

Prost by Emanuel Derman

Late in life, when his roots should have held him steady, he became unmoored, and it seemed inappropriate. But who determined what was appropriate?

In the summer of 1956 when he was an eleven-year old boy, the hot items were fluorescent socks in lime green or neon pink that glowed in the dark as they strolled up and down the beachfront at night. Those strolls were a local version of what his parents called *shpatzieren*, the pre-WWII *Mitteleuropean* slow promenading up and down main street on a Saturday or Sunday summer afternoon, men in white suits walking arm-in-arm with their parasol-carrying wives, the men doffing their hats to the opposing women on someone else's arm, the women smiling back in response.

Here in southern Cape Town (or *Cup-Eh-To-Ven*, as his mother first pronounced it, she told him, when she heard she was to emigrate to there from Poland) no one wore white suits. Here, teenagers and parents *shpatzieren* in casual clothes on the elevated Promenade in Muizenberg, or on the winding pavement beside the lawns of Beach Road, Sea Point.

Muizenberg was a Southern African Brighton or Blackpool, a colonial English-style summer resort, the preferred vacationland of Jewish immigrants who lived in the lower part of the continent.

Every summer for several years his family spent two weeks at *The Queens Hotel*, a shabby dark three-storey establishment owned by some relatives of his father, open only in the summer. All the hotels in Muizenberg were colonial. Every meal from breakfast to dinner seemed to involve baked haddock, and every room had a chamber pot in case you had to urinate in the night, since the shared bathroom was at the end of the corridor or even half way up another flight of stairs. Parents requested on a form to have coffee or tea with biscuits delivered on a tray to their room each morning at 6 or 7 a.m., a supposed holiday luxury whose nature eluded him: Why would you want to have coffee served to you in bed long before breakfast and then go back to sleep?

Smarter and more regal than *The Queens* his family stayed at was *The Balmoral*, the favorite

of richer visitors from Johannesburg. Rhodesians with their better British- sounding accents stayed at *Rhodesia By The Sea*. The local bioscope was called *The Empire*. Its floor was sticky with a thin layer of dried spilled cooldrinks that felt and sounded like Scotch tape on your bare feet. Its upstairs was reserved for Coloureds, who weren't allowed on the main floor.

Muizenberg was a day trippers' resort too. When his family weren't holidaying in the hotel, they often drove the fourteen miles from central Cape Town to Muizenberg on weekends along a narrow two-way road that could take an hour or more in traffic. His immigrant uncle, who sometimes drove them all there in his snazzy white Ford, insisted on pulling over at about the half way point to take a fifteen-minute nap. Most often it was his mother who drove them there for the day in their navy four- door 1948 Chevrolet, stopping *en route* to buy trays of fruit or entire watermelons his mother tapped with her knuckles from Coloured roadside vendors.

At lunchtime, day tripping crowds picnicked on the Muizenberg lawns; the fancier families unpacked elegant wicker picnic boxes containing neat stacks of English china and sets of bone-handled knives and forks secured by leather toggle straps. Before lunch and after everyone jammed together under beach umbrellas on the narrow stretch of sand between the raised cement sidewalk and the sea.

All of Muizenberg's beaches were divided in two by a double row of brightly colored (red, yellow, blue or green) wooden bathing boxes that ran parallel to the water. Families rented a semidetached half of a box for the season; you could lock and store beach equipment in them, and change in and out of your bathing costume in apparent privacy. Two friends of his that summer peeked through holes they had surreptitiously poked in the dividing wall of their parents' box to watch their attractive girl cousins in the adjacent half changing out of their costumes. His family's doctor, a thin old man with a bald head, had a box there too. After bathing he emerged from the cold water with his thin legs sticking out of loose worn elasticized Speedo-style bathing briefs and flapped his arms back and forth in the style of an Olympic swimmer warming up at the edge of the pool before a race. No one snickered at his revealing bathing suit; they knew that it was a foible, like Einstein's wild hair or socklessness.

Muizenberg's Snake Pit was the most crowded of its beaches, a triangle of white sand between its beach boxes and the Promenade that was packed with white teenage boys and girls on beach towels. Coloured men roamed the beach selling paper cups of lychees for a shilling. At dusk other Coloured men and women systematically strained the sand for dropped coins.

Before entering the Snake Pit, it was traditional to sit on the Promenade above it, your legs dangling over the cement wall. You surveyed the scene, checked out who was where, and only then went down to join the people you had spotted.

In the Snake Pit, that summer when he was eleven, the really cool boys and girls wore thin gold or silver chains with Stars of David around their necks. There was something sexy and shameless, and nothing at all religious about wearing the symbol, a silly rebuttal to the crosses worn by gentiles. He wanted one too, though in his heart he knew that jewelry on men was *prost*, that asking for one was embarrassing, and that he would never get one.

Though no one ever translated it for him, *prost* was Polish-Yiddish for vulgar, common, uncultured, crass, and unrefined, or some mix of them all. *Prost*, for example, were the Silverbergs in the apartment down the road from his family's house, barely high-school educated and doubly damned by not knowing much about Jewish culture either. Mr Silverberg walked with a prominent belly-out duck-toed strut that wasn't *shpatzieren*. He dressed flashily, sold clothes on lay-by to Coloureds who paid him in monthly installments. He could speak Afrikaans fluently. He beat his kids with a belt when they were naughty, chasing them around their small bedroom until he caught them, and when he cursed, he cursed in four--letter English words rather than obscure Polish or Yiddish ones. Mrs Silverberg was simultaneously blowsy and skinny, a combination that gave her a sour dissatisfied look. She had long fingernails, each *prostly* painted in two-tone scarlet and silver, the colors meeting on a diagonal straddled by a tiny black spade or club. A few years later she had a hysterectomy which everyone spoke about in veiled tones, and Mr Silverberg looked even more irritated than usual.

At the Silverbergs' son's Saturday night Barmitzvah party, a dinner-and-dance at The Bohemian Club whose red light rotated and flashed at its front entrance, someone made a

toast to the Barmitzvah boy's parents. The toastmaster (this was ex-colonial South Africa) reminisced about how he and Mr Silverberg in their youth had mischievously climbed trees to steal loquats from neighbors' gardens. "That's all they can find to say about him?" the boy's father said in the car on the way home. "Stealing fruit?" That was *prost*.

Shpatzieren. In Muizenberg you strolled on the Promenade, which ended in midair above the sand dunes that stretched for miles beyond the populated part of the beach. You strolled there only if you vacationed there. No one would dream of driving to Muizenberg in the evening to take a walk.

Sea Point was where you went for walking. Your parents took you there by car; you separated into tribes; boys walked with boys, girls with girls, checking each other out on hot summer nights during the holidays. Parents strolled separately on the same strip. At the end of the evening, you met up with them again for the ride home.

If Muizenberg was Brighton, then Sea Point was Nice or Venice, its beachfront dotted with cafés and pizzerias, its apartment blocks boasting French or Italian Riviera names (Marseilles, San Remo). You could buy gelatos, frullatos, espressos, cappuccinos. All of this exotic Italian-ness had sprung up during the postwar boom in which Italy, despite being part of the Axis only a short few years before, had miraculously become synonymous with sophisticated food, movies and clothes. You were still not supposed to buy German, but Italian was fine.

Some actions were appropriate, others weren't. All behavior had meaning. Was anything actually neutral?

One afternoon when he was four years old, he had sat on the living room floor and listened to the radio, guiltily absorbed in a religious program about Jesus and Christianity. It sounded beautiful, he liked it, but he knew it wasn't good to like it.

At the center of Muizenberg was a regal Pavilion with a high central dome, and within it a Milk

Bar where you could twirl on raised red leather bar seats and order milk shakes or banana splits. In the right wing that extended from the dome was an English-style penny arcade with purely mechanical games. One of them involved dropping a large contemporary copper penny into a slot and onto the tracks of a glass-enclosed vertical wheel, and then rolling the penny progressively down the horizontal tracks by tilting the wheel from side to side, without letting it fall off the edge. The prize was getting your penny back. Inside the arcade too was a little studio where you could pay to have your voice recorded on a small shellac-covered tin disk. He still had one his father recorded with him years earlier, reciting Mother Goose at 78 rpm, interspersed with his father's audible prompts in a heavy Yiddish accent. There was no longer a way to play it.

To the left of the Pavilion was the long cement Promenade. At its entrance was a ten-foot-high hexagonal cement kiosk, windowless, that housed a *camera obscura* whose lens at the top projected onto a horizontal table at the center of the kiosk the astonishing moving images of the people outside walking up and down. His father used to take him there on sunny days.

Once that summer, idling alone at the entrance to the Promenade, he was approached by an elderly Jewish man who told him how he, the man, when he had been thirteen years old, had found the Jewish religion and his Barmitzvah preparations unsatisfying, and had turned to Jesus. The boy found this convincing and attractive, and worried that he would suddenly find himself converting to Christianity.

At the end of his first year in grade school his family went to Muizenberg for the day. When he grew tired of walking his father carried him piggyback. Somewhere near the penny arcade he saw a schoolmate, who saw him being carried by his father. He buried his face in his father's back; being carried at his age was shameful.

His mother was good with a sewing machine. In summer she made him pairs of shorts out of cotton with an elasticized waist that he wore to the beach. They were embarrassing and a little loose around the legs. In winter she knitted him Fair Isle sweaters, copied from the imported ones his cousins had. His cousins had more toys than him, and were wild, breaking out into fierce physical fights that their mother threatened to report to their father.

Looking back, it seemed to him, he had been half-spoiled and half-constrained.

That summer at Muizenberg he fell in love with a twelve-year-old girl called Anna Lidin. She was dark and plump and black-haired and self-sufficient, and wore pink lipstick *and* a gold Star of David around her neck. After a few days she grew so tanned she could have passed for Coloured. One day a conductor on the train from Cape Town to Muizenberg told her to go to the car she belonged in. Anna simply tossed her head and laughed.

The Lidins were spending two weeks at *The Queens Hotel* too. Mr Lidin was short and quiet; Mrs Lidin, dark like her daughter, was bubbly with a wide cheerful once-acned face. There was nothing special about them, nothing immediately noticeable. In addition to Anna, they had a son, Ivan, about ten years old.

“They couldn’t find a better name than ‘Ivan’?” the boy’s mother asked his father rhetorically. “Every Russian peasant is called Ivan.”

Anna and her family, the boy deduced, were *prost* too. But the Lidins were born in South Africa, didn't speak with accents, had no idea of the shame involved in giving your Jewish son a Russian peasant name. Mr and Mrs Lidin walked on the Promenade together after dinner in *The Queens Hotel*, each with an arm about the other's waist, a couple one generation more assimilated than his immigrant parents.

The Silverbergs' *prostness* was visceral, instantly apparent. The Lidins' was more subtle. But Anna was pretty, the Lidins were nice, and they were physical with each other. Did *prost* have to be bad?

Prost was a family failing, a function of upbringing and occupation. *Prost* wasn't the same as *uneducated*, though it was correlated.

Prost came by way of nurture. Entire families were *prost*. Its opposite was *eidel* – refined, delicate, and gentle.

Eidel didn't mean cultured. You could be uncultured and uneducated, and yet be *eidel*. *Eidel* was inherent; it came from nature.

The Coloured "maids" that were employed by each family in the boy's all-white neighborhood were probably *prost* too, but it wasn't their fault. They lived in little rooms adjacent to each family's house. When their day jobs were over, it seemed, they lived their dramas of sex and violence in a separate world of their own. His family's maid entertained her boyfriend Walter in her room in the evenings.

When his parents left him alone at home on a Saturday night to go to the movies, Walter came over from the nearby orphanage where he worked, and together they retreated to the maid's room. There she and Walter drank and argued and fought. One Saturday night at 11 p.m. she came running into the house from her room. When Walter tried to come after her through the locked back door, she boiled a kettle full of hot water and poured it out of the upstairs rear window down onto him. A few years later, when Walter roamed their back garden late at night seeking entry to the back yard where her room was located, the boy's father cleverly shouted through the window: "Stand still, or I'll shoot!" and Walter fled.

Some maids had sad lives. Their own families, sometimes their own children, lived far up

country with their relatives, while the maids looked after other people's children.

Why was *prostness* such a big deal to his immigrant parents, such a demarcator of people, he wondered years later? Was it the narcissism of small differences? Just as *apartheid* widened the small gap between poor Whites and the Coloureds from whom they were not that different, did the notion of *prostness* usefully broaden the gap between similar Jews, elevating some, diminishing others? Weren't they all equally God's children, he wondered?

Or was it the sexual element in *prostness* that was so reprehensible? There was, it seemed to the boy, something unreserved and passionate about *prost* people, a shameless willingness to take desperate chances. Did his parents recognize the temptations of vulgarity, and fear that it could level you or bring you down? Was that why they abhorred it?

His father was in business. His parents were worldly but not *prost*. His Hebrew teacher, a scholar, wasn't worldly at all, and came to his father for financial advice. But even the teacher-scholar shunned *prost*, recoiling when his daughter married the son of a butcher. Still, there was more than one dimension to respectability. Wealth could override lack of refinement. There was some unarticulated tradeoff between *prostness* and wealth. The boy could tell that were families who were wealthier but more *prost*, and families who were less wealthy but more refined. His family seemed to think, he concluded, they were the convex combination of money and refinement, sitting at the saddle point: more refined than wealthier people and wealthier than more refined people.

Perhaps because his parents abhorred it, there was something he found fascinating about *prost*. Was it this forbidden attraction to energy and vulgarity that led to his unmooring?

When you became unmoored you could do anything you liked, but who knew where it might lead?

PROST by EMANUEL DERMAN

Date Written:

Date posted on CHOL Share Your Story Site, Oct 2022