's second team as a front-ranker. In 1952 I was promoted to the first team. It was not surprising that, together with the other two twenty-plus "oldies", we managed, for the first time in St Charles's history, to beat every high school in Natal.

I was lucky to escape major injury until the penultimate game of the 1952 season. In a match against Voortrekker Hoër, I suffered what turned into a life-long injury. Five minutes into the game, the scrum collapsed on top of me. That is the only thing I remember of the game. When I woke up in the dormitory, I was surrounded by my team mates, mockingly congratulating me on playing the best game of my life. I asked, "What game?" They sang in chorus: "The game against the Voortrekkers." They thought the episode was funny. Two years later I discovered that I had sustained a serious injury to my lower back and neck and I had subsequently to undergo three back operations.

There were two other incidents I remember at St Charles which affected me emotionally. One illustrates the instinctive group self-preservation instinct; the other a gift to celebrate my twenty-first birthday in the style of an eminent person.

The first concerns a bully, a bulky rugby player nicknamed "Andre", derived from his surname. He spent some time in Australia in an attempt to become a teaching brother, but he was a



St Charles 2nd Rugby Team 1951. Jan Zacharewicz played prop (front row, second from right)

bully and terrorised small boys. It seems he failed to learn anything during his novitiate days. Eventually, I decided to do something about it without snitching on him to Brother Ralph. I used my Tech experience of dealing with bullies. I suspended the Christian “Golden Rule” of loving one’s enemies. I then convinced a group of Standard Nine boys not to wait until they grew stronger but to combine into a wolf pack and hammer the bully’s backside to smithereens. I suppose a modern psychologist would term this behaviour deviant, but school life proves otherwise. To encourage them, and to impress them, I quoted the old Latin saying “*ex unitate vires*” (literally, strength comes from unity) to encourage them to action. It took them a while before they combined their strength. When they did, they beat him up so much that he never tried to bully anyone again. This happened just before the July holidays.

After school closed, I decided to hitch-hike to Johannesburg. I was dressed in my school uniform, with two

pounds in my pocket. I walked up the steep road up Town Hill. Foolishly, I had no idea how big Johannesburg was. I had no address to where I was going, except for the name of the place where my sisters were staying. I stood on the road outside Pietermaritzburg for at least an hour. Then a car stopped. The driver offered me a lift but only to Har-rismith. I waited there for an hour before I was given a lift by a middle-aged couple. It was dark when we reached Johannesburg. They dropped me off at the Hilton Hotel. It was too late to find the Convent. I did not realise what I was doing. The manager was startled by my request for a room. He exclaimed: “What on earth are you doing here?” I explained what had happened and when he noticed my Marist uniform, he told me that he was a Marist Old Boy. He understood my predicament and paid for a taxi to take me to my sisters’ address. I stayed in Johannesburg for two weeks.

Shortly after my return to St Charles I celebrated my 21st birthday. I had no idea that any of the St Charles boys

knew the date of my birth. On the evening of 30 October as the boarders lined up for the evening meal I noticed that the dining hall was in darkness. I thought it might have been caused by a blackout of some sort. Normally, the Matric Class was last to go in. That night, however, we were ordered to go in before the juniors. I also saw that my table was decorated with a bouquet of flowers and a huge lit candle. Then I heard a chorus of voices singing, "Happy Birthday, dear Mr Zac." Then the Head Prefect handed me a small gift-wrapped parcel. When I unwrapped it, I gazed in wonder at a silver wrist-watch with a simple inscription at the back, "Zac, S. C. C. 30, 10, 1951". As I write this, I am looking at this "Helvetica" watch and I am still overcome emotionally, repeating what I said then, "thank you", three times because I could not find other words to express my gratitude to the boys and the Marist Brothers. After all, this was the first watch I had ever worn. After this brief ceremony, I was waited upon with a meal of specially prepared guinea fowl, nurtured by old Brother Paul in his own chicken coop.

After my 21st birthday, I began the new stage of my life. I was now an adult, no longer subject to the whims of authorities. As an adult, I did not have to suffer the school cadet marches.

Nothing exceptional happened during the rest of my time at St Charles. In December 1952, it ended with writing the Joint Matriculation Board examinations over a period of two weeks. I studied feverishly and became very afraid of failing because I was not sure whether I would obtain a University Exemption Certificate, because Mathematics was

required for that. My entry into the religious life depended on the result. A long wait began for the examination results. I went back to Mrs Reed's and managed to get temporary employment again at Anderson's Bakery, working the night shift to supervise bread deliveries. I found it somewhat vexing to work from seven in the evening until seven in the morning and having nothing to do during the day.

The examination results came out late in January, 1953. My boarding-house colleagues urged me to go to St Charles College to find out how I had done. One gave me a lift to the school in his car. I trembled in fear as I entered Brother Patrick's office. To my surprise, he smiled and congratulated me. I had passed with Matriculation Exemption, but with only a Second Class, because of an "E" in Mathematics. I was now assured that the Oblates of Mary would accept me and I could begin my novitiate on 10 February 1953, in Germiston. Fr Chris Kelly was delighted to arrange my departure. He took me to Mariannahill, where the tailor brother fitted me with a cassock and a black suit. I was to depart on 8th February to Germiston. In the meantime, however, I spent the rest of the time in Durban with my friend Dennis Boule, who was also entering the novitiate.

And so I left Natal but would return a year later to begin my priestly studies at St Joseph's Scholasticate, Cedara. The next 12 years are beyond the scope of this narrative. They entail my experience as a theological student, six years in Rome, a professorship at St Joseph's Scholasticate until 10 February 1968, and my leaving the priesthood.