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South African Historian as True Patriot

"Bill Freund was a true South African patriot," remarked Minister of Higher Education Blade Nzimande toward the end of a Covid-era online memorial service for the Durban-based academic, who died at age seventy-six in 2020 shortly after completing this autobiography. Freund had committed his working life to discovering and telling the truth, as he saw it, about Africa from the home he had happily made in South Africa's preeminent port city. There he built the Economic History Department at the University of Natal Durban (UND, later University of KwaZulu-Natal, UKZN), engaged with the trade union movement, joined in editing a politically engaged journal (*Transformation*), and wrote four of his six books: *Capital and Labour in the Nigerian Tin Mines* (1981), *The Making of Contemporary Africa* (1984), *The African Worker* (1988) (written mainly in Johannesburg prior to arriving in Durban), *Insiders and Outsiders: The Indian Working Class of Durban in the Twentieth Century* (1995), *The African City: A History* (2007), and *Twentieth Century South Africa: A Developmental History* (2019). These books and his many articles displayed his "predilection for political economy, a strong interest in contemporary politics and a sense of being at home in a milieu of Marxist and left scholarship, particularly focused on Africa and the Third world" (p. 141). A ferociously independent thinker, Freund wrote African history that pandered to no one. Neither racist colonialists nor black nationalists—or paternalistic liberals, for that matter—found a friend, or even much patience, in Freund.

Freund wrote the history of his own life by putting the tools of his trade to good use. He dove into personal and family archives to find letters, photographs, and drawings and supplemented them with his own memories and a few interviews. He shaped his findings into a three-part study, divided into family history, youthful fascinations and disappointments, and, lastly, his focus on Africa as both the subject of his work and the place where he found a home. The search for home provides a leitmotif for this book, reflected in the poignant title of his last chapter, "South Africa, My Home." The man finally felt a sense of belonging after being immersed in, and wounded by, two other continents, North America and Europe.

Born in Chicago to Austrian refugees, Freund grew up aware that worlds can be destroyed by bigotry. His parents fled Nazism but never rejected Austria or their social democratic values, which they passed on to him. He retained, too, a respect for high culture—classical music, multilin-

gualism, urbanity, bookish intellectuals and their discourse—that derived from their Old World. Their New World milieu was Jewish, but, as secular Jews, the Freunds brought up a son who was far more comfortable with Jewish culture than with the religion itself; and he rejected the Zionism that his father defensively adopted, as well as his father's racism. The household seems to have been a cold one, where the boy, an only child, did not feel nurtured and where family members who suffered and died during the Holocaust were never mentioned. Freund wrote the first part of his autobiography in part as a memorial to those who succumbed in the "unforgiving hell" of Nazi bigotry (p. 40).

Despite the European trauma, Freund would eventually feel that he had a "persona" closer to the European than to the American "average" (p. 84). His high school years, when he was inspired by a great history teacher named Jim Inskeep, were nevertheless sociable, but they were followed by many years of feeling like an outsider. That he gained admission only to the University of Chicago, and was rejected by all the other colleges to which he applied, signaled to him that he presented himself in interviews as "naïve, effeminate and somewhat preposterous," in part because his intellectual and left-wing proclivities were so different from those of the ideal American boy (p. 71). Inspired notably by reading Eric Hobsbawm at Chicago, he went on to graduate study in Yale's history department where he was inspired by no professor at all. (Leonard Thompson was mainly interested in his own career, and Maynard Swanson was uninterested in Freund and possibly hostile to him, he thought.) "Home" still eluded him, on many levels.

The year 1969 was his annus mirabilis because it marked his first visit to Africa—mainly eastern and southern—where he found he was drawn to neither African village culture nor anthropology. He realized he preferred to focus on the "big picture" of African history so the continent could take its place alongside the histories of the other continents (p. 96). He was also interested in "uncomfortable social facts and in people who fit in poorly" (p. 98). These two statements point to signature traits of Freund's scholarship: his desire to find broad historical patterns relating to the wider world, rather than to conduct isolated micro-studies based on intensive primary research, including interviews; and his refusal to see racism as determining all interactions in South Africa throughout time, which made him stand apart from the liberal crowd.

While these realizations came early, the process of finding a home base from which to investigate them took roughly fifteen years. Freund needed a secure job, and, despite writing "hundreds" of letters, he failed to find one. That a real intellectual, as Freund surely was, who happened also to be unconventional to the point of eccentricity, failed to find a job at an American university should be read as an indictment of those academics who hire only people like themselves. Freund was reduced to working briefly at Kirkland College in upstate New York, then Harvard for only three years; after stimulating stints at universities in England (the School of Oriental and African Studies and Oxford) and the University of Dar es Salaam, he taught for four interesting but not entirely comfortable years (1974-8) at Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, Nigeria.

Only after he arrived in Durban in 1985 had he reached home. The state of emergency drew left-minded people together, and he enjoyed living as a beloved member of a real community, in which he even played on the touch rugby team. (In addition to plentiful tears, his memorial service rang with affectionate laughter as mourners shared memories of him playing rugby and driving cars, oblivious of the rules.) The autobiography ends in harder times—his Durban community depressed him by dispersing, Donald Trump was in the White House, neoliberalism was shrinking government programs around the globe, the Afric-

an National Congress (ANC) had been unable to spark economic growth—but the final word in this last book is uplifting: despite his admiration for the "cynicism" of, say, Berthold Brecht, Freund was "grateful" for having been able to realize his dreams and put them to work (p. 191).

Freund's autobiography belongs alongside those of Africanists Jan Vansina (***Living with Africa*** [1994]) and Roland Oliver (***In the Realms of Gold: Pioneering in African History*** [1997]) who chronicled the creation of their field. The way Freund tells his story stands in stark contrast, though, to that of fellow historian C. Vann Woodward, whose first draft of his autobiography (***Thinking Back: The Perils of Writing History*** [1986]) did not even use the first person singular. (Woodward referred to himself only as "the historian.") Freund, on the other hand, was utterly honest and direct about personal matters, like his masculinity or his fear of being "unwanted," situating himself closer to the Jean-Jacques Rousseau end of the spectrum of self-revelation (p. 188). Freund was uninterested in being politically correct. He said what he thought; he was beholden to no school, or, as his friend Rob Morrell nicely observes, "his ideas floated free of audience" (p. x). For example, while he identified himself as a Marxist historian, he believed capitalism is so "dynamic" that it can probably, at best, only be reformed or modified (p. 128). As a proud modernist, he supported economic and social development rather than the "liberatory promise of socialism," which he appeared to regard as mere sentiment (p. 129).

Freund was never a political activist. He worshipped no sacred cows like black nationalism, which he scorned for provoking a "religious devotion" (p. 102). Not all Africa's problems can be blamed on white oppression or imperialism, he wrote. He rejected as "noxious" the phrase "colonialism of a special type" because it conveys the idea that whites have no right to be in South Africa (p. 181). He opposed the ANC's elevation of empowerment, even of those without skills, above the creation of a democratic and deracialized society. He warned that it will be impossible to erase the cavernous wealth inequalities in South Africa without economic growth, adding that modern attitudes and skills are necessary to create it, especially among the black masses.[1] Race-based promotions, he wrote, badly damaged efforts to improve the quality of South African universities, which were, in any case, only mediocre before the end of apartheid.

In what ways was Nzimande right in calling this eccentric historian, who was actually the product of three continents, "a true South African patriot"? On a personal level, Freund did find his only true home there and loved it, though, true to his contrarian self, he did not vote in South Africa. On a professional level, he put what he saw as truth—the most desirable political goal is a better life for everyone—before ideology or party interests. To the extent that the ANC delivered a better life, he saluted it: by providing popular housing, grants for child support, good labor legislation, and disability grants for AIDS victims; promoting women; and more. On the other hand, he saw the ANC as protecting corrupt chiefs, failing to improve the educational system, destroying local industry by supporting free trade, and egregiously promoting corrupt comrades. If we define patriotism as praising civic virtue and calling out its enemies, then Nzimande was surely right: Freund was indeed a true South African patriot.

Note

[1]. As a result of reading his autobiography, I better understand Freund's ***Journal of African History*** review of my ***Starving on a Full Stomach: Hunger and the Triumph of Cultural Racism in Modern South Africa*** (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001) and wish I could discuss it with him.

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