

## Rebels with an Unjust Cause by David E. Kaplan

On the centenary of South Africa's 1922 Rand Revolt, I share my late father's intimate childhood recollections and personal experiences.



The centenary this 2022 of the armed uprising of white miners in the Witwatersrand region of South Africa - known as the 'Rand Rebellion', the '1922 Rand Revolt' or the '1922 Rand Strike' and by some even the 'Red Revolt' - will most likely pass ignored, as the experiences passions and issues of yesterday's long dead no longer resonate with today's living.

Relegated today to a *footnote* in history, it was by *foot* many years ago that I learnt firsthand of what happened through a child's eyes – my late father, Solly Kaplan.

On a family visit to Johannesburg shortly after the end of Apartheid, we were idly sitting at a hotel breakfast table and my father said, "*Son, come I want to take you downtown to Fordsburg; show you a chapter of my childhood when South Africa teetered on the brink of civil war.*"

With violence in the streets of downtown central Johannesburg rife at the time and my father well in his senior years, I cautioned against it but he replied:

*"Violence! You don't know what violence is. I was a youngster here back then and I was in the thick of it, darting between bullets."*

I was fascinated.

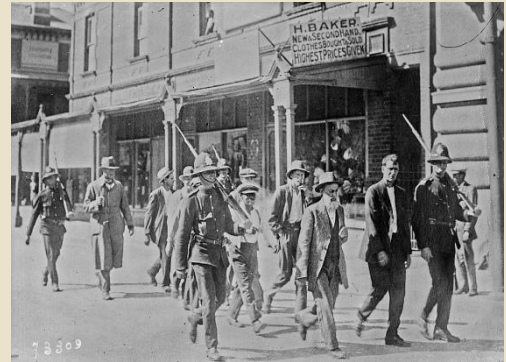
I threw back my coffee and said 'let's go'. On the way, he explained that his exposure to civil violence began a good few years before the 1922 Revolt, when as a young lad of five, he disembarked at Johannesburg Central Station in 1913, "*in the midst of a violent miners' revolt.*"

He explained:

*"What stated as a dispute over working hours of a few miners at the New Klipfontein Mine led to sackings and a strike that soon spread to other mines. By the time I arrived in Jo'burg, rioting had broken out in the centre of the town. Soon thereafter, Park Station was set ablaze, as were the offices of "The Star" newspaper. Union government troops soon joined the fray, and in the first two days of open hostilities, over 100 strikers and innocent bystanders had been killed."*

This was Solly's baptism to life in Johannesburg, and by the time my father left the 'Golden City', for "*the quiet and sedate Cape*" in 1923, he would experience firsthand - "*virtually on our doorstep*" - the far more serious and violent miners' rebellion, which history would record as the '1922 Rand Revolt.'

When the hostilities broke out, Solly, now 12, was living with his family in downtown Johannesburg. *“It was not a Jewish area, more a mixed bag of locals and immigrants, with a plethora of rough and ready types, who had gravitated to this grubby, dusty boomtown. People tried to eke out a living the best they could.”* His father, Max, worked in a small factory in West Street manufacturing wrought iron gates – an expertise that would sow the seeds with his sons and emerge as the global wire and steel manufacturing behemoth – ‘Cape Gate’.



*“We had settled in Anderson Street in one of those typical small houses with a corrugated tin roof and a front porch close to an area known as the Jeppe Dip. It was here that White miners set themselves up in a makeshift stockade and from where they indiscriminately shot at any Blacks within firing range.”*

### **STRANGE BEDFELLOWS**

The revolt began, explained Solly, *“as a strike in Witbank on 2 January 1922, when coal miners downed tools over proposed pay cuts.”* What then inflamed the crisis was the announcement by the Chamber of Mines to increase the employment ratio of Black to White workers, which would have resulted in a substantial diminution of White jobs. Adding fuel to the fire was a further proposal to abolish the paid holidays of May Day and Dingaan’s Day, both enormously symbolic to the English and Afrikaans workers respectively. On February 7, Johannesburg was greeted by the sight of striking miners marching through the streets under the banner:

**“WORKERS OF THE WORLD UNITE FOR A WHITE SOUTH AFRICA’.**

*“So, what began as a strike supporting job reservation,”* explained Solly, *“rapidly exploded into an armed rebellion, where Afrikaner Nationalists had no problem joining forces with English speaking communists.”*

This sudden solidarity between natural foes, *“showed that when expedient, traditional ideological antipathy can quickly be dispensed with for the shared common cause of self-interest.”*

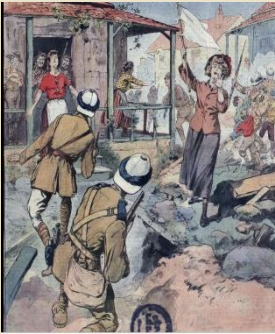
### **STREET-SMART**

Although only twelve, *“I was very conscious of what happening, mainly because of the risks I had to take. My stepmother used to send me out daily to buy provisions from the store in Commissioner Street, some three blocks away. I would dash along, and then when crossing*

*intersections, I would constantly be on the lookout, ducking and diving the bullets when necessary, coming from the stockades and roadblocks. Any unfortunate Blacks in the area were moving targets and would attract a fusillade of gunfire.”*

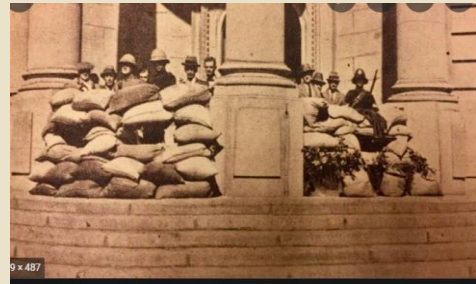
One day, recalled Solly:

*“We heard shooting outside our house. We ran out onto our stoep (porch), and saw a Black man writhing in pain on the road. He had been shot by a dum-dum bullet, filled at the head to implode on impact. The poor fellow’s leg was completely shattered. We had no phones in the area, so I ran to the nearest greengrocer, run by the Regalsky family, and asked someone to phone for an ambulance. We did the best we could for the fellow as he lay bleeding profusely on our stoep. It was clear that he would lose his leg.”*



### **SMUTS STEPS IN**

By mid-March the strike leaders lost control of the mobs that had virtually seized most of Johannesburg and were calling for armed insurrection and the overthrow of the state. It was then that Prime Minister Jan Smuts made his move. He declared martial law; travelled by train from the Cape to the Rand and “*alighted at Potchefstroom and*



*continued the journey to Jo’burg by car. He was acting prudently, afraid he could be bumped-off if word got out that he would be arriving at a given time at the Central Station,”* related Solly who had remained fascinated by the turbulent history surrounding this early chapter of his youth. “*Smuts then personally took control of more than 20,000 troops backed by airplanes, tanks and field artillery.”*

Walking around the streets where this drama played out, Solly continued:

*“There were mass arrests of strikers, and many of the ringleaders who had been trapped in their headquarters in the Trades Hall were picked up and then jailed at The Fort. Fierce retaliation on police stations followed, mainly to replenish arms, but after five days of fierce battles against trained government troops, the insurrection was brought to a climactic violent finale. Brixton Ridge, which was captured by troops on March 12<sup>th</sup>, provided the ideal position from which the artillery could open fire on the main rebel strongholds in Fordsburg. It was subjected to a thunderous pounding and on March 14<sup>th</sup>, government troops swept into town. Rather than face*

*the inevitable charge of treason, two of the strike leaders, Spendiff and Fischer, committed suicide.”*

In the legal proceedings that flowered, Solly continued, *“118 strike leaders were sentenced to death of which four were finally executed. They walked defiantly to the gallows singing the communist anthem, “The Red Flag”.*

Walking through the area of his youth, it took a lot of imagination on my part as too few buildings remained from that period, only the street signs like *Anderson, Fox, Rissik, Eloff, Jeppe and Commissioner*. Bustling with traffic and pedestrians, we had to carefully look out for oncoming vehicles as we crossed these same streets.

*“A far cry from dodging bullets,”* observed Solly wryly.

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### **A word about me:**

My life's journey in 1986 from South Africa to Israel included not only a change of scenery, but a change of professions - from being a partner in a law firm in Cape Town, to journalism that over the years has seen my articles and interviews appear in The Jerusalem Post, Haaretz as well as being editor and chief correspondent of a number of English magazines, including the Hilton Israel Magazine, Inbal Jerusalem Magazine and Telfed Magazine, known as 'The voice of the South African community in Israel'. I am a cofounder, editor and contributor of Lay Of The Land (LOTL), an online multimedia platform covering the Middle East and Africa and can be followed on <https://layoftheland.online>

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