A WORD TRIGGERS A CHAIN OF MEMORIES — AN OLD SOUTH AFRICA STORY
By Karine Schomer

On the 6th of February 2023, I was driving home to the San Francisco Bay Area on the open highway. Late afternoon California slanting sun, little traffic, listening idly to U.S. National Public Radio. A perfect, calm, emotionally quiet "now" moment.

Suddenly, the news switched to an excited report on the just announced 2023 Grammy Awards. To tell the truth, I rarely pay attention to the Grammies — I'm more of a Western classical music type, and most of the award categories don't interest me that much. But what I heard just then jolted me into full backward gaze and drew a howl of grief, loss and love out of my gut.

The announcement was simple: "South African artists Zakes Bantwini, Wouter Kellerman, and Nomcebo Zikode have won the Best Performance award in the Global Music category at the 65th annual Grammy Awards in Las Vegas. The trio won the award for their hit song **Bayethe**.

Music video image for song **Bayethe**. Source: @wouterkellerman/twitter.

No, I didn't know this famous trio, and I had never heard that song of theirs. Nor did my mind go immediately to the jubilation that must have erupted among their fans in South Africa.

It was that one word — ***BAYETHE***— that gave me such a huge jolt and jerked me from my world of "now" to my world of "then".

The world when my husband Raphael Shevelev was still alive and his gripping stories about living in South Africa during *apartheid* first became lodged in my heart and mind. In this second year since Raphael's death, I have been increasingly drawn to telling these stories, as I best recall them. It's a way of not losing that extraordinarily rich world of "then" too quickly, and of continuing to deepen that journey of grief and renewal.

So here is the story of ***bayethe*** that Raphael recounted to me long ago.

A Young White Man in *Apartheid* South Africa

Born in 1938, Raphael was ten years old in 1948, when the official policy of *apartheid* was put in place. From childhood on, he had realized there was something very wrong with the racial inequities he saw around him. His school and university years were against the backdrop of each of the new acts of the Nationalist government that cemented the *apartheid* system in place. He was outraged — at the government and also at fellow White South Africans who went along with it.

In every way he could, he fought the system, including in small gestures of defiance.

Like refusing to be put ahead of Black people in a queue. Or helping the Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town put up a sign in front of St. George's Cathedral that said "*All People of All Races Are Welcome Here at All Times".* Or going over to stand with the White women activists of the Black Sash as they held their public vigils protesting the *apartheid* laws.

Black Sash vigil demonstration, Cape Town, 1950s. Source: Blacksash.org.za

When the 1959 Extension of University Act decreed universal segregation of higher education, prohibiting Non-Whites from attending any White university, he took part in the massive student protests at the University of Cape Town.

He also participated in the wave of demonstrations protesting the draconian Pass Laws that required Blacks to carry identity documents whenever outside of the segregated Homeland areas, and in condemnation of the 1960 Sharpeville Massacre that killed 69 peaceful Black protestors.

In the 1961 general parliamentary election, he was hired to serve as campaign manager for the fiercely liberal Progressive Party's Helen Suzman from the Houghton constituency in Johannesburg. Against great odds, she won, by a bare 564 votes, while all the other Progressive Party members were defeated.

For many years, Helen Suzman was the only MP who was consistently and unequivocally opposed *apartheid*, and faced constant antagonism from her fellow MPs and threats of violence.

Raphael considered it a great honor to have played a role in her political career, and thereby to have made a small contribution to the long struggle for change.

Helen Suzman and other members of South Africa's Progressive Party in 1960.
Source: Wikipedia, original photographer unknown.

Teaching Political Science in the Days of Apartheid

After completing his B.A. at the University of Cape Town, Raphael went to the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg for further studies in Government and Public Administration, then spent three years teaching Political Science as a Lecturer at the University of South Africa in Pretoria, including in an Extension Program in a nearby Black township.

To get a sense of how pervasive fear is under a repressive regime, he liked to share in later years the story of how one of his relatives, when told of his appointment to this job, asked with some concern: "Political Science? Isn't that illegal?"

It was indeed a tense time in South Africa in which to be in the field of Political Science. The increasingly harsh unfolding of the *apartheid* regime's actions, and the growing resistance to them both internally and internationally, were always in the background and in the daily news. Especially so in Pretoria, as it was the

seat of the executive branch of South Africa's government and the place where all the foreign embassies were located.

It was also there, in the majestic Palace of Justice, that the infamous Rivonia trial took place that resulted in Nelson Mandela and six of his African National Congress colleagues being sentenced to life imprisonment on Robben Island in 1964.

Crowds outside the Palace of Justice in Pretoria during the 1963–64 Rivonia Trial. Source: Africa Media Online

Nelson Mandela in Pretoria addressing supporters during the Rivonia Trial. Source: South African History on Line. Photographer: Peter Matubane.

Raphael was in the courtroom audience during the trial, deeply aware that he was witness to something of major historical significance — often referred to as "the landmark event that changed South Africa forever."

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One of the other things Raphael remembered from his life at the University of South Africa in those days was his many confrontations with faculty colleagues, and the personal shunning he experienced from some of them, because of his outspoken liberal views.

He also remembered the "Banned Books" section of the library, from which he was allowed to take out a few books for research, but on condition they be promptly returned and locked up. His small act of protest was to repeatedly take out as many as he could and then replace them on the open shelves in the subject-matter sections to which they properly belonged.

He wrote regular opinion pieces in the local newspapers, for which he received some notoriety, and on account of which the government had his phones tapped and started watching his movements. When threats were made to his life, he published a piece in which he described in exact detail his daily movements from his home to the university, then started carrying a concealed handgun for self-protection.

One day, he heard some screaming from the police station next door to where he and his wife lived. He immediately called one of his contacts in the government and threatened to expose the torture going on if it didn't stop immediately. Shortly thereafter, the screaming stopped.

On another occasion, he received a formal invitation to attend a government function presided over by the Minister of Justice and Correctional Services of

the regime. His reply was instantaneous: “Please inform the Minister of Justice that I definitively intend to be ill on that day.”

It was not only his university colleagues and government officials with whom Raphael had to contend.

He recalls an instance when, the day after having published a particularly scathing piece condemning *apartheid*, he went to his synagogue for services, and found people deliberately avoiding him, including getting up and moving away from the area in which he was seating himself.

Then something remarkable happened. The rabbi started reading his prepared sermon, suddenly stopped, put his notes aside, and launched into a full and supportive discussion of the moral issues Raphael had raised. The rabbi did not last long with that congregation.

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It was in this hothouse political environment of South Africa in the early 1960s that Raphael did his first teaching, in the Black township Extension Center of the university.

I don’t think I ever got the details straight about which township, what classes, how often, or how many students. But I know that Raphael first had to translate the curriculum into Afrikaans, because part of the *apartheid* policy was to bar Black students from receiving education in English, the language of advancement and white-collar professions.

And I know for a certainty that he did not stick to the government-prescribed curriculum, but instead used the opportunity to have serious discussions with

his students about justice, liberty, democracy, resistance to tyranny and the injustices of *apartheid*.

Bayethe! — The Story of the Last Class

All these activities of Raphael's as a young Political Science Lecturer brought him under even closer scrutiny by the government authorities. It seemed clear that it was only a matter of time before something might happen.

In 1963, his wife gave birth to their first daughter, so there was now a child in addition to two adults to worry about.

Meanwhile, he had become friends with the Public Affairs Officer at the U.S. Embassy, Dr. Argus Tresidder, a remarkable and fearless American diplomat who was more passionate about justice and freedom than about simply following orders and minding established protocol. He, too, hated *apartheid*.

Once, while the U.S. Ambassador was outside the country, he brazenly commandeered the Ambassador's official car, and rode it, American flags flapping proudly in the wind, to a an African National Congress rally.

On another occasion, Raphael came in to see him and fulminated against something he had just learned: that the U.S. Embassy was holding two separate Fourth of July celebrations, one official event restricted to White people (in order to comply with South African policy), and another unofficial event open to all. Without hesitating a moment, he took Raphael to the Ambassador's office and let him deliver his diatribe to the Ambassador himself.

It was through Argus Tresidder that Raphael received the intelligence that there were plans afoot for him to be arrested by the South African authorities on the charge of seditious activities.

Late one night, Raphael recounted, there was a knock at his door. Convinced that it was the police coming to arrest him, he put on his bathrobe, stood straight and proud, and walked towards the door, intent on not showing fear. It turned out it was only a neighbor asking for some milk for her baby.

But that episode was enough for Raphael and his wife to decide there was no choice now but to leave the country. Living with this kind of threat hanging over them was not something they were willing to do now that they had a young child.

Argus Tresidder went to work on a plan to get Raphael and his family to safety in the United States. He eventually was able to arrange for him to be awarded a Fulbright-Hayes grant to do post-graduate work at the School of International Studies in Denver, Colorado.

And so, on December 17, 1964, Raphael, his wife and their baby daughter were on a plane out of South Africa. His last memory of his native country was the moment when the plane flew out of South African air space and the cabin erupted into clapping and shouts of jubilation.

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But before that day, Raphael had one more important thing to do. He needed to let his Black students in the township Extension Program know that he was leaving.

He taught his last class, then put away his lecture notes, told them the news of his upcoming departure, and shared with them how much it had meant to him to know them and be their teacher. “You will be the future political leaders of South Africa,” he said to them.

At first, some half-suppressed sniggers in the hall conveyed to him that the students thought this was an outrageous and impossible prediction. At that time, the *apartheid* regime was fully entrenched. New repression and horrors were happening daily, world opposition was just getting underway, and the release of Nelson Mandela from the Robben Island prison was still a quarter of a century in the future.

But they listened, and he spoke to them some more, straight from the heart, of his hope and belief that change would come, that the injustice would end, and that they would indeed see a free South Africa in their lifetimes.

Suddenly, spontaneously, the students all broke out into the **Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrica** liberation song that is now South Africa's national anthem, and clapped as he walked towards the classroom exit afterwards.

As he neared the door, a tall Zulu student came up to him to say goodbye in the name of the class, and did so using the traditional Zulu royal salute, raising his right hand high over his head as he said "**Bayethe!**"

Stunned, Raphael was unable to hold back his tears.

They flowed again the first time he told me the story thirty-six years ago, and every time he shared it with anyone. Being addressed in that manner by the Zulu student, in that place and in those times, he said, was the greatest undeserved honor of his life.

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And that's how it was that, on the 6th day of February 2023, riding home through the rolling hills of California towards the setting sun, I was suddenly

transported by a single word, ***bayethe***, into the faraway world of 1960s South Africa, and stricken with grief that I would never again hear Raphael recount his unforgettable story of The Last Class.

A word about the author:

Karine Schomer was born in the United States, raised in France, and was involved with India for many years as a professor and scholar of South Asian Studies at the University of California-Berkeley. After subsequent careers in academic administration and cross-cultural management consulting, she currently devotes herself to essay, memoir and opinion writing on a wide range of topics. Some of her work can be seen on the *Medium* platform www.schomer44.medium.com. She has never been to South Africa, but in the three decades of her marriage to the late Raphael Shevelev of Cape Town, who left South Africa in 1964, she has absorbed the culture, the history, the feel, the references, and the lore of her husband's native place to the point that she feels deeply and personally connected to it. She has started and will continue to share with CHOL the stories Raphael himself has written over the years about the sweetness and the tragedies of the "Beloved Country" he left behind. She lives in El Cerrito, CA, USA.

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