

# LEO MARQUARD: A MEMOIR

by René de Villiers

You might think that a Dutch Reformed Church parsonage in a Free State dorp is an unlikely incubator for liberalism. In Leo Marquard's case you would be wrong, totally wrong.

His mother was a major influence in his life (his father died when he was a few years old). She was a gentle and spiritual woman with an instinct for fair-dealing and tolerance and a deep compassion, which her children inherited. His maternal grandfather, Professor John Murray, of Stellenbosch, was a divinity scholar with an educational background from the Europe of the 19th century.

The white community of Winburg, where Leo was born and had his early schooling — he was proud to call himself a republican burgher by birth — was cosmopolitan and forbearing. Leo spoke of only one black man in his early life, Stefaans, coachman cum handyman, who was more part of the family than anything else. The whites spoke Afrikaans or Dutch; many, including the Marquard children, usually spoke English in the home and both languages, but often Afrikaans or its equivalent, outside; others had German as their mother tongue. Ethnicity was unheard of: all were Free Staters first and foremost, South Africans, nothing less, nothing more.

The Rebellion of 1914 brought its tensions and heartbreaks for a small community split down the middle; and then came the Great War, with Leo following in his eldest brother's footsteps and enlisting for service in Europe. He had a brief spell with the Royal Air Force and later spent three years at New College, Oxford, as a Rhodes Scholar.

These two periods overseas were a major watershed in Leo's life. He came back to South Africa and developed into an inspiring history teacher. But he became much more: his public-spiritedness soon led him to found the National Union of South African Students. Potchefstroom, Stellenbosch and Pretoria provided some of his staunchest colleagues. The National treasurer at one time was Daan de Wet Nel, later Dr Verwoerd's "plural relations" henchman. Braam Fischer, from Grey University College in the Free State, was the Nationalist "Prime Minister" at one of the student parliaments. (Gys Hofmeyr, I recall, was Mr Speaker that year).

Soon, also, he and his wife, Nell, his life's partner, had established a night school in what we used to call the Location in Bloemfontein, and enrolled a group of young people to help him with the teaching. The pupils were mostly adults, and I remember one of them persevering until, about 16 years later, he obtained a bachelor's degree. Nell, and Leo's sister, Louise, also ran the child welfare society and the Wayfarers. When Leo helped found the South African Institute of Race Relations in 1929, he had been the guiding spirit in the Bloemfontein Joint Council of Europeans and Natives for some time. Public service came naturally to the Marquards.

I cannot remember hearing anyone talk about liberalism in those days. Leo and Nell, and those they attracted to them, simply practised it as a matter of course. They realised there was a need for the kind of service they rendered and they responded automatically.

What I did hear them talk of constantly was the need to improve the quality of life of the Natives, as we called Black people (Kaffir" was still occasionally used), the need for more and better education, the need to raise their standard of living. And of course, at that period, one heard them talk a great deal about Nazism and its attendant horrors in Europe, particularly its herrenvolkism and its anti-Semitism, both of which appalled them. So when war came Leo enlisted — at great personal sacrifice and inconvenience, I might add, for he was already over 40. He enlisted, without fuss and bother, because he saw it as his duty to fight authoritarianism, which to him was the negation of liberty and freedom, the highest of all virtues.

Fortunately, although enlisting meant giving up school-mastering, he was able to use his teaching gifts in the Army Education Service with which Ernie Malherbe entrusted him. After the war his heightened sense of public service took him into a variety of spheres where he could continue to work for improved human relations and the advancement or at least protection of civil liberty. He was a liberal and proud of it. I imagine he would have agreed completely with Mrs Hoernle when, in her 1951 Institute of Race Relations presidential address entitled, significantly, "Rights and duties of liberals in South Africa", she said:

"It is this our duty without fear or favour to say honestly what we think is wrong or inadequate and to hammer away at what we are fully convinced is right and necessary, remembering always that though the outlook is dark at times, liberty is not lost, is not irretrievable, until the desire for it is lost. So long as men have the will to be free and to grow mentally and spiritually, no man-made laws can prevent them from striving until they reach their goal".

The will to be free. That was the touchstone of Leo's philosophy and life. He wasn't a passionate being; but he believed passionately in liberty and strove incessantly to spread its philosophy. He was wholly without "side". He was absolutely honest and straightforward and forthright. And this produced in him the courage to say what he felt needed to be said and to stand up and be counted, no matter what the cost or the consequences.

Even after the Security Branch, in one of its craziest moments, searched his home and went through his papers for reasons known only to them, he carried on precisely as before doing what he thought was necessary and right. In fact, this incident brought home to him more than ever before the need to fight the authoritarianism of Nationalism. In this he was totally "onverskrokke".

Leo knew and understood Afrikaner Nationalism and could talk to Nationalists not only in their own language but in their own idiom. He had, in addition, a loathing for cant and hypocrisy. He was a no-nonsense man. The double-talk of so many in public life sickened him.

He was my idea of what a South African should be: tolerant, compassionate, unafraid and understanding, without a trace of racialism. He had a foot in each of the white culture camps and felt at home in both. Above all, I would

say, he was a man of rugged commonsense who managed to get tremendous pleasure out of life — an achievement to which his lovely sense of humour and his common touch contributed appreciably. He loved good stories and told many.

Nationalists, I believe, respected him, particularly his ice-cold logic and intellectual integrity. And although they started from the premise that he was politically “verdwaald”, they, the “super patriots”, were never able seriously to doubt his South Africanness, his “egtheid”. In their heart of hearts they knew that there was nothing “uitheems” about his liberalism: they must have realised that he was a natural liberal.

But Leo was no starry-eyed idealist. He never had any illusions about the difficulty of the path the liberal in South Africa had to tread. In his first book on South African politics, “The Black Man’s Burden”, written under the pseudonym of John Burger and published in 1943 while he was serving in the Army, Leo wrote:

“... liberalism is fighting a gallant rearguard action and all it can do is to try to prevent the forces of reaction from having it all their own way. It is, indeed, apparent that the limits of reformism have been reached and that any further improvement in the living conditions of the non-European proletariat will have to be achieved along the lines of industrial action rather than by liberal influence in politics.”

“The Black Man’s Burden” sheds a good deal of light on Leo’s fairly radical early thinking and confirms, as I suggested earlier, that he was among the first to warn against the fascist cancer and to see communism in its right perspective. So, for instance, he wrote: “What the Nationalist Press mistakes for communism is sheer discontent blindly directed against an exploitation whose nature the African does not understand.”

In another passage he pointed out that “the Union is a precursor, and not a follower, in the matter of racial doctrines. Long before the Nuremberg laws were promulgated in Nazi Germany, South Africa had laws compelling its citizens to be careful about their grandmothers”. He saw the real peril facing this country as fascist racism and pinned his faith in a “strong and educated working-class movement of all workers, European and non-European. Along that path alone lies hope for the future.”

Leo, perhaps more than any South African of his generation, tried to make people think in sane and unemotional terms about politics. He set countless men and women of all races on the road to thinking rationally and getting their priorities right. For that alone his memory deserves to be honoured. □

# A TRIBUTE TO LEO MARQUARD

by David Welsh.

It is now exactly four years since Leo Marquard died at the ripe old age of 77. For some years prior to his death his health had been indifferent, but right up to the end he remained, for the most part, cheerful, and also intellectually alert and lively.

In watching a number of people I know grow old I have often wondered what circumstances combine to produce that mellowness and tranquility that were so characteristic of Leo. He could look back over a long life-time of rich experience, rewarding activities, interesting friends and colleagues, and he could, if he had been induced to do so (which I doubt) sense the glow of satisfaction that a successful career and life must bring.

More important, though, I think that Leo’s serenity came from a combination of unshakable moral convictions about the nature of the just and compassionate society, and his never-failing openmindedness and willingness to consider new ideas. He was sincere in his beliefs and he never felt that sheer dogmatism was necessary for their defence.

It may seem that in the South Africa of 1978 to look with admiration at the life of a liberal is to engage in the celebration of lost causes. I have been saddened by conversations with some of my elderly friends to sense in them a feeling, not articulated in so many words, that all their efforts had been a waste of time; that the rise and consolidation of apartheid amounted to a trampling on their convictions and ideals.

Leo never indulged in this essentially self-piteous kind of thinking — or at least I never detected a trace of it: Neither was he unduly optimistic or immune to pessimism.

I am sure that he would have taken the philosophical view that he had done his best, that he had never flinched from the consequences of his convictions, and that his efforts and those of others, while not reaping immediate benefits, would make their contribution in what was (and is) bound to be a protracted struggle.

Leo’s concrete achievements as a scholar and publisher, aside from his activities in politics and student affairs, will stand as a monument to the acuteness of his intellect and his wisdom. **The Black Man’s Burden**, published under the pseudonym of John Burger, and **Peoples and Policies of South Africa** are, in my judgement, Leo’s outstanding books. The difference in tone between the two is also an interesting reflection of the probable change of Leo’s thinking. The earlier book, **The Black Man’s Burden** was published during World War II and reflects his concern with Fascism and its local offshoots or variants. The stance is much more radical than those, who like myself, knew Leo only in later times.

The outstanding quality of **People & Policies** is its ability to convey vividly a sense of the flesh and guts of South African society — more so than any other comparable introductory text. This book has run to four editions and was updated by Leo at least twice. I venture to express the hope here that someone might consider another updating so that its usefulness is not impaired.

The book which Leo might have written, but never did, was of course his autobiography. Some years before his death Peter Brown and I were involved in an abortive effort to persuade Leo to make a start, but, as I recall,