

CUSTODIANS OF MEMORY



*Royal Navy officers, whose ship was being repaired in Durban harbour, watching a tennis game with local farmers' wives and daughters in the Stanger district in 1943 ... one of the photographs from John Conyngham's Natal and Zululand memoir, **Hazara: Elegy for an African Farm***

Record your own history before it is too late, says John Conyngham, who has just written a family memoir

Article:

Decades ago, when I was about six years old, my parents and I spent a night at the Plough Hotel in Longmarket (now Langalibalele) Street in Pietermaritzburg's city centre. To my great excitement, in the early hours of the morning the sprawling, corrugated-iron-roofed building across the street came to life. As I remember, standing at the window in my pyjamas, out of the half-light emerged a noisy armada of small trucks and horse-drawn carts loaded with fruit and vegetables.

Years afterwards, the Plough Hotel became a retirement lodge named Ken Collins House, which later was demolished to make way for the parking lot of City Square Spar. Later still, Nando's and Boxer outlets were built on part of the footprint of the vanished hotel.

Looking nowadays from that direction towards the city hall, most people would find it difficult to visualise the thriving market, which disappeared when its building was demolished in 1972. Only the area's name – Market Square – provides a clue. And when my generation and the remnants of its predecessor are gone, there will be no-one left who can recall firsthand what it was like.

A similar disappearance occurs in families. Each generation has a fascinating story, but unless it is captured, past lives endure only as long as they are remembered by others. I was reminded of this several months ago when I visited Mountain Rise cemetery to pay my respects to Clint Zelman, the *Witness* photographer who was murdered in Pietermaritzburg on February 10, 2001.

After work on that fateful evening, Clint had been drinking with friends in a pub in Perks Arcade when an intruder burst in brandishing a handgun. When Clint, the gentlest of souls, asked what he wanted, the gunman shot him dead and ran away. The crime remains unsolved.

As I stood beside his grave in the small Jewish section of the cemetery, I reflected on how life's stream had borne Clint from his childhood home in King William's Town to Pietermaritzburg and that dreadful night when, aged only 35, his life had suddenly been ended. Nowadays, his friends and family, scattered across the world, remember him fondly, but once they too are no longer alive, who will be the custodian of his memory?

Among the surrounding graves, fringed with overgrown grass and corralled by encroaching shrubbery, were two of Pietermaritzburg residents who had been born in Russia. Surely neither of them, during their Russian childhoods, could have dreamed that their final resting place would be in a cemetery in a city towards the foot of Africa. Yet such is the tragedy of the Jewish and other diasporas (think today of the refugees streaming into Europe, or the South Africans who have chosen to emigrate), that many millions of people live dislocated lives. Each émigré starts again in a foreign country, forging a new narrative, but with much of their story left behind.

The importance of family history seems only to occur to some people, and usually when they reach middle age, when most of their life is behind them. Young people, understandably in a hurry to get on in the world, generally find genealogy boring, if they consider it at all.

There is also the widespread view that only the lives of famous people are worth recording. But surely everyone's story is important, especially ordinary men and women who live as best they can in the face of challenging circumstances. Aren't they better subjects than glitzy so-called celebrities, or the carelessly super-rich, or self-seeking politicians?

I asked myself this question repeatedly during the eight or so years it took me to research and write a family memoir. As my forebears owned a farm near Stanger (now KwaDukuza) from 1924 until 1977, the sugar world was the appropriate setting. But each family has its own 'setting' around which its story revolves, whether a special place, or special person, or even a momentous incident or decision which affected the family's destiny.

In my memoir, *Hazara: Elegy for an African Farm*, I concentrate on my parents' and grandparents' generations, recording not only how they lived as farmers but also how as soldiers or nurses they were drawn into conflicts like the Anglo-Boer War, Bhambatha Rebellion and both World Wars. Even if the focus is a farm called Hazara, named after a regiment in the British Indian Army, and its surrounding community, integral to the story are the triumphs and tragedies of everyday life. Not to record them, I realised, would be to condemn them to oblivion.

Should you consider telling your family's story, you need first to accumulate the facts. This painstaking process involves primarily questioning relatives, but also rooting around for reports and photographs, searching in archives for birth, marriage and death certificates, and poring over books in libraries. Type key words into the internet and see what turns up. Use what you can glean to draw up a basic family tree, working backwards from you and your siblings. If possible, get older family members, and other people who are connected with your family, to help fill in the blanks. And so, slowly, a picture will begin to emerge.

Back in 1977 I heard poet and academic Guy Butler speaking on the radio about how he had researched his first volume of autobiography, *Karoo Morning*, which had just been published. He had divided his life into years, and filed everything – invitations, academic reports, photographs, letters, newspaper cuttings, scribbled notes of his own – under its particular year in a concertina file. Gradually a narrative began to take shape. In today's digital era, electronic folders could be used.

Once a skeleton has been constructed, it needs to be fleshed out with further research. Ask yourself why your family was where it was at that particular time, and what was behind its circumstances. People with African heritages can chart how their distant forebears migrated south from central Africa, and those with European or Indian heritages can begin to understand what historical tides swept them onto the shores of this country. And people of mixed race can begin to understand how different strands combined to create their story.

This process of gathering can take generations, so your history should be written down, no matter how roughly, and passed on to successive custodians to be added to and improved on. But if writing is too difficult for you, or too time-consuming, or if you don't have descendants to whom the accumulated facts can be bequeathed, choose a relative who sees the value of history, and help them record it instead. As each stage feeds into the next, so your family's unique lineage will gradually begin to take shape.

But without facts, no true story is possible. So speak to your grandparents or parents, or aunts and uncles, or brothers and sisters, and write down the details. Don't waste a moment, because sometimes people die suddenly and unexpectedly, taking great chapters of information with them, which are then lost forever.

John Conyngham is a former editor of The Witness, and the author of three novels – The Arrowing of the Cane, The Desecration of the Graves and The Lostness of Alice. His family memoir, Hazara: Elegy for an African Farm, has recently been published by the Natal Society Foundation.

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