

29/4/66

Spent the afternoon cutting
out an article by Con Thamba
in The Classic. C.T. was recently
included in a list of people
overseas whose words may
not be quoted in S.A. —
regardless of the content!

I've attached the article &
the slip in.

What a bloody stupid
waste!

Audrey Colclough

OWING TO THE RECENT BANNING OF CAN THEMBA
WE HAVE BEEN FORCED TO REMOVE HIS TRIBUTE
TO NAT NAKASA. THIS AFFECTS THE CLOSING
VERSES OF WILLIAM PLOMER'S POEM, WHICH WE
REPEAT ON THIS PAGE. WE APOLOGISE FOR ANY
INCONVENIENCE TO THE READER.

"My people", in anguish
She cried, "from me have rotted
Utterly away." Everywhere
She felt rejected:
Now she is nowhere.

Where men waste in prison
For trying to be fruitful,
The first fruit is setting
Themselves dug for;
He will not taste it.

Her blood and his
Fed the slow, tormented
Tree that is destined
To bear what will be
Bough-bending plenty.

Let those who will savour
Ripeness and sweetness,
Let them taste and remember
Him, her and all others
Secreted in the juices.

WILLIAM PLOMER

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WILLIAM PLOMER

THE BOY WITH THE TENNIS RACQUET

CAN THEMBA

SOMEONE had passed the buck to me. The story went out that a razor-sharp journalist from Durban was coming to Johannesburg to work in our main office. The editor had told someone to find accommodation for him, and that someone had decided that his initiation was best in my hands. Those days handing an other-town boy into my hands for initiation was subtlest excretion. Not that we would persecute him. We only sought to divest him of the naivetes and extraneous moralities with which we knew he would be encumbered.

He came, I remember, in the morning with a suitcase and a tennis racquet — ye gods! a tennis racquet. We stared at him. The chaps on Drum at that time had fancied themselves to be poised on a dramatic, implacable kind of life. Journalism was still new to most of us and we saw it in the light of the heroics of Henry Nxumalo, decidedly not in the light of tennis, which we classed with draughts.

He had a puckish, a boyish face, and a name something like Nathaniel Nakasa. We soon made it Nat. I took him to Sophiatown. I showed him the room where he would stay, what was it? three minutes, five minutes? Then I took him to my shebeen in Edith Street.

There was a beautiful girl there, and I hoped Nat would make her. As a matter of cold fact, as he declined drink after drink, I decided that he was interested. She was Tswana and he Zulu, but they got on swimmingly, love being polyglot. Honest, I don't know how it happened, but I left him there. He told me later, that a few tsotsis came in and he approached them with trepidated terror. He asked them if they knew where Can Themba lived. They immediately looked hostile. (At first, they thought he contemplated some harm to the revered Can

Themba.) But when Mpho, the girl, explained that this was really a friend of the chap, who had deserted him there in one of his drunken impulses, they said: "O.K. Durban-boy, hang around and we'll take you there."

This is a measure of Nat's character. He was in a new situation. He knew about Jo'burg tsotsis, the country's worst. He was scared — he told me later he was. But he went with them, chatted with them, wanted to know what type of character this his host was. Though he got only grunts, it was the journalist in action, not the terrified fish out of water.

He found me at home, out of this world's concerns. Later, he found out about Jo'burg without the aid of my derelictions. He quickly learned about the united nations of Fordsburg and Malay Camp; about the liberal enclaves in Hillbrow; about the cosmopolitanism of Johannesburg. And about the genuine values, in those people who were not trying to prove or protest anything: God knows South Africa begs any stranger to want to prove or protest something, and Johannesburg is its Mecca.

But Nat sought for something inside himself that would make language with the confused environment in which he found himself. He sought, fought, struggled, argued, posed — but I doubt if he found it. The South African stubbornness was too much for him, and he had to go into exile.

The bitterest commentary on South Africa is typified by Nat. All those Africans who wanted to be loyal, hard-working, intelligent citizens of the country are crowded out. They don't want to bleach themselves, but they want to participate and contribute to the wonder that that country can become. They don't want to be fossilised into tribal inventions that are no more real to them than they would have been real to their forefathers.

Nat's was such a voice. Sobukwe's is that of protest and resistance. Casey Motsisi's that of derisive laughter. Bloke Modisane's that of implacable hatred. Ezekiel Mphahlele's that of intellectual contempt. Nimrod Mkele's that of patient explanation to be patient. Mine, that of self-corrosive cynicism. But Nat told us: "There must be humans on the other side of the fence; it's only we haven't learned how to talk."

We replied: "Humans? Not enough."

One day, we met at a dry cleaners called the "Classic." Nat bought the drinks and said he had an idea. Ideas were sprouting all over the place, but any excuse for a drink was good enough.

After the ninth we got around to discussing the idea. Nat

proposed starting a really good, artistic magazine. He wanted all of us — I don't mean just those Non-White journalists present — but all of us: Black, White, Coloured, Indian. For want of superior inspiration we decided to call the damned thing "The Classic" — the place where it was conceived, born and most of the time bred. Most of us got stinkingly drunk, but Nat captained the boat with a level head and saw to it that we met dead-line.

He slipped into the artistic-intellectual set of Hillbrow and I had to go to Hillbrow. In between he met a girl who seemed to match the accomplishments he sought. She was African (that would vindicate him from the slur that any White woman was better than every Black woman, though I think Nat would have thought with contempt of this); she was educated and intelligent (though I think Nat was no snob); she was lively and interesting (though I think Nat would have none of a floozie); she could mix with the High, the Middle and the Low (Nat chose what he wanted from High, Middle and Low). Eventually, she eclipsed herself and went to marry someone in Europe.

Nat has a brother here in Swaziland. Joe Nakasa. One day Joe took me to Chesterville in Durban to meet his family. There is a father, a sister and a brother. Another brother is in England studying at Cambridge. Their mother is in Sterkfontein Mental Hospital, unable to recognise even her sons. Nat talked little about his mother, but once when I had gone there with him, he broke out into bitter, scalding tears. I had not been there when he saw his mother, but I guessed that it was a gruelling, cruel experience.

Then he went to America. We thought this was the big break.

At the time of his death, Nat was planning interesting things, journalistically speaking, interesting things

Quo Vadis.

Mon Tues
A
D

ELEVEN YEARS AGO...

68/65

Was Nat a Black man who lost his way?

ELEVEN YEARS ago almost to the month, a talented young Black journalist from Durban, Nat Nakasa, reportedly jumped to his death from the seventh floor of a New York City skyscraper. Apparently, according to newspaper reports, it was suicide.

To shocked members of his family, friends and former colleagues, Nat Nakasa's death was a tragic loss. But it also left a big question mark that remains a puzzle to this day. Why did he do it, if indeed it was suicide?

When he left South Africa on an exit permit — he was refused a passport — to take up a Nieman Fellowship at Harvard University in 1963, Nat looked hale and hearty. A brilliant career in international journalism appeared assured. He did not seem unduly bothered by the fact he had virtually renounced his South African citizenship, and might never again be able to return to this country.

So again in question, why did Nakasa choose to take his own life barely a year after stepping out into the big, wide world? I tried to figure it all out recently during six weeks of touring the United States as a guest of the U.S. Government under an educational and cultural exchange programme.

Friends

Having known the late Nathaniel Ndazana Nakasa from boyhood and having been a close friend from school days through our entry into journalism 20 years ago, I can claim to

By
OBED KUNENE

have come away with as near plausible an explanation as ever one could hope for.

From my own observations of the American way of life and thinking, and from my intimate knowledge of the mind of Nat, I believe frustration and disillusionment killed my good friend.

Interest

I believe Nat got to the US at the wrong time. I believe that, during his short sojourn there, Nat came face to face with himself . . . and found he did not really know or understand who or what he was. It was a question of identity, or lack of it.

During my visit, I met and talked with many Black Americans — men and women who told me that "liberation" for them came the day they began to discover themselves as Blacks. A new kind of pride in their Blackness began to manifest itself.

I listened with interest to lengthy expositions on the significance of "a Black identity," the "Black is Beautiful" concept and Black consciousness which resulted in Afro-Americanism.

It all happened in the early 60s when the civil rights bandwagon gained momentum. Black Americans started then to seriously question and take a fresh look at a whole gamut of values and priorities which they had for long accepted with equanimity.

It is common knowledge that America has never been the same since, and I believe the world has not heard the end of the soul-searching process in the Black community there.

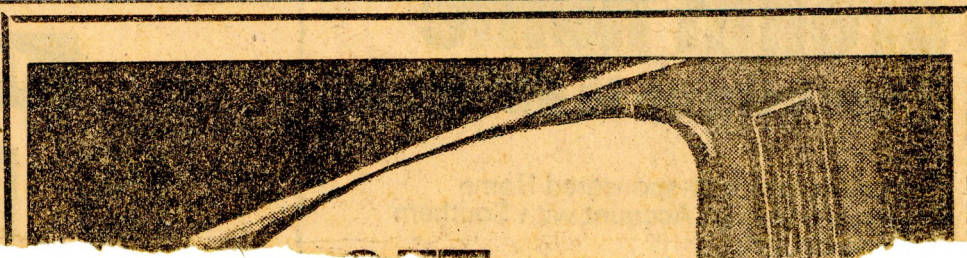
At the end of his term at Harvard, Nat Nakasa wrote me a most interesting and — I thought — revealing letter. He spoke of having had a tough time at the hands of inquisitive "Negroes", as they were then called. He said they asked him questions about Shaka and all the other well-known Zulu kings; they wanted to know about his own tribal origins. They wanted to know how much of a "Black brother" he was.

Nat's letter ended on a sad note: "I regret now my indifference to all those Zulu books written by R. R. Dhlomo. You remember how I used to hate reading them at high school? Please do me a favour. Send me any book you can find dealing with Zulu history and written by our people, like Mr Dhlomo."

Crisis

Mr Dhlomo was a noted newspaper editor and author of Zulu historical biographies. He died in 1971.

Had my friend Nat come up against an identity crisis, I wondered. The story goes — and I have it on the authority of many close friends — that in Johannesburg, where he made his name as a magazine and newspaper columnist, Nat hobnobbed more with the Whites of Lower Houghton than with the Blacks of Soweto



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