

# PORTRAIT OF A MILLIONAIRE: 'I, HARRY OPPENHEIMER'

A SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

ONE is used, of course, to being abused behind one's back—it is a measure, after all, of just how far one's arm can reach. But there are times when the distinction of being so talked about cannot compensate for the hurt of what is being said, and one's dignity positively demands that one replies. Such has been my reaction since I heard that I was being sneered at as "multi-facial". Some people, apparently, cannot understand how I am able to support the Progressive Party and the South African Foundation simultaneously. The first, they cry, presumes to be an infusion of new life into the parliamentary struggle against the Nationalists, while the second is a conspiracy of business men to "whitewash" (how degrading this political jargon can be) the Government's racial policies.

I find it distasteful and tedious to write about myself. In ordinary circumstances, of course, one or more of my well-paid Public Relations Officers would attend to this sort of thing. The charge against me, however, is essentially so personal a one that I would be failing in respect to myself if I left its rebuttal to others. In any case, it is not the first time that the accusation has been made, and I have given some thought to the matter. I have been jeered at for giving money to both 'progressive' and 'reactionary' organizations—how crude these clichés are, one feels soiled simply in the repeating of them! There was the occasion when half-a-dozen United Party M.P.s rebelled against the treacherous Coloured vote policy of their caucus—it seemed then to many of the more naïve that I should have been among them, instead of helping to arrange their surrender. And then, in 1953, when the Torch Commando wanted to "go to town", as they so innocently put it, against the authoritarianism of the Public Safety and Criminal Law Amendment Acts—on the eve of a General Election!—I was attacked for having addressed the leaders privately to dissuade them from their brave, quite brilliant bungle. We thought it wise soon afterwards to bury the Commando; and fortunately some of my young men at Anglo-American were effectively placed there, so that the once useful—but now rather too dangerously flamboyant—body of ex-service-men backed away from the political scene. Rather too many of

its members were beginning to take their battle against the Government rather too seriously.

But I am straying from the point. You require an answer to the claim that I am behaving ambiguously by lending my not inconsiderable support to the new Foundation as well as to the Progressives. I want to give you the whole picture, and I can only do this if I acquaint you properly with some facts about my family and its business interests. You will require to know not only "What does Oppenheimer want?" but also "*Who is Oppenheimer?*" This I shall attempt to tell you.

My family runs a group of companies which include 43 assorted mines, producing gold, diamonds, copper, coal, etc., worth £160 million annually, and other concerns ranging from manufacturing and merchant banking to ranching and real estate. Our empire is composed of three main groups, the Anglo-American Corporation, De Beers Consolidated Mines, Ltd. and Rhodesian Anglo-American; and the subscribed capital of these companies (of which I am chairman) is £336 million, with total reserves of £268 million. Our enterprises extend from the Cape to the borders of Kenya, and cover South West Africa, the Federation, Mozambique, Tanganyika, the Belgian Congo and Swaziland. Our annual wage bill is £36 million, paid to 20,000 whites and 136,000 non-whites.

I wish I could convey to you at all adequately the atmosphere in which I was brought up—the atmosphere of diamonds. You will recall that, as Rhodes on a large scale amalgamated the diamond mines of Kimberley, so my late father on a smaller scale combined those of South West Africa into one large corporation. To-day, of course, we control the diamond industry. My late father, incidentally, went to work at the age of 16 as a £1-a-week clerk in a London firm of diamond merchants. His three brothers were also in the diamond business; and as we were very much a family unit, I grew up in an atmosphere where diamonds were more than a simple business pre-occupation. A deep love and understanding of diamonds, and an appreciation of their fascinating historical, technical and geological aspects, permeated the discussions of our family. To say that we thought of them merely in terms of money is to misjudge and grossly misunderstand us.

After leaving Oxford, I spent some time in the London offices of the Diamond Corporation, familiarising myself with office routine and establishing contacts with leading figures in the



diamond industry of Britain and the Continent. On my return to the Union, to settle permanently, I took up temporary residence in Kimberley, so as to be able to develop my knowledge of the practical side of diamond production and of the valuation and recognition of various types of diamonds. Years later, when that difficult Canadian, Williamson, was causing us some anxiety about the uncontrolled sales of his diamond output in Tanganyika, my father chose me to go and negotiate with him. He snubbed me at first, but in the end we had our way. Now, John Williamson is dead. I am sorry. I found him amusing.

I might mention, too, that Kimberley, the capital of diamonds, was my birthplace (Harry Frederick Oppenheimer: born October 28, 1908). My late father was—not strangely—mayor there from 1912 to 1915, and Member of Parliament for the area from 1924 to 1938. I followed his example, and in the 1948 General Election (how was I to know that Smuts would lose?) I won the seat for the United Party with a majority of 2,266 votes. I won it again in the 1953 General Election, but the next delimitation placed it within the Government's grasp. Fortunately, I could plead that my business interests were demanding more and more of my time in Johannesburg, and it was decided that I should abandon the now shaky Kimberley seat for the Opposition bastion of Johannesburg North. However, my father's death occurred at this time, and with some relief I withdrew completely from the election battlefield.

Naturally, I had the benefit of a becoming education. I spent part of my boyhood at a well-known Johannesburg school, and then I was sent to England for the training (in which they so excel) that equipped me for my responsibilities in later life. I went to Charterhouse and then to Christ Church, Oxford (I won a scholarship in French language and literature there) to graduate a B.A. (Hons.). My subjects were politics, modern philosophy and economics; and my late father, I know, was glad of that. He felt that I had lived up to his highest expectations in the fields which mattered most—economics and politics. It was his pride, as it is mine, that I was not just an heir, that my reputation rests securely on my own achievements.

My entry into politics was watched with great interest. In Parliament I spoke with what people felt safe in calling "authority". At first, I confined myself largely to economic matters, but gradually I brought in the topic which interests me so vastly—the whole tumultuous subject of race relations.

Commentators wrote that probably not since Cecil Rhodes was in the old Cape legislature, had a business man commanded more respect in the House than I did. Others said that I had naturally assumed the mantle of the late J. H. Hofmeyr, South Africa's liberal Finance Minister, who died of a broken heart after the 1948 General Election.

I could always expect a full turn-out on the Government benches when I spoke. From the Cabinet down to the most dull-witted backbencher, they would stare at me almost in fascination. I, of course, was the personification of the Afrikaner's traditional enemy, 'Hoggenheimer', the opulent, Semitic capitalist. I must confess that their attitude irritated me. I am certainly not opulent in appearance; and, as for stressing my Semitism, I think they should be told that I employ very few Jews at Anglo-American. The late Prime Minister, Mr. J. G. Strydom, once abused me as "an ambitious political opportunist"; but at least I had the satisfaction of always seeing that he pricked up his ears when I spoke. In their rather slow way, these Afrikaners somehow grasped the fact that of the two, economics and politics, it is the former which dominates, and for this they hated me. I recall, with some satisfaction, the time when Dr. A. J. R. van Rhijn, then Minister of Mines, in spite of himself, compared my late father favourably with Carnegie, Rockefeller, Ford, Krupp and the Lever brothers.

The Nationalists are always accusing me of manipulating the United Party for my own ends. Admittedly, I gave the United Party a great deal of money (£250,000, I think—I must refresh my memory from my cheque-book stubs), but it depends on what is meant by my "own ends." I would not go so far as to say that what is good for Anglo-American is good for South Africa, but in subsidising the United Party (when most of my business colleagues had washed their hands of it) I was merely doing the obvious and necessary thing. I formed the United South Africa Trust Fund, with 10 of my friends (Eric Gallo, R. B. Hagart and Claude Leon are with me again on the Foundation); and through this organization, which the Nationalists described as "secret and sinister," we channelled funds to the United Party. The Nationalists made such a noise about the Trust Fund that I had to issue a public statement, denying that there was any truth at all in the story that the Trust Fund was aiming at the destruction of the industrial colour bar. I also pointed out that the Trust Fund merely subscribed to "the

fundamental rights of man," and not to the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, which, in the view of South Africa's delegate at the United Nations, went far beyond the former concept. In fact, the relevant clause in the Trust Fund's constitution was drafted in the way it was *specifically* to express approval of the attitude taken up by the South African delegate on that occasion.

I recall an occasion when Strydom, in an attempt to impugn my patriotism, attacked me for investing capital outside the Union. He wanted to know how much capital we had provided for Rhodesian companies. I was able to reply that net investment in Rhodesia by our companies over the past ten years (that was in 1957) had been £5,600,000—and that during the same period, these same companies received from Rhodesia £10,700,000 by way of return on their investments. I was rather proud of that reply: it showed, I think, that I was both a good politician and a good business man.

As I said, I have a fascination for the Nationalists. They are forever trying to discover what I am *really* like. They never cease abusing "big capital" (*die geldmag*), but when they see it in the flesh they have a certain awe of it. One of their journalists once detected an "aesthetic, idealistic strain" in me, but doubted whether I would be able to "maintain the momentum" of my father's era. How stupid of him! The buccaneering days are gone, but this does not mean that we are incapable of doing big things. Personally, I think financiers operate on a much vaster scale these days. Let me explain.

First, I want to sort out this confusion over whether I am a capitalist, or a liberal, or a liberal-capitalist, or whatever other term of flattery or abuse the public might devise for me. The Nationalist journalist to whom I have referred said of me that "Nationalists detect behind his carefully chosen words and his precise thoughts the deep voice of big capital". Yet in the next breath Nationalist politicians accuse me of being a sentimental liberal who wants to hand the country and all its riches over to the non-whites.

It shows how hopelessly people misunderstand me. And yet I gave them the clue when, in an address to the South Africa Club in London, I said that "by South African standards I am supposed to have liberal views." The operative words, of course, were and are, "by South African standards." Here we come to the root of the matter, for during this past decade in South

Africa the political situation has been made to stand upon its head. The victory of the Nationalist Party at the General Election in 1948 turned everything topsy-turvy, and in the confusion the strangest things happened: the Church, the Press and Big Business, which usually form the retaining wall of the established order, found themselves swept along in what some people exuberantly chose to call the "liberatory movement." Anglo-American became an ally of the African National Congress! I am not noting this with regret, the circumstances demanded it; and if there is one facet of my character which stands out above all others, it is my capacity to adapt myself to the circumstances. When it was necessary to be 'liberal,' I was liberal; when it was necessary to be 'conservative,' I was conservative; and when it was necessary to be both 'liberal' and 'conservative', I was both. Nor should I be accused of lack of principle. I think I can fairly claim that, throughout my career, I have been faithful to a basic principle, which is that our family business should flourish. And if the situation is conducive to the progress of Anglo-American, it is also conducive to the country's progress. Perhaps, on second thoughts, I *can* make bold to say that what is good for Anglo-American is good for South Africa.

As we enter the second decade of Nationalist rule, however, the situation calls for a new approach. The violent, all-out opposition to Nationalism that characterised the first decade is no longer desirable. Recent trends (like the near-rebellion of African women in Natal) suggest that South Africa is drifting into isolation and insurrection. The overseas boycott, too, could precipitate a most unpleasant situation here. The temper of the non-white masses has been rising, and who knows when an explosion may not occur? If these trends were allowed to continue unchecked, and if, for example, we were to ally ourselves with the so-called "liberatory movement," the Nationalist Government could be defeated. But then we would have to share the victory with the African National Congress—and where, I ask you, would Anglo-American be then? The fact must not be forgotten that South Africa is the most highly developed State in Africa, and the most valuable one. It cannot be allowed to jump out of our grasp.

Consequently, we have been obliged to make other plans; and the first essential now is to take the edge off revolution, so to speak. This is where the South African Foundation comes in. It has a two-fold task, internal and external. Internally, it must

strive to eliminate many of the animosities which to-day are so much a part of our lives. The spectacle of whites quarrelling among themselves cannot but give ideas to the non-whites. Fortunately, we have prominent newspaper representatives on the Foundation's Board, and they will see that criticism of the Government's racial policies is kept within the bounds of temperateness. This applies not only to their own editorial criticism, but also to the criticism of the numerous organizations and individuals who use the Press freely as a medium for attacks on the Government. Once the air has been cleared of animosities, we will be able, too, to pave the way for a merger of the two white sections. This is, after all, the only safe way to get rid of Dr. Verwoerd. All other methods will merely consolidate his position; we must undermine him from within. To sum up: the immediate task of the South African Foundation is to create an atmosphere in which it will be possible to arrange a coalition of the moderate elements in the Government and the Opposition. Externally, the Foundation will persuade investors that South Africa is returning to sanity, that—as I expressed it recently—if the country is a risk, at least it is a good one. An increased inflow of foreign capital will lead to heightened prosperity, and this in turn will take the edge off the non-white's desire to revolt. In effect, the advent of the South African Foundation reflects the return of big business to active politics. It is high time. My business colleagues have let the situation deteriorate for far too long.

Now, you ask, where does the Progressive Party come in? Perhaps you are thinking that this new, and rather idealistic, group will undo all the good work of the Foundation by renewing the struggle against the Government in an intensified form. This is not correct. The United Party cost me quarter of a million—and what did I get for it? The Progressive Party promises to be different; and all it has cost me so far is a cheque for £5,000 and my personal blessing. No, I need the Progressive Party for another purpose, which I have the highest hopes that it will achieve.

You must remember that, for a decade, big business has been without a coherent political voice in the country. Smuts served us well (although he allowed himself to be influenced too much by John Martin, who occupied—without my subtlety—roughly the position that I occupy to-day); but since 1948, I must admit, we have been floundering. The United Party was quite hopeless.



This was not entirely its own fault: public pressures were too strong for it once the anti-Nationalist tidal movement got under way. I tried to steer the United Party in a definite direction (from my vantage point within the Party's upper councils); and at one stage, after we had removed Strauss and installed Sir de Villiers Graaff as leader, I had hopes that the situation would right itself. I even ventured to launch my controversial Senate Plan at the United Party's Union Congress, and I had the pleasure of seeing it adopted (although somewhat emasculated). But the conflicts within the United Party were too fundamental: there were those who wanted to force the Nationalist Party to its knees by attacking apartheid, and there were others who tended increasingly to seek a coalition with the Nationalist moderates. Graaff himself let me down. He is not only insufferably cautious and an arch-conservative, but his hunger to be Prime Minister quite tortures his judgment. I see no future for him in politics. He has rejected Harry Lawrence's suggestion that he should join the Progressives, and he is too much a United Party symbol to be acceptable in the new merger we are planning. If there is one thing I have learnt, it is that the ordinary Nationalist hates the United Party; the sooner we bury the name, the better.

I have no illusions that a merger of Government and United Party supporters would solve all South Africa's problems; indeed, it would solve very little. But it is an essential first step. Once it has been brought about, the basic problem of race relations will still be there—and that is where the Progressive Party will enter the room. The Progressives have already established good relations with the African National Congress; and, in the period which lies ahead, they will have to equip themselves more adequately in preparation for the day when they will have to negotiate the terms of a more lasting settlement of the racial question with the non-white leaders. I am relying considerably on the Progressives.

And now I am finished. I have explained my position simply and, I think, frankly. It has been a difficult, but necessary, task. I cannot hope to have persuaded everyone that what I and my business colleagues are doing is the correct thing. The Nationalists, I know, will continue attacking me for "capitalist intervention" (as if they were not tied hand and foot to the capitalist system); and the liberals, no doubt, will sneer at me for being "multi-facial." But I would ask them, in all earnestness, to consider whether there are any flaws in my reasoning.

Verwoerd, admittedly, can be ousted with the help of the non-whites, but that means sharing the victory with them. Are any liberals prepared to pay that price? And it will be a heavy price! Trying to remove Verwoerd through the ballot box is utterly futile: this is accepted, I think, by all shades of opinion. Is there any *real* alternative, therefore, to the "merger of moderates" which the Foundation proposes? As for the Progressives, surely it is desirable, nay, imperative, that a white political party, conversant with modern trends in Africa, should go into training now for the day when its intervention will be needed? I am speaking the plainest common-sense.

I am genuinely anxious to improve race relations in South Africa. It is not only good politics: it is good business! I am genuinely willing to see political power extended to the more responsible section of the non-white population, even if this means having a black man in the Cabinet. What is wrong with that? Africa is changing, and we must change, too. The white electorate must be persuaded that, under my system, all the things that the white man really cherishes will be preserved.

Imagine that a Nationalist journalist should accuse me of not being able to think big! Picture the industrial revolution that will take place in Africa if the black man's economic fetters are struck from him! Think of the millions of skilled men who will enter the labour market. Think of the vast new consuming public! And if we arrange our political affairs carefully, we can achieve all this and still retain effective political power in the hands of the white man. The Nationalist Government, on the other hand (as I said in a speech in Pretoria), is "destroying white supremacy, quickly and well." Its policies (as I pointed out on another occasion) will result in an upheaval, with "uneducated people, still in a semi-barbarous state," being put in charge of this developing country. Do you understand what I am getting at?

I think I can claim the main credit for this exciting vision of the new Africa, yet all that I have done, really, is to allow myself to be guided by the interests of Anglo-American. Are you still unconvinced? How can what is good for Anglo-American possibly be bad for South Africa?