

## **DEATH OF NAT NAKASA: Jumped or Pushed?**

by

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On 14th July 1965, when Nat Nakasa died, did he jump or was he pushed from the seventh floor of an apartment building in Manhattan, New York? In other words, did he commit suicide or was he assassinated? A dominant narrative explaining the cause of his death is that it was a suicide due to depression caused by the eminent expiry of his visa in the USA and not being able to return to South Africa having left on an exit permit, commonly described as a one-way ticket out of South Africa allowing for a no return. It is this hypothesis that I aim to interrogate in this article. But, first, I must give some idea of my friendship with him.

### **Our relationship**

We had known each other before a very close relationship developed between us during the last eighteen or more months before he left South Africa in September 1964. We lived within less than 500 metres of each other in Phefeni, Soweto. He rented a room in Vic Sondlo's house while I rented a room at the back of Martha Matlhaku's garage. Both Sondlo and Matlhaku were leading members of national liberation movements: Sondlo in the Unity Movement of South Africa and Matlhaku in the African National Congress and a trade unionist. At this time, Matlhaku's movements were severely proscribed by a house arrest order served on her under the so-called Suppression of Communism Act. She was not allowed to leave her home between the hours of 6pm and 8am and forbidden from entering any factory in the country, or being in the company of more than one person outside her immediate family or communicating with any person similarly banned. Following her banning order she applied for an exit permit and left for Botswana. Sondlo was a leading member of the Unity Movement of South Africa of which I had been a member till 1957. Not only were they our 'landlords' but also very close friends. Being able to relate to both, and equally with members of the Pan Africanist Congress, implied a broadmindedness or non-sectarianism on our part because they belonged to mutually antagonistic political organisations. In fact, as I will try to tell later, Nat did not adhere to any political ideologies prevalent at the time: nationalist or communist or socialist. Freedom, in particular freedom of expression, was the alpha and omega of his politics.

Living so close to each other, Nat and I met on most evenings for a drink in a shebeen, either at Susan Kelly's in Grahamstown Street in the city or at Dutch's in Diepkloof, Soweto. We were both under frequent watch by the security police known as the Special Branch. On many occasions we had them in a car following our car on the way to Dutch's. They would hang outside the shebeen while we were inside. We had a lot of fun out of their conduct. We ignored them pretending we were unaware we were being followed. To exhaust their patience, we would stay long inside the shebeen. We expected as they were wont to do in those days that they would raid our homes and search for anything that might politically incriminate us in their eyes. In the event it happened Nat, enjoying some mischief and knowing they would be curious, always left an unfinished letter he pretended to be writing to a friend overseas in his typewriter saying "Good to know you're keeping well. Just dropping you a few lines while waiting for a friend with whom I frequently go out to my favourite Soweto spots for a drink. Lately, a strange thing has been happening whenever we go out. We've been followed by the police. We wonder why? We've committed no crime."

It was during this time, ordered by the Special Branch to quit living on the premises of a proscribed person, that while looking for a new place to rent elsewhere, I moved into the Planet Hotel. Without entirely giving up his lodgings in Soweto, Nat was only too happy to join me in the hotel, taking a

room next to mine, only as he would put it to “taste what life was like living outside the township.” The Planet Hotel was a newly opened “non-whites only”, as apartheid laws would decree it, hotel in Fordsburg within walking distance of central Johannesburg.

The name Dutch, most likely derived from his real name Leburu which is also Sesotho for boer which is Afrikaans for farmer, Afrikaners having mostly descended from the Dutch settlers. Always making us very welcome to his shebeen and at times providing us with a meal he was a simple person unaffected by the sophistication of urban living. On the eve of Nat’s departure for New York we, together with other friends, had a last drink with Nat to bid him farewell at Dutch’s. He was due to leave from what was then known as Jan Smuts Airport the morning after. But, lo and behold, Nat whom I drove to the airport was late for his flight. That evening we were back at Dutch’s and Nat got Dutch, delightfully ignorant of geography, to believe that he was now back from New York; so more drinks from Dutch to welcome him back home! Such was Nat’s character, jovial and fond of making fun.

More than amusing, Nat was also an eccentric character. Much of the time he wore sandals that were so worn out that their soles had become paper thin. “If you in the townships don’t like them my white friends in the suburbs think they’re novel and fabulous”, he’d say. Then also his car, a Ford Prefect, was such a wreck that to get it started its bonnet had to be shaken. “A Bendix problem!” he said it was to passers-by he asked to give the bonnet a shake while he sat in the car to turn the starter key on.

Spending much time together in shebeens, Nat and I had many, many long nights in conversation about our condition under apartheid and what the future held for us. A recurring topic was will we ever be given passports so we can travel and experience the world beyond South Africa? We talked endlessly about this, long before Nat had any inkling that he’d one day be a recipient of the Niemann Fellowship to Harvard. Under apartheid there was a blanket ban on the issue of passports for international travel to blacks unless you were a well-known collaborator with apartheid, such as were Bantustan leaders, or a member of an anti-communist organisation such as the Moral Re-Armament or such a person interceded on your behalf. Travel to what was then known as the High Commission Territories or British Protectorates of Basutoland, Bechuanaland and Swaziland was facilitated by means of a “travel document” which was easily granted but quite distinct from a passport allowing international travel.

We talked about people we knew who had left the country. Some like Nat’s best friend Lewis Nkosi, his colleague at *Drum* magazine and a Niemann Fellowship alumni, had left South Africa on an exit permit after being refused a passport. Others like E’skia Mphahlele obtained a passport. He had waited “fifteen months of harrowing speculation attended by doubts and forebodings” before his passport application was approved in 1957 (Mphahlele; 3). And to be allowed to return to South Africa in 1977, “it required a five-year negotiation with the government through the good offices of the Chief Minister of Lebowa, Dr C. C. Phatudi” (*ibid*; 3). Lebowa was a Bantustan. He most likely used the same channel to get the passport in 1957. Otherwise, being the political activist that he was, he would not ordinarily have been granted a passport. Along with a future president of the PAC and Robben Island prisoner, Zephaniah Mothopeng, and a man who later qualified himself as an attorney and provided Robert Sobukwe on his release from Robben Island with legal articles of clerkship, Isaac Matlhare, they had been sacked by the government as teachers at Orlando High School in Soweto because of their politics. On top of that, he it was who at the Congress of the People at Kliptown in 1956 introduced and moved for adoption the clause on culture and education into the ANC’s Freedom Charter. Persons of such pedigree were not granted passports unless a collaborator with apartheid pleaded on their behalf. In my own case, I had no such luck when I twice

applied for a passport with the help of Dr Willie Nkomo, a co-founder of the ANC Youth League turned crusader for the Moral Re-Armament movement which, according to a CIA released document, had set as one of its tasks the conversion of communists. It believed it could prevent the spread of communism and create a better society by imbuing people with moral principles. As such and founded by an American, Frank Buchman, it enjoyed the support of the CIA. I did obtain a travel document allowing me to travel to Swaziland under very restrictive conditions which required me to state when and for how long I am going to Swaziland. Even so, this was subsequently withdrawn from me when I was served with a letter to that effect from the Minister of the Interior (Home Affairs).

A persistent question we asked ourselves on many occasions when we met was what would we, Nat and I, do to leave South Africa if we had to. We never expressed any doubt that either we will skip the border illegally like most activists who went into exile or that we will apply for an exit permit in order to leave the country legally. Nat had many former colleagues at *Drum* or *Golden City Post* who had by this time left South Africa with no intention of returning while the country remained under apartheid or totalitarian rule. In addition to Nkosi, they included Mphahlele, Broke Modisane, Bennie Bunsee, Arthur Maimane, Bessie Head, Collingwood August, Joe Louw and Todd Matshikiza. Other black journalists or writers included Alfred Hutchinson, Dennis Brutus, Alex La Guma, and Ernest Cole. Some were lucky to leave on passports but others left on exit permits or simply skipped the border. So we were psychologically prepared to go into exile if the pressure ever arose. However, many times Nat told me what Nadine Gordimer's choice would be. A very close friend he was of Gordimer's, who was on the Board of the literary magazine *The Classic* which Nat founded and edited, said to him that under no circumstances would she give up living in South Africa. The subjects – South Africa, its people and their social lives - were the substance of her creative writing. To cut herself off from them would be to deny herself her well of inspiration to writing. Nat himself wrote in 1964, the year of his departure that "If I shall leave this country and decide not to come back, it will be because of a desire to avoid perishing in my own bitterness – a bitterness born of being reduced to a second-class citizen" (Patel; 163).

It was in the company of Nat that on a few occasions I accompanied him to Gordimer's home in Parktown and so we got to know each other somewhat. When she expressed to Nat a wish to experience a party in the township I offered to host one at my parent's house in Alexandra. Thanks to Nat I had the privilege of being invited to discussions on literature by members of *The Classic's* editorial board. A memorable discussion led by Gordimer, renowned equally for her short stories as for her novels, was a comparison of a short story by Ernest Hemingway with one by Guy de Maupassant. These discussions were particularly very enlightening to Nat who though an editor of a literary journal he had no formal education in literature nor education beyond high school.

Also, through Nat I became a friend of Peter Magubane, the acclaimed photographer, who worked closely with Nat at *Drum*, Nat writing the story and Magubane shooting the photos to accompany the story. When Magubane in 1964 undertook his first overseas trip to an exhibition of his photographs he asked me to stay in his house in Diepkloof, Soweto, to look after it while he was away. Through Nakasa I bought a Vespa scooter from David Goldblatt, another famous South African photographer when he and his partner Peggy Stephenson, a friend of mine, left South Africa. When I expressed to Nat a wish to become a journalist he introduced me to Robert Hodgins who was editor of the cultural pages of *NewsCheck*, a weekly magazine, and subsequently became one of South Africa's leading painters. I had stints freelancing, actually moonlighting while in fulltime employment training to be a solicitor, as a reporter and providing stories which Hodgins incorporated into his

articles for the magazine. One such story was based on my interview of PQ Vundla, a popular leader of the ANC in Johannesburg and a leading member of the Moral Re-Armament in South Africa.

Nat was friendly with two American men who worked in the USA embassy and lived in Pretoria. I do not recall their names nor do I know how they met and became friends with Nat. They would invite him to their homes in Pretoria for an evening drink. On at least two occasions he asked me to join him to the home of one of them. His car too unreliable to take him to Pretoria and back to Soweto late at night is the reason he asked me to accompany him and drive in my car. Such was the bonhomie between Nat and these men that when they had had a few drinks and wanted to pee it was not to the loo they went but to the bottom of the garden. It was obvious to me that this was a routine ritual whenever they got together. But I was always suspicious of them like many of us on the left were of US embassy staff.

Once I accompanied him when he was visiting Jim Bailey who as his employer was the owner of *Drum* and *Golden City Post*. He lived in a homestead in the area now known as or in the vicinity of Lanseria, a fair drive out of Johannesburg. Back then it was very much like being in the countryside. Bailey was living with or married to the former wife of Jeremy Taylor who made a name for himself with his hit song *Ag Pleez Daddy*. Nat's joy in visiting them was to jump into their swimming pool and experience what was undreamt of in the townships, a private let alone public swimming pool or, as he would say, experience what life for the other half was like in South Africa. But he couldn't swim! Fearlessly, he would jump into the pool and like a bird furiously flutter his hands to stay afloat.

When his girlfriend, Shiela Cingo, left South Africa to study in the USA I lent him my car to take her to the airport and bid her goodbye. Again, his not being reliable to take him to the airport and back.

Despite the lack of freedom in the country people found ways of enjoying life as much as they could under the circumstances. There was just no party like a party in Soweto during those times. And Nat and I savoured these to the utmost. We had our own party circle consisting mostly of women whose husbands were serving prison sentences or had been forced to flee the country to escape persecution for their political activism. All sterling women who under very difficult conditions had no choice but to keep, as the saying went, the home fires burning. The only "Rivonia widow", as they bravely called themselves to ridicule the apartheid regime while their husbands were jailed on Robben Island or in exile, who could not join her friends on these occasions, was Winnie Mandela. She had the Special Branch hanging outside her house in the evenings and could not risk arrest for frivolously flouting her restriction order. Many of the parties were held in Martha Matlhaku's home notwithstanding that she was under a banning and house arrest order that forbade her being in the company of more than one person. But at the knock on her door she would promptly disappear to her bedroom to pretend not to be violating her banning order that restricted her social contact. Her husband fled the country to Botswana after being banned before her.

On some occasions when Nat received a visit from an overseas journalist I joined him as he took the journalist into the townships to show them what it was like to be a black person living in South Africa. Of course, we would do trips like this surreptitiously – enjoying them all the more for this – because whites were not allowed to enter townships without a permit.

On being awarded the Niemann Fellowship Nat told me that Harvard did not fund the fellowship. However, the fellowship was so prestigious that finding financial sponsorship was not difficult. But the responsibility was his to seek the funding. He arranged to meet with Mary Oppenheimer and apply to the Oppenheimer Fund (I cannot remember if it was called that or by another name). They arranged to meet in a newly opened Indian restaurant at the eastern end of either Market or

Commissioner (as they were known then) Streets. Again, I obliged him by driving him to the restaurant. When I later went to pick him up he walked out of the restaurant to me waiting inside the car with a smile beaming from ear to ear. He had secured funding from the Oppenheimer Fund! It was most likely as a result of this meeting that he wrote to John Thompson on 21 August 1963 that "I am planning to leave the country on some grant or other which I had been told reliably that I will get" (Wits University; Historical Papers Research Archive). However, according to reports he was funded as if only by the Farfield Foundation (Davis; 46) which had also provided seed funding for *The Classic*, the literary periodical he founded.

So much namedropping by me but just a few to demonstrate Nat's connection to powerful and influential people: literary scholars Nkosi and Mphahlele, Nobel Laureate Gordimer, heiress to the Oppenheimer fortune, newspaper owner Jim Bailey, eminent photographers Magubane and Goldblatt, leading painter Hodgins, USA embassy friends. Most are people I came to meet through my friendship with Nat. But my relationship with Nat was not all partying, chauffeuring him to these parties and meeting the luminaries who were his friends. Talk between us of what was taking place politically in the country at the time could not be avoided.

I have alluded already that Nat was not political in the sense that he did not hold any of the political ideologies so prevalent within the national liberation movements at the time: nationalism, socialism or communism. Nonetheless, as a journalist fervently believing in civil rights and freedom of expression, which he practised in his daily life in South Africa in flagrant disregard of their prohibition under apartheid, he unreservedly abhorred communism. A topic that frequently cropped up during our shebeen outings was a comparison of the USA and the Soviet Union. To say that Nat engaged in any discussion of communism would not be correct. He simply did not want to hear anything favourable regarding the Soviet Union. Uncharacteristic of his usual easy going and jocular manner he would lose his cool and shut you down at any word in support of the Soviet Union. Just nothing redeemed the Soviet Union as far as he was concerned, even as some who agreed with him on the suppression of freedom in the Soviet Union would say there was at least full employment in the Soviet Union. Nat would hear none of that. I return to this later when I write about his disillusion with the USA.

What he passionately believed in and lived it was the freedom to express himself. It is a freedom that he deployed with the utmost irony in his weekly column for the *Rand Daily Mail (RDM)*. It is the promise of freedom he believed the USA held out for him when he took up the Niemann Fellowship. "Nat came to America with a dream" wrote Kathleen Conwell in her tribute to Nat after his death, a tribute I quote more fully later. Freedom not just for him but for everyone and every citizen.

During 1964 I was serving articles of legal clerkship, training to be a solicitor, under Andrew Lukele. He had developed an expertise in handling claims for damages against insurance companies. His clientele were persons injured in motor car accidents. His reputation in such cases had grown to an extent that he became a solicitor's solicitor. In other words, other solicitors were instructing him to handle such claims on behalf of their clients. Many of these solicitors were based in the eastern Cape. Working on one very difficult claim that ultimately required the services of Senior Counsel when it reached the Supreme Court, I decided to go to the eastern Cape to inspect and sketch diagrams of the site of the accident and also to find and interview witnesses. This was at the time of the inauguration of the Transkei's parliament, the first one to be established in the Bantustans. Nat seized the opportunity to take a lift with me and accompany me so he could write his weekly column on the event. The parliament was loaded with salaried functionaries of the apartheid state. Of its 109 members, 64 were chiefs the majority of whom unreservedly supported the Bantustan set-up.

Ever so irreverent, Nat asked a member of this parliament who was squatting on the kerb of the road having for his lunch an unsliced loaf of bread in one hand and drinking out of a 2-litre bottle of coke in the other hand if “members of the other parliament” as he expressed it, “the one for whites in Cape Town, also dined sitting on the kerb of the road on a loaf of bread and a 2-litre bottle of coke.” In the evening, we went to a “hotel” in which some members of parliament were accommodated. They all slept in a dormitory, with broken floorboards possibly rats running beneath them. Again, he asked them is this how members of the other parliament, the one in Cape Town, are accommodated? “I visited some of the members in a boarding house in Umtata”, he wrote in his weekly column for the *RDM* on our return to Johannesburg. “I found four chiefs accommodated in a room together with their aides and guards. There were eight or ten beds in the room. A pile of bags, suitcases and travel baskets stood at one end of the room. A four-gallon paraffin tin had been converted into a meat carrier and contained plenty of boiled beef provided by the State during the celebrations. They invited me to join them in dinner as they sat about the room cutting from the beef with their pocketknives. ‘Don’t you carry your own knife?’ one asked me in astonishment as I confessed that I would have to borrow cutlery” (Patel; 54). But, of course, there was no cutlery but their pocketknives and bare hands to eat with! This is just the sort of Nat’s satire that set people in the townships rocking with laughter every Saturday when his column appeared.

He wrote two other columns directly related to the inaugural opening of the Bantustan parliament which were a follow-up when the Bantustan’s Chief Minister Kaiser Matanzima led an entourage of his cabinet to sell the idea of the Bantustan to people in Johannesburg. All three are included in a collection of some of his articles (Patel; 53). However much Nat was mocking of the Bantustan parliament, a toy telephone it was said to be by its opponents, he was deeply impressed by the opposition party led by Kings Victor Poto and Dalinyebo Sabata. What impressed Nat was their use of the Bantustan platform to speak out against the sham it was – this at a time when all other black opposition voices inside the country had been silenced. We even surmised, in a very rare serious political discussion between us, whether this might be the way to re-ignite open and vocal resistance to apartheid: using Bantustan platforms to oppose apartheid. Nat, as I have been constantly emphasising all along, prized the freedom to speak his mind above all else. That was the essence of his politics, no ideology and neither left nor right.

On our way driving back to Johannesburg he asked me to stop in Durban. He then visited his parents’ and siblings’ home in Chesterville, a township of Durban. He returned to the hotel into which we had booked for the night enthusing that his weekly column in the *Rand Daily Mail*, a Johannesburg newspaper, was being read as far as Durban. Upon meeting his family, neighbours and others he had grown up with in the township, all were hailing him as Umabalane, which is IsiZulu for writer, and that they see him in the newspapers. Only later it dawned on him that they were referring to an advertisement with a picture of him, a pen in hand and a writing pad before him, appearing in the Natal IsiZulu newspaper *Ilanga Lase Natal*, and above his picture was written “Umabalane”, advertising a writing pad. What hilarious fun it was for him to later figure out that it wasn’t Nat the satirical columnist they were referring to!

His *RDM* column, appearing on Saturday mornings, was looked forward to by people in the townships. Saturday would be one day in the week when the *RDM* was sold out in the townships. What an amount of effort and time he put into writing it! Calling the column *As I See It*, the deadline for his copy was Friday midnight. There were many occasions when he met the deadline at the very last minute having been preoccupied all week with about what to write. For two or three or four days he would have been driving all over Soweto, talking and listening to people just to pick up

something in the stories they told him that would give him an idea what to write about in his column for the week.

What distinguished Nat and brought him into much greater prominence is that he was the first black person to be asked to write for a South African newspaper targeting mainly a white readership. To honour him, his column and his bravery in telling it as it was at the time, the South African National Editors Forum have instituted an annual memorial lecture in his name.

### ***The Classic***

The story of the founding of *The Classic*, the literary journal Nat founded as its first editor, is told in his biography, *A Native of Nowhere* (Brown); 91-104). Its publishing was funded by the Farfield Foundation. Nat and his friend Lewis Nkosi had met John “Jack” Thompson, the foundation’s executive director, during 1960 at a party held in the white suburbs of Johannesburg.

The party, attended by Nat and Nkosi, was specially hosting Thompson. Exactly at whose house the party was held is not clear. Coming to South Africa was part of Thompson’s frequent sojourns in Africa in order to pursue his interest in African literature and make contact with writers on the continent such as Nadine Gordimer, then a future Nobel Laureate. Quite conceivably the party would have been hosted by some established South African writer or academic with whom Thompson, given his interest in African literature, was in contact. At the time neither Nkosi nor Nat had made their mark in creative writing: Nkosi had yet to establish himself as a literary critic and novelist, and Nat had not made his entry into editing a literary journal. About Nat, Gordimer remarked: “He was a clever newspaperman but had no literary background or experience” (Patel; xxi). Both were well known as reporters for *Drum* and *Golden City Post*. Subsequent to the party, they invited Thompson for a drink in a township shebeen – not unusual in those days, as I remarked earlier, for us to “smuggle” our white friends into the townships where they were otherwise forbidden by apartheid laws.

An offer of funding the magazine for one year and with the possibility of a renewal conditional on the success of the project was conveyed to Nat in a letter dated 15 May 1962 from the Farfield Foundation and signed by Thompson. But the first issue came out in June 1963. By the time in 1964 when Nat left for the USA he had edited three issues of the journal and thereafter ceased to be its editor.

Thompson did not dictate or impose a policy on Nat in terms of a political line to follow. What concerned him most in his correspondence with Nat was being assured of the quality of the magazine. To this end he advised Nat to secure an artist to design an attractive cover for the magazine and mentioned a cover designed for *Encounter* by the eminent sculptor Henry Moore (letter dated 12 December 1962). It so happened Nat and I were very good friends of Abe Mashugane. He was the first black person in South Africa to obtain a university degree in Fine Arts. Nat asked him to design the cover.

Thompson also expressed concern regarding the quality of the contributions. Exhibiting his profound knowledge of literature, as indeed he was a professor of literature, he wrote to Nat on 13 August 1963 after the first issue of *The Classic* had come out:

“It seems to me that *The Classic* has a very important mission, not only in publishing the stories and poems now being written in South Africa, but in setting high standards and in educating its readers – and its writers – by encouraging criticism. For instance, your fiction writers all seem to write in a direct naturalist tradition. Why? Is this a choice made consciously? Are they aware that this is only

one way of writing, and not a very usual one today? Your poems seem to me often to be more concerned with making a statement than with making a poem: they could learn that even a statement is made best, made so that it really sticks, when the language and form are recognised as an important part of what is said" (these letters are in the Nakasa papers at Wits University, Historical Papers Research Archive).

### **About Thompson**

Thompson was "well-known in New York intellectual circles" (Wilford; 105). He was a professor of literature at the State University of New York at Stony Brook with an interest in African writing. According to Bawer who studied for a PhD under him, Thompson wrote "erudite essays for the New York Review, about big cultural and social questions." Bawer describes his two books, *The Founding of English Metric* and *The Talking Girl and Other Poems*, as "small gems"; and the former as "a pioneering study of metrics." His daughter, Louise Thompson together with Ruth Losack, collected his essays, reviews and other writings into two large volumes titled *Straws in the Wind* which includes "several substantial essays on social and cultural issues" (Bawer; *Commentary*). The two volumes, altogether consisting of some 900 pages, are a highly impressive display of his formidable intellect. They include reviews of books by Gordimer, Mphahlele and Ronald Segal.

Thompson was a friend of Gordimer (Zondi; *The Weekender*). But unbeknown at the time to her and most of the people he was meeting in South Africa and in other countries in Africa, Thompson was also a Central Intelligence Agency official. He was recruited into the CIA by Cord Meyer (Saunders; 138). Meyer was head of the International Organisations Division which fell under the CIA's Deputy Director Plans (Clandestine Services) (Agee; 656). The Farfield Foundation which Thompson ran and the more known Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF), with which it was principally connected, being fronts of the CIA through which the CIA funded anti-communist as well as non-communist causes. "The Agency's principal front organisation in the so-called cultural Cold War was the Congress for Cultural Freedom created in 1950 to counter the [Communist Information Bureau's] 'peace offensive' . . . . . the CCF evolved into one of the most important artistic patrons in world history, sponsoring an unprecedented range of cultural activities, including literary prizes, art exhibits and music festivals" (Wilford; 101/2). Nat and his journal thus became unwitting beneficiaries of covert CIA funding.

Contrary to his role in the CIA, in an edition of the Dictionary of American Professors, Thompson described his political views as radical (Bawer; *Commentary*). In some ways this may be true. In a letter dated 30 August 1963 which he wrote to Nat he spoke of his attendance at a Freedom March in Washington. "It was a tremendous historic occasion . . . . all the people happy and serious and singing the wonderful Negro songs of Freedom. And there was power there. There was real power, and it is going to be used" (Wits University; Historical Papers Research Archive).

Also, as another indication justifying to some extent his self-identification as a radical, in several articles he wrote "he took a jaundiced view of the Washington political establishment, expressing disdain for the purported complacency of the Eisenhower years, and revulsion at 'the sight of a huge power like ourselves crushing a tiny peasant race' in Vietnam" (Bawer; *Commentary*). During the mid-60s he is said to have been "flirting with the New Left" (Saunders; 404).

Yet in other ways, he held views that contradicted his self-identification as a radical. He came over as a conservative in matters of sexual orientation. "Being queer is a bum rap" he said to his students during a seminar (Bawer; *Commentary*). At this time the word queer was used to denigrate lesbian and gay people and not yet appropriated by the lesbian and gay movement to use it to challenge



assumed binary of sexual and gender identity. And, during a PhD oral examination he uttered the N-word (*ibid*). What's more, "according to the book editor Jason Epstein, Jack "became obsessed with saving Africans from the Russians" (Saunders; 426). "He would offer fellowships to African scholars and intellectuals, and their governments" – could only possibly be referring to Nat, Nkosi and Mphahlele – "would allow them to go on condition they never returned (they were glad to get rid of them)" (*ibid*; 426). So obsessed by his concern for the welfare of black people he is reported by Saunders that writing in 1968 "he told the Josselson's that everything that wasn't Vietnam was going to be about the African-Americans (though the word he used to describe them was distinctly colonial)" *Ibid*; 404).

About his drinking habits: "Before ever taking a course with him I'd heard that on the mornings of the days he held classes, he could be seen in his office, the door open, tossing back paper cups of white wine at his desk, and inviting pretty girls, as they passed by, to join him for a drink. The wine also turned up at my first seminar with him: He'd come in with it and during the seminar would make regular trips back to his office, across the corridor, to refill his cup" (Bawer).

Also, he was not averse to "use profanity" (*ibid*).

### **Other beneficiaries of covert funding**

Six years later, after his first meeting with Nat and Nkosi, and after Nat had died, when the cover of the CIA was blown in the *New York Times* it became publicly known that *The Classic* was not the only South African publication covertly funded by the CIA. The others included *Africa South* and later *Africa South in Exile*, *Contrast* and the newsletter *South Africa Information and Analysis* (Davis; 48). These were respectively edited by Ronald Segal, a good friend of the African National Congress, particularly its president Oliver Tambo; amongst others by Randolph Vigne, a member of the Liberal Party and the Armed Resistance Movement; E'skia Mphahlele and then later by Lewis Nkosi. Widely believed at the time, and there was no reason whatsoever to doubt it, is that Segal funded *Africa South* out of his inherited wealth.

Within the South African national liberation movements it was widely speculated that *Crisis and Change*, edited by Nana Mahomo (of the Pan Africanist Congress but acting individualistically and independently of the PAC) was also funded by the CIA. He had an office in a building overlooking Trafalgar Square in London, across the road from the South African embassy. There were questions about how he funded the running of the office, the magazine and his lifestyle. He had been appointed by the African-American Labour Centre, a division of the American Federation of Labour-Congress of Industrial Organisations (AFL-CIO), which was formed as the latter's Program of Action in Support of Black Trade Unions in South Africa. His relationship with the AFL-CIO was established in 1963. "Mahomo's contact with the AFL/CIO officials provided the basis for rumours that the Pan-Africanists were being helped by the Central Intelligence Agency" (Lodge; 307). Discontent within the PAC over the accounting of the donation of funds to the organisation and their mismanagement led to Mahomo's suspension from the organisation. But even after his suspension, "The AFL/CIO, incidentally, continued to provide funding for Mahomo's projects" (*ibid*; 309). "Importantly", Williams comments that "it [AFL/CIO] was CIA-backed and funded; British diplomats in the know, notes one expert on the history of the CIA, mockingly referred to it as the 'AFL/CIA'" (Williams; 76).

The PAC itself, as an organisation, before and while in exile, was not free of suspicion of support from the CIA or US government through its embassy in South Africa. Potlako Leballo assumed the presidency of the organisation when Robert Sobukwe was jailed on Robben Island after leading the anti-pass campaign in 1960. "The Security Branch file on Leballo contained unverified reports that he

was being paid a monthly salary by the CIA official attached to the U.S. Consulate in Johannesburg. In the seventies” writes Swanepoel, “I was given the opportunity of visiting the late Robert Sobukwe, the first PAC president, at his home in Kimberley. I asked him about the many allegations which had been made in South Africa and abroad, to the effect that the PAC had been a creation of the CIA and that the organisation was financed by the Americans. Mr Sobukwe replied that there was no truth in these allegations. He said it was true that Leballo sometimes ‘did favours’ for the people at the U.S. Embassy for which they occasionally paid him small amounts, but this had nothing to do with his organisation” (Swanepoel; 150). Swanepoel was formerly an officer of the Bureau of State Security (BOSS), previously known as the Special Branch and wrote this in his book *Really Inside Boss*. Reference to Swanepoel may be tainted because of his BOSS credentials. But the fact is that such allegations were made and supported by credible sources. “In its external relationships the PAC had had a disturbed history, incurring the wrath of the Organisation of African Unity in 1967 and 1968, and the Zambian government in 1968 and 1973; entering ill-starred alliances with the Frente Nacional de Libertacao de Angola (FNLA) in 1963 and the Comite Revolucionarie de Mocambique (Coremo) in 1968; and attracting the dubious benefits of support from China and the Central Intelligence Agency” (Lodge; 306).

Beyond South Africa, a British monthly magazine, *Encounter*, highly acclaimed particularly within the non-communist left, also emerged in the *New York Times* revelations as a beneficiary of covert CIA largesse. On discovering, or in some cases finding confirmation, from where the funding of their publications came, all proclaimed that this had made no difference to them as they had remained editorially independent and the CIA never dictated policy to them. “One reaction of writers who were surprised to learn that the CIA had been subventing their work was: No one ever told us what to write. But that was exactly the point. They did not need to be told. They were already saying the things the CIA – that is, the U.S. government – wanted the world to hear” (Menand; 716).

*The Classic*, too, as already remarked, was not instructed by its benefactor, the Farfield Foundation, what to write. In other words, a political line to be followed was not imposed by Thompson on Nat. Rather, what concerned Thompson was the quality of the magazines, its cover and contributions, and to this end he gave advice to Nat.

Mphahlele asked: “Why? Why? Was the question. What was in it for the CIA, when it would never, even if it wanted to, dictate the activities its money made possible? Why?” (Mphahlele; 90). “In Paris”, he explained, “I had edited the South African Bulletin, which the Congress [for Cultural Freedom] had asked me to initiate. A fortnightly news digest and editorial column. I had ample freedom to express my views editorially without claiming that they were shared by the Congress” (*ibid*; 129).

Such were the protestations of many when the source of the funding of their endeavours was exposed in 1967. But a point missed out by Mphahlele and others proclaiming independence is that it was precisely this independence which the CIA used against the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Such was the sophistication of the CIA strategy that it allowed for independence of thought because it used this as a weapon against the totalitarianism and tyranny of the Soviet Union. It supported Jackson Pollock, to take one example, at a time when abstract expressionism was scorned upon by the Soviet Union for its lack of a proletarian message. There was nothing for the CIA or western policy in abstract art in the sense Mphahlele is asking or, for that matter, in “art for art’s sake”. Non-criticism of the west, nor praise singing of western policy for that matter, was not a condition of its support for publications edited by Mphahlele, Spender and others. “The fact that dissent was tolerated in the United States was a major Cold War selling point” (Menand; 716). Hence there was no need to influence the editorial policy of its beneficiaries. “Writers who imagined themselves as

having a critical distance from American policy, or a sceptical relation to capitalism or consumerism or militarism or vulgar anti-communism, were actually taking the party line. They did not need to be bought out because they had been on board all along" (*ibid*; 716).

### **Departure from South Africa**

Nat knew he would never be given a passport. At the time around 1963 and 1964 when liberation movements were proscribed, activists silenced by banning orders, jailed or fleeing into exile, his was the only black voice remaining inside the country to speak out openly against apartheid. Not so much speak but to write mockingly about the ironical irrationalities of apartheid. He was to that period what Desmond Tutu was to the late 1980s: fearlessly speaking truth to power when all other black opposition voices inside the country were silenced by draconian laws and states of emergency. How could the government grant him a passport which they regarded not as a right but a privilege? With tongue in cheek, he provocatively was saying he would be granted a passport because he had done nothing wrong. Done nothing wrong? Who was he kidding? Certainly not the apartheid government. "As I have never been active in politics except as a journalist", he wrote to the Niemann Foundation, "I expect no difficulty in obtaining a passport" (Brown; 113). He was not naïve to believe this. His friend, Lewis Nkosi, though at the time not as outspoken against apartheid as Nat, was refused a passport and left on an exit permit. Why would he be given one? What he knew and was clearly obvious to everyone at the time is that anyone who wrote or spoke out against apartheid, certainly if black, would either be jailed or banned under the Suppression of Communism Act under which they could not be quoted or published. Had he stayed on in South Africa he definitely would have incurred a banning order which would have barred him from practising his craft as a journalist and writer of any kind in the media in South Africa. And as it happened but was only discovered after he had died, a banning order was prepared to be served on him but he left South Africa before it could be done (*ibid*; 119).

So Nat and I applied for exit permits after being refused passports. We had long ago worked out that this is what we would do, like others before us, on being denied passports. In her tribute to Nat after his death, Gordimer wrote of his decision to leave South Africa on an exit permit. "He took what every other young man of outstanding ability – but of a different colour – takes for granted and gets without the necessity of an agonising decision to exile himself from home, country, friends and family – a chance to travel and seek education" (Patel; xxv). His application was timed so he could leave South Africa in time to take up the Nieman Fellowship at Harvard. I was led to make my application because I was being endlessly harassed by the Special Branch raiding me in the middle of the night, hanging at the entrance to my office building or following me and taking a seat in a restaurant I used to go to for lunch. I reckoned that before I am banned or detained or joined to be charged with the political group I mostly identified with, the group whose members included Neville Alexander, Fikile Bam, Dulcie September and Marcus Solomon being tried in Cape Town at that time, I should quietly apply for an exit permit. Nat left the country during September 1964 and I left for Botswana during January 1965.

An exit permit is not a passport. It did not allow for visa procurement to enter foreign countries. Its user was to all intents and purposes rendered stateless once out of South Africa. Entering any foreign country risked being returned to South Africa – this in itself, as I explain later, did not mean the bearer of an exit permit could not return or be returned to South Africa. So no one left on an exit permit without having first secured an arrangement to be received in the country of first destination. I could not have left on an exit permit for Botswana if I had not been assured beforehand that either King Linchwe of the Bakgatla in Mochudi, a close friend of Malthaku, or King Leapetswe of Bamangwato in Serowe, with whom I was at boarding school, would adopt me into

their sub-nations and thus secure my residence in Botswana. Without holding a passport, not to have had such an arrangement I risked arriving in Botswana, or any other country, being returned to South Africa, the immigration officials putting me on the next plane, so to speak, back to South Africa, and to prison for at least three months.

Nat's first stop after leaving South Africa was in Tanzania. His entry into Tanzania, without a passport, must have been facilitated by one of the national liberation movements recognised by the Tanzanian government. These organisations acted as gate keepers to vouch for any of us fleeing South Africa either on an exit permit or, in the majority of cases, activists who skipped the border illegally in search of training for armed struggle. Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland, at that time, were the only countries we, travelling without a valid passport, could enter without being vetted by any of South Africa's national liberation movements in exile.

He entered the USA, after stops in Lusaka and London, on a visa obtained in Tanzania which most likely limited his stay in the USA to the duration of his fellowship though he was well connected enough to get an extension to his visa. He must have worked out what would happen to him when his visa expired. Once on an exit permit you absolutely did not make a move without a prior arrangement to be allowed to land at the destination intended next. He could not have left South Africa without having worked that out, whether he would be allowed to continue staying in the USA or find some other country to adopt him. He had ample contacts, even inside the US administration such as the embassy friends he had in South Africa or indeed John "Jack" Thompson of the Farfield Foundation (still more about him later), whom he could have called upon to assist him in this regard. Thompson as a CIA official would have opened doors for him. Later, I speculate on why Nat would have refused to go along this route or, if he wanted to, could not get help. Besides, he had friends like Lewis Nkosi who left South Africa on exit permits and from whom he could have found out, if he didn't already know, how they solved their "statelessness".

Each and every one of us who left South Africa on an exit permit relied on the knowledge of those who preceded us. We made no move without their assistance. Take me as an example. Travelling on an exit permit, my first stop was Botswana thanks to Matlhaku arranging for my adoption by King Linchwe, and my second stop in Britain was arranged by political colleagues already in London, Ismail Mohamed, Barney Desai and Kenneth Jordaan. I was only able to enter Britain after they had arranged with the National Union of Teachers to have a letter of invitation to attend for a teaching job interview sent to me by a head teacher of a school. On top of that they had to find a member of parliament, invariably a Labour MP, who could intervene in the event there was some difficulty with immigration officers.

On the strength of the invitation letter, rather than a passport, and the NUT having alerted the Home Office of my coming, immigration officials at Heathrow airport gave me an entry visa valid for one month. Just enough time to allow me to attend the interview! Once given the job as a teacher, I had the validity of my entry visa extended to twelve months and thereafter renewable every twelve months until I completed five years in the country whereupon I qualified to apply for naturalisation. To reiterate: an exit permit was not a passport and could not be used for travel unless assured of entry to the country of one's landing.

And so using my own experience, and my knowledge of what ropes to pull, so to speak, I was able to help other South Africans without valid passports to come into Britain: Andrew Khutsoane, Livingston Mqotsi and Zanele Mbeki. In the case of Zanele, I went to Heathrow to await her arrival, not knowing at the time that there was another major airport at which she was arriving. She arrived at Gatwick and, interestingly, was admitted into the country on an expired South African passport.

I hinted above that returning to South Africa after leaving on an exit permit meant going to gaol. Contrary to popular belief, though also known as a one-way ticket out of South Africa, an exit permit did not mean that its user was barred from returning to South Africa. Issued under the Departure from the Union Regulation Act No 34, this law made it “an offence to leave South Africa without a passport or equivalent document. A person who is refused a passport may be given an ‘exit permit’ and this shall be given to such person if he satisfied the Secretary of the Interior that he intends to leave the country permanently. He does, however, forfeit his citizenship and thus becomes a stateless person under international law. If he returns he is deemed to have left South Africa without a permit and is subject to the penalty for unlawful departure, that is imprisonment for not less than three months and not more than two years” (O’Malley). Thus exit permit users were not barred from returning to South Africa.

Incidentally, prior to 1954, it was not unlawful to leave South Africa without a passport. Taking advantage of this loophole, the ANC’s Walter Sisulu and Duma Nokwe visited China and other Soviet block countries. Immediately after their return to South Africa, it was to stop such a visit by South Africans to communist countries ever happening again that the law was made to make it illegal to leave the country without a passport or exit permit.

Nat knew, as it was plain to all of us who would never be given passports, about having to make prior arrangements and the consequences of leaving South Africa on an exit permit. Our collective experience of navigating the problems around our statelessness was very, very rich. He could never have dreamt of returning to apartheid South Africa, as some narratives of the reason for his death imply: that he was homesick. Returning to South Africa, as it was then, is the last thing Nat would have wanted to do. And this must be said most emphatically: nor could he have suffered a depression simply because he couldn’t return to South Africa after Harvard. Return to what? A prison sentence of at least three months followed by a banning order that would prevent him from practising his craft and earning a living.

### **Death of Nat Nakasa**

It was on the 14th July 1965 or a day after that I received a cablegram from Barbara Masekela telling me Nat had fallen from the seventh floor of an apartment building in Manhattan and had died. I cannot remember if at the time Barbara said it was death by suicide. But no sooner had it become widely known than it was said to be suicide.

I could not believe that Nat who I had spent so much time with and got to know so well, who was such great fun and so fond of life, on the cusp of achieving an international status as a journalist as he had illustriously achieved nationally in South Africa, freed from the stifling conditions of apartheid and at last free to live his life without a show of bravado in defiance of segregation laws, had committed suicide. Also, what I found difficult to fathom is why he would take his life when he only very recently had fallen in love. For more than two years he had fervently been seeking love. He had lost a woman, Yolisa Bokwe, he loved with so much adoration that he used to speak of her as “God’s own daughter”. They lived together in Phefeni, Soweto, until she left for Norway to wed her old flame, Billy Modise, who in 1994 became democratic South Africa’s first ambassador to Canada and thereafter President Thabo Mbeki’s Chief of Protocol. After she parted from him and left the country for Norway, whenever Nat and I were at a party or shebeen, I used to amuse myself and tease him by saying to him he was behaving like a headless chicken, trying his luck without success by darting from one woman to another, seeing which one he could date or seduce to go home with him. But, at long last just before he left the country he had found a new love in Shiela Cingo. She left South Africa

for the USA shortly before he left and they were thus together in the USA. Why would he kill himself just when he was happily in love again?

Living under a repressive police state, being politically involved against it and being watched by the Special Branch, we had to at all times keep our guard against likely informers. We developed a nous to know who to trust and who not to trust. We developed an instinct to second-guess who we knew was the enemy. A calamity like happened to Nat was bound to send many amongst us searching for answers and speculating if this or that could be the cause of his death. For months, I tried to work out why. Only a month or two before he had sent me an aerogram very happy that he had secured enough newspaper commissions to financially see him through for the next twelve months. In an aside, he said the lot of black people in USA was not good. I regret not having kept the aerogram because it would have dispelled so much of what has been written about his death and the reasons given for his state of mind – depressed because he could not return to South Africa or impecunious, it was claimed.

So it is that I tried to figure out, not only then but in all the time since leading to my urge to write this article, what could have led Nat to end his life, never really believing that that is what he had done\*. There's just no one who loses a loved one through an unnatural cause and does not thereafter go through life without questioning how and why it happened. My speculation then was that if, a very big if, indeed it was suicide then he could only have done it because he had learnt that his journal and his fellowship had been sponsored somehow by the Central Intelligence Agency. His close ties with the two men at the US embassy came to mind. Those of us who unlike Nat were political activists and on the left simply did not trust the US embassy staff. Rightly or wrongly, we simply thought all of them were CIA. Our paranoia can be excused by the extreme state repression and police surveillance we experienced post-Sharpeville, seeing intelligence agents everywhere, even under our beds.

To discover that he was being bankrolled by the CIA and that he might have been seen as singing the tune of the donor is something Nat, the freethinker, or liberal as some of his compatriots described him, could never live with. That alone, I speculated would have been sufficient reason for Nat, the Nat I knew of lofty principles, to end his life. Besides, within the national liberation movements, ANC and PAC in exile at this time, he would have been treated with much suspicion, called a stooge and isolated. If it was perceived he was being funded by the CIA - that would have been as good as a death sentence in those days. I also believed that arriving in the USA, a country he so fervently believed to be open and free with equal rights for all its citizens, he was soon disillusioned when his eyes were opened by the Black Power struggles at their height in the 60s – a total collapse of his dream about which more later.

On the other hand, still in the realm of speculation on my part, if he had been assassinated was it because he was threatening to go public regarding the financial sponsorship of *The Classic*. Not such a far-fetched idea considering that this was a time before the revelations by *Ramparts* and the *New York Times* of the CIA's operations and when the CIA would not have tolerated any whistleblowing. Covert funding by the CIA had to be maintained as much of a secret as with their mind-control experiments.

Nat would not have minded open sponsorship directly by the American government. Afterall, his political sentiments were profoundly pro-American. In fact, he was soliciting funds from the US Embassy in Pretoria, most likely with the help of his two friends who were attached to the Embassy. "The American Embassy here", he wrote in a letter dated 5 August 1963 to Thompson, "is engaged in the business of acquiring or trying to acquire additional funds for us" (Wits University; Historical

Papers Research Archive). Funding coming from the CIA was a different matter: it was contaminated by being covert in the context of the Cold War.

### **Rumours and denials of CIA funding**

In his article, *Nakasa a Cold War Pawn*, Mlungisi Zondi makes a slip by including Nat among the editors of CCF-funded journals about their reactions to the revelations in the New York Times in 1967 of their covert funding by the CIA. It is that that Heather Acott seizes upon, calling it an anachronism, to dispute that Nat would have known of the revelations because he died in 1965 before the revelations were made in *Ramparts* or the *New York Times* (Acott; MA dissertation). What she overlooks is that rumours of covert CIA funding passing through the CCF and Farfield Foundation were rampant long before Nat's death. In the same article, Zondi, in a way correcting the slip he made, does say that on the night Nat died he had gone to the Farfield Foundation's director, John 'Jack' Thompson to ask him if the rumours were true. To ask if the rumours were true, it must be emphasised. "Absolute nonsense", this was said by Gordimer when Zondi interviewed her for the article (Zondi; *The Weekender*).

Gordimer's reaction, despite the lapse of forty years during which it was well known that Thompson and the Farfield Foundation were conduits for CIA funding, was not surprising to me. She would not even concede an iota of plausibility to the idea that Nat could have found out the source of his funding. She was a friend of Thompson (Zondi, *The Weekender*). It tentatively explained to me why she wanted nothing to do with me on my return to South Africa from exile. We had last met in London during the middle of 1966, the first time after Nat's death. Naturally, we talked about the death and I expressed my suspicions of CIA involvement. By this time, I had grown even more suspicious following the CIA's covert funding revelations in the *New York Times* earlier that year, during April (Saunders; 371). At a function at Kippie's jazz venue in 1996 to welcome the return from exile to South Africa of Zakes Mokae, the actor made famous acting abroad in Atholl Fugard's plays, I went up to her to say hello. When it appeared to me that she did not recognise me, after all it had been thirty years since we met, I told her who I was. "Who could ever forget a man with a name like yours?" she said and turned away from me. A friend – who I told I was going to say hello to Gordimer was intrigued that I could be a friend of so great a novelist - observing the encounter from some distance he said "Hm, she doesn't know you!". She clearly had gone off me. Why? I could only hazard guesses. Perhaps my writings in exile when I stood up for black consciousness (though never an adherent to what its proponents said was its philosophy, especially deeming no role for whites in its struggle) as an understandable response to racial domination. She would have supported the ANC rather than the Black Consciousness movement. It was a time when some people did not want to know you if you were not ANC. Chris Barron, paying tribute to her after she died in 2014, said: "She was so close to the ANC that, certainly until 1994, she was practically an embedded, or in-house, ANC novelist" (*Sunday Times*, July 20, 2014). She herself affirmed she was a member of the ANC, saying "I would call it a fundamental position" (Roberts; 162). Or, could it have been because of my speculation about the CIA and by implication Thompson that she was cross with me? But, of course, given Thompson's ostensibly left wing concerns about Vietnam and the condition of black people, it may have been that Gordimer understandably could not reconcile this with any views that implied he was a CIA official.

Frances Stonor Saunders in her *Who Paid The Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* cites a number of instances of the rumour. She refers to Paul Goodman who "had hinted explosively at the truth as early as 1962 when he wrote in *Dissent* that 'Cultural Freedom and the *Encounter* of ideas are instruments of the CIA'" (Saunders; 356). A leak occurred in August 1964 – about a month before Nat left South Africa - which revealed eight foundations as "'mail-drops', often consisting of nothing

more than an address, set up to receive CIA money which could be transferred elsewhere with apparent legitimacy. After money was transferred to the mail-drop, the 'second pass' or 'pass-through' would occur: the front foundation would make a 'contribution' to a prominent foundation widely known for its legitimate activities" (*ibid*; 354). The leak happened in the course of a Congressional investigation led by Congressman Wright Patman into the tax-exempt status of US foundations. These foundations came to be known as The Patman Eight and the revelations as the Patman Papers.

Already, as far back as 1961, Michael Josselson, recruited by the CIA – thus a salaried CIA officer – to found the CCF in 1950 and becoming its executive director, was concerned that the organisation's cover as a front for the CIA was insecure. He proposed a smokescreen of new foundations through which to pass money from the CIA to the CCF (*ibid*; 356). By 1963 the CCF's statements of receipts showed a brand new set of donors (*ibid*; 356). "As for the Fairfield Foundation", Saunders writes, "its credibility as an 'independent' foundation had become increasingly stretched. 'It was meant to be a cover, but actually it was transparent. We all laughed about it, and called it the 'Far-fetched Foundation' said Lawrence de Neufville. Everybody knew who was behind it. It was ridiculous'" (*ibid*; 356/7). De Neufville was in the CIA until the 1956 Hungarian Uprising brutally crushed by Stalin.

Another sarcastic comment pointing at how easy it was to tell the source of the funding: "Ironically, it was the sheer scale of the Fairfield Foundation's endowments which made it especially vulnerable to discovery. In the wake of the Patman revelations it wouldn't have taken a Conan Doyle to deduce who was the schemer behind the foundation" (*ibid*; 358). Significantly, these particular revelations were made about a month before Nat left South Africa.

Both John Kenneth Galbraith and Arthur Schlesinger admitted in May 1967 knowing of the CIA sponsorship of CCF as far back as 1960. "But, of course," in a parenthetic aside by Cauter, "those who swim in the Bay of Pigs must learn to hold their breath" (Cauter; 324).

"Who didn't know, I'd like to know? It was a pretty open secret", said Lawrence de Neufville of CIA funding (Saunders; 394). "Everyone in France, in my circle at least, knew the truth about who was behind the Congress", said Chantal Hunt, wife of John Hunt who was the executive director of the CCF, "They all talked about it. They would say, 'Why do you want to go and work there? It's CIA'" (*ibid*; 395). And none other than Nicolas Nabokov, secretary-general of the CCF from its foundation in 1951 till 1966, said "Many of us suspected some sort of funding of this kind and it was the 'talk of the town' in many capitals of Europe, Asia, Latin America and Africa" (*ibid*; 396).

The American Society of African Culture (AMSAC), launched in 1957, was the CIA's major front in the African-American population – "a CCF for black American anti-Communists" (Whitney; 123). Already at its inception, like the other fronts of the CIA, it "provoked abroad, a peculiar mixture of suspicion and opportunism" (Wilford; 206/7). And just like the other fronts it "denied all knowledge of secret government funding, posing as a victim of successful official deception" (*ibid*; 213). But in a memorandum, dated February 1967, following a disclosure in the *New York Times*, addressed to the Executive Council of AMSAC, Adelaide Cromwell-Hill wrote: "First of all, the possibility of CIA involvement is not new information to me. I remember the exact time and place almost eight years ago when such a possibility was first confided in me and by whom. Several years later further and more detailed confirmation was given me by another friend. Around the edges were frequent innuendos and asides. None of this was documented, understandably so" (*ibid*; 213).

Rumours there were but reputable newspapers, for the sake of maintaining their own reputation, do not rush into print at the slightest whiff of a rumour. Its veracity must first be investigated before



revelation to the public. Such investigations were ongoing long before *Ramparts* and the *New York Times* made the more comprehensive revelations in February 1967. Josselson was anticipating the revelations two years before they were made. "From late 1964", Saunders states that "Josselson tried frantically to steer the Congress for Cultural Freedom away from the pending revelations and the damage they would cause. He considered changing the name" (Saunders; 358).

*Encounter*, as previously mentioned, was a British cultural-political monthly journal which was held in high regard by intellectuals, particularly those of the non-communist left. It was published from 1953 to 1991. "If it is remembered nowadays, it is usually in connection with the revelation that, for its first decade or so of its existence, it had secretly been funded by the CIA (via the Congress for Cultural Freedom or CCF) and the British Foreign Office (via its covert propaganda unit, the International Research Department or IRD)" (Lewis; *Prospect*). Its founding editor in 1953, Stephen Spender, a British citizen, had the honour of being the first non-USA citizen to be appointed the USA's poet laureate. According to his biographer, during 1964 when he was in New York, "Spender was forever picking up worrying gossip at parties – particularly from the 'radicalised' NYRB [*New York Review of Books*] people. Jason Epstein (one of the magazine's co-founders) told him, frankly, 'Stephen, I think this whole [CCF] outfit is being run by the CIA, and you haven't been told and you should find out right now'" (Sutherland; 429). In the summer of 1965, that is mid-year in the northern hemisphere, Mark Kermode was invited to edit the magazine. But by this time Kermode already knew of the rumours. "Kermode, like everybody else," writes Saunders, "had heard the rumours linking *Encounter* to the CIA. Spender told him that he too had been disconcerted by such allegations but was satisfied that denials he had received from Josselson and the Farfield Foundation were proof to the contrary" (Saunders; 373). In an interview with Saunders in July 1994, Spender explained that "it was with people who come and tell you that your wife is unfaithful to you. Then you ask her yourself, and if she denies it, you are satisfied with it" (*ibid*; 425).

Both Spender and his co-editor Frank Kermode remained disturbed by the revelations. They had received repeated assurances of the magazine's independence from Josselson. What disturbed them more than the revelations was their reputation - they themselves had repeated the assurances they received from Josselson to others who had confronted them about the rumours so that now they will be seen as liars. "Worse, as having lied in the service of a Cold War ideology that, as the war in Vietnam rumbled disastrously onwards, seemed tarnished beyond repair" (Lewis; *Prospect*).

On May 8, 1967, the front page of the *New York Times* published an announcement by Spender in which he stated that "in view of the revelations that have been made and the allegations which may still be made about the past sources of *Encounter* funds, I feel that any editor who has knowingly or unknowingly been involved in receiving these should resign. I have done so" (Lewis; *Prospect*). Kermode and Spender resigned their co-editorship of *Encounter*.

Responding to the revelations of covert funding in his memoir *You Must Set Forth At Dawn* in 2006, Nobel literature laureate Wole Soyinka had this to say: "we would discover that we had been dining, and with relish, with the original of that serpentine incarnation the devil, romping in our postcolonial Garden of Eden and gorging on the fruits of the Tree of Knowledge! Nothing – virtually no project, no cultural initiative - was left unbrushed by the CIA's reptilian coils" (Adebajo, A; *Johannesburg Review of Books*).

There is thus ample demonstrable truth, as evidenced above, that there were rumours – not just rumours in the air but also articles in the media such as *Dissent* and reports in the Patman papers - of the CIA's covert funding through the CCF and Farfield Foundation long before Nat died. Evidence, too, by what some said of these rumours that they were the "talk of the town" or "party gossip".

Indeed, the rumours were flying! But every enquiry as to whether the CCF and Farfield Foundation were fronts of the CIA were met with strenuous denials. In a letter from John 'Jack' Thompson to Spender, dated 25 May 1964, he "dismissed as ridiculous the claim that the Farfield Foundation was a front for the American government" (Saunders; 377). Fortunately for him, he was not exposed as having lied when the revelations in the Patman papers made three months later did not include the Farfield Foundation amongst the foundations named as CIA fronts. As ex-CIA official Thomas W Braden later wrote: "Truth was reserved for the inside. To the outsider, CIA men learned to lie, to lie consciously without the slightest tinge of guilt that most men feel when they tell a deliberate lie" (*ibid*; 380). Braden resigned from the CIA in 1954 when he was head of the CIA's International Organisations Division.

All of these reactions show the feeling of outrage by not only Spender and Kermode but by many others when they learnt that they had unwittingly been supported by funding from the CIA. None expressed their outrage as strongly as Wole Soyinka in his little book *Trumpism in Academe*. They felt outrage only when the revelations of their funding were made. Nat – dying before the revelations - felt outrage on hearing the rumours. If he had only lived until the revelations he would have found strength and solidarity in not being alone outraged by having been unwittingly funded by the CIA. He would also have found out that he was not the only South African who unwittingly enjoyed patronage by the CIA. In addition to Ronald Segal and Randolph Vigne, already mentioned, there was also, significantly all of them black, Dennis Brutus (a poet and leading campaigner for a sports boycott of apartheid South Africa), Alex la Guma (novelist and a member of the South African Communist Party), Raymond Kunene (poet and ANC's chief representative in London during the 60s), Richard Rives, Mphahlele and Nkosi (Davis; 7 & 20). He, too, could have justifiably asserted the common refrain of all the CIA's beneficiaries, as Mphahlele did, the covert funding notwithstanding, that he enjoyed ample freedom to express his views.

### **Depression and disillusion**

On 1st July 2023, I texted Barbara Masekela. She and the famed duo, her brother Hugh and Mirriam Makeba, were all very good friends of Nat. In fact, Nat had undertaken to write a biography of Makeba. I told Barbara that I am trying to write a paper on the death of Nat and interrogate whether his death was by suicide or assassination. A few days later I had her response to my text:

"I am convinced he committed suicide," wrote Barbara. "The last time I saw him he was entering the subway on 125th Street." She wanted "to convince him not to give up his life" but she was in a hurry to get back to Englewood, N.J. "He had told me earlier on the phone that it was all finished and he was going to end his life. In retrospect, I realise that he was suffering from deep depression, unable to write a piece commissioned by the *New York Times*. He exhibited symptoms of one undergoing a nervous breakdown, unable to finish simple tasks like brushing his teeth and obsessed with the racial situation in the US, especially swept away by the influence of Malcolm X. My take on it is that he had belatedly an epiphany about the meaning of being black in the USA, which did not tally with the position of his personal experience in South Africa. It was the overwhelming culture shock of being a minority in a vast sea of whiteness. I would also look into the insanity of his own mother. It is not unlikely that he carried that image of his mother in the mental facility. I can never forget how he told me the story of his shock at how diminished she was in size. Her particular mental illness resulted in the dwarfing of the victim. He had not seen her in many years because she was taken away when he was a mere child. He had expected to see the grown woman he had known as a child and encountered an aged dwarf he did not recognise as his mother. She was also far gone in her illness and just stared at him unknowingly. The persistent question when he died was why, in his state of confusion and hopelessness, he had chosen to go to the apartment of the man who ran the Farfield

Foundation. To meet Peter Magubane? Why would he not come back with me to Mirriam's [Makeba's] house? Did he deliberately plan the scene of his death? Is it reasonable to think he was pushed? Would that not have been self-indictment by those who pushed him? Just a few thoughts."

Nat, under the emotional turmoil he was going through, may very well have said it was all finished with him and he is going to end his life. For me, what is lacking in this and for that matter in all other accounts is testimony of any person who actually observed him jumping to his death – if at all he did jump.

Gordimer wrote that "He was a very sensitive person, and the terrible thing is that nobody seemed to realise what was happening to him in New York. He was having a full-scale nervous breakdown, and it was just ignored or regarded as an amusing eccentricity. His death was a tragedy. But whether it had to do with the family history of mental instability – his mother has been in mental hospital virtually all his life – or whether it had to do with what the Americans call 'culture shock' we will never know" (Acott; 79). It is not clear whether these remarks by Gordimer are based on an actual face to face meeting by her with Nat in the days leading to Nat's death, or whether they are a mixture of hearsay and speculation.

Nat's death, Brown says, is "succinctly summed up in a letter to the editor of *Ilanga Lase Natal* from July 1965. 'I am angry with Nat', the letter opined. 'I want to say "Nat, you damn fool, why did you do it?" . . . . But . . . . it is our Government who made Nat homeless . . . . . and whatever other reasons there may have been for his death, the fact that he could no longer return to his own country was, I am certain, a contributory factor" (Brown; 168).

Finally, a word on Nat's death from Thompson himself, the CIA man in whose flat Nat dropped from the seventh storey to his death. In an interview with Brown for her biography of Nat and most likely in the statement made to the New York police on the morning Nat's body was discovered on the pavement below his flat, he claimed that on receiving a call from a mutual friend that Nat was "very disturbed and talking about suicide" (*ibid*; 156), he left immediately to fetch Nat and his friend to his home. "Nat told him he was terrified that he was 'doomed to be mentally ill' like his mother and didn't know if he could fight it. And more practically, he confessed he was in dire financial straits, jobless and nearly completely out of money. But after an hour or two of conversation, Jack remembered that Nat seemed calmer, more relaxed, and he offered to let him stay the night in his guest bedroom. Then exhausted by the evening's ordeal, Jack went off to bed himself.

"Suddenly a persistent pounding on his front door jarred him awake. When he opened it, a police officer was standing in the entrance. Nat's body was lying on the sidewalk, seven storeys down" (*ibid*; 156). The statement by Thompson, as all statements by CIA officials, would have been approved by the CIA or not in conflict with what the CIA itself would say to make sure they all sing from the same hymn sheet. Basically concurring with Thompson, as do all those who believe Nat committed suicide, the poet and activist Wally Serote wrote that "He let himself loose from the seventh floor of a building in New York, and died" (Patel; xxvii). But that's hearsay because Serote could not have seen it happen. He was not in Thompson's flat nor in America at the time of Nat's death in 1965. He only left South Africa sometime after he had been detained without trial for several months in 1969.

Such then has been the dominant narrative to explain the reasons for Nat's death: suicide; depression; nervous breakdown; 'culture shock'; home sickness; his mother's insanity; financial straits; and joblessness. "Without *Drum*, without Johannesburg, without apartheid to push back against, he became unmoored in the United States, disconnected even from himself" (Brown; 134).

All, as some are problems that came with exile, most probably very true though I reserve a question mark on suicide. But I also want to assert that exile was not the only cause, if true, of his depression. What is left out completely in these accounts is his disillusionment with the US. He arrived in America and discovered it was not like he had always believed it to be. It was not the America he so earnestly used to defend in shebeen discussions.

Allister Sparks, under whose editorship the *Rand Daily Mail* was when Nat contributed his weekly column, is one of two amongst the commentators on Nat's death who knocked the nail on the head. "He died of frustration and disillusionment because he didn't find freedom in the United States as he had expected". Frustration and disillusionment not so much the cause of his death, I'd put it, but rather of his depression. "He found racism instead, something he had thought was uniquely evil to South Africa . . . . Was is it disillusionment with the whole human race? Was it the unspeakable thought that racism was endemic everywhere and that he, the committed non-racialist, was somehow the odd one out, that broke his spirit and left him unable to cope with evil?" (Sparks; 260).

Kathleen Conwell was the other person who before the publication of Sparks' book recognised Nat's disillusionment with the US. In a letter she wrote as a tribute to Nat after his death she wrote that "Nat Nakasa came to America with a dream. All that he had learned about this country while in South Africa had given him the hope of freedom here. He knew about the problems of the American Negro, but what he had read and heard about made him believe that the American government was in all sincerity and honesty attempting to redress these grievances. He once said to me that when he came to America, for the first time in his life he could let himself dream things he had never even dared to think about while he was in South Africa. He said he was like a child when he first came here, full of excitement of being able to walk freely, stay out as late as he wanted – simple things that we take for granted were all adventures for him" (Patel; xxxiii).

Interestingly, it looks like on first arriving in New York and meeting some of his compatriots he continued extolling the virtues of America, like he used to do during our shebeen outings. Living in New York at the time was Keorapetse Kgositsile, democratic South Africa's first poet laureate till his death in 2008. Nat still believing America was not blighted by racism, at least not as bad as in South Africa, Kgositsile would tell him that "the US was just bigger and a bit more sophisticated than South Africa and, therefore, more dangerous." To this Nat's retort was that Kgositsile "had been misled by reading too much Richard Wright" (Massey; *New York Times*). Ironically, Wright had also been an unwitting beneficiary of CIA covert funding. He was funded by the CIA while being spied on by multiple agencies (Williams; 63). He wrote on the plight of the African-Americans subjected to racial discrimination. It is these writings Nat had in mind which, in his idealistic view of the US according to his remark to Kgositsile, he did not seem to take seriously.

"It didn't take long for Mr Nakasa's dream of freedom in America to be shattered by reality, especially during a reporting trip to Alabama for *Times Magazine*. 'There were moments when I wanted to bow to a tenant farmer in Alabama', he said, according to Ms Conwell, 'because I understood the miracle of his survival. They took away his identity and yet he survived'" (Massey; *New York Times*). The editor of *Times Magazine* returned his report on Alabama to him requesting him to make "major revisions, but he thought any change would diminish its honesty. It was never published" (*ibid*). That was Nat honest to a fault! His report must have been forthright about racial segregation in Alabama.

Masekela mentions a 'culture shock' Nat experienced when he got to the USA. This, according to her was the shock of finding himself as a black person being in the minority unlike in South Africa. Gordimer also mentions, as she put it, "what the Americans call 'culture shock'". She does not

explain what this means. But in either case it cannot be the disillusionment Sparks and Conwell are ascribing to Nat – his dream shattered by discovering that not all people in America were equal.

It must be said that Nat was not the only one at the time leaving South Africa and imagining that we were leaving racial discrimination behind. What surprised those of us who arrived for exile in Britain in the early 60s was to discover the existence of racialism though not as virulent as in South Africa. There was racial discrimination in jobs and housing for rental. It is in this sense, with which I fully agree, that Bunsee, who knew Nat well having worked with him as a journalist, wrote when Nat's remains were brought for reburial in South Africa in 2014: "When Nat Nakasa went to the US, he did experience a culture shock – he had not expected to see such racism in the US. Many of us who went abroad to European countries, with the idea of the great liberal traditions in those countries, were shocked at the racism in those countries" (Bunsee B; *Mail & Guardian* August 25, 2014). But coming from South Africa it was a hurdle we knew too well and, unlike Nat, we didn't have big dreams about the West or what the politically inclined ones amongst us in a simple way knew as imperialism.

### **Nat's reaction to the rumours**

In describing reactions to the revelations of CIA covert funding two words used with much frequency are witting and unwitting. What Nat would have found even more repugnant was to learn from the rumours that the Farfield Foundation was a front of the CIA and he had been an unwitting beneficiary of its largesse.

If Stalinism and the Soviet Union, which he abhorred, had its fellow-travellers thought by open-minded intellectuals to be gullible and duped, Nat must have been devastated to find out the USA, the country he so much venerated, engaged in similar practices. "Those fellow-travellers who have collaborated within communist front-organisations are often described as dupes or worse. We should pause to consider how often this is. And if it is indeed true, recent events have demonstrated clearly that such gullibility (or corruption of l'esprit) has by no means been confined to the friends of the Soviet Union. Consider the following quotation: 'Use legitimate existing organisation; disguise the extent of \_\_\_\_\_ interest; protect the integrity of the organisation not requiring it to support every aspect of official \_\_\_\_\_ policy.' Guess the word omitted on two occasions. 'Communist?' Wrong. The word is 'American', and the whole quotation belongs to Thomas W. Braden explaining in retrospect (*Saturday Evening Post*, 20 May 1967) how, under the patronage of Allen Dulles he arranged for CIA penetration" of several organisations he named, one of which was the CCF (Caute; 323-4). Braden, as previously mentioned, was a former CIA official. Here again he reflected with the knowledge of an insider albeit a former one. To Nat, a liberal, it must have been a devastating shock that the USA, the country of his dreams, engaged in similar subterfuge – "those who ceaselessly denounced Communist fronts willingly adopted their methods" (*ibid*; 325).

To realise that he had been duped, indeed used as a pawn in the Cold War, by Thompson and the Farfield Foundation is what must have agonised Nat to the point of an incurable depression. Just how would he be seen by our national liberation movements? A sell-out. A stooge. Crucially significant to note is that this was in 1965 two years before the revelations in the *New York Times* in 1967. Then it was not safe to expose what was a CIA secret. Had he come to know of the covert funding when the revelations were made he would have found strength in knowing that he was not alone having been unwittingly funded by the CIA. And, above all, for his own safety, it would not have been him making the exposure but the *New York Times*. He could also have justifiably made the same statement as other beneficiaries regarding their independence. Without exception, as observed earlier on Mphahlele, those amongst them who were publishers said that their editorial

policies were not directed by the CIA. That the publications may have been established independently of the CIA and pursued independent editorial policies is not to be disputed. What mattered to the CIA is that they were at least non-communist and the CIA provided them with financial support to secure their sustainability – a highly sophisticated strategy. And, again to quote Menand, as far as the CIA was concerned, “they [the editors] had been on board all along.”

In several accounts Nat is described as a liberal, a term used perjoratively within the national liberation movements without any justification in political theory. But Sparks and Gordimer have used the word in its best sense – an adherence to democracy and non-racialism - to refer to Nat. “He was a black liberal, committed to non-racialism at a time when the apartheid regime was cracking down hardest on black resistance and black people were responding in kind by identifying with the Black Consciousness movement which spurned collaboration with white liberals” (Sparks; 258).

The rise of black consciousness during the 70s would have presented Nat with a quandary as a journalist. Black journalists organised themselves into a blacks only trade union, first during the 70s the Union of Black Journalists and, after its banning, the Media Workers Association of South Africa (MWASA), in parallel to a hitherto whites only union, the National Union of Journalists which only about then was opening its membership to all journalists. MWASA was formed alongside other black consciousness-oriented organisations whose explicit policies excluded whites from membership. Leading them were the Azanian People’s Organisation and student formations like the South African Students Organisation formed in opposition to the multi-racial National Union of South African Students. Just what would Nat’s position have been when in 1980 Zwelakhe Sisulu announced that “we have a mandate to form a new black union – no whites allowed”? Only the Western Cape region dissented from this decision (Phahle; *Azania Worker*). The new union was MWASA and Sisulu its president. Nat, as I knew him, not a black nationalist, and as the liberal described by Sparks and Gordimer, would have been very uneasy about the racial split in the organisation of journalists. His own journal, *The Classic*, was not a “blacks-only” publication. On its board were Gordimer and Barney Simon who succeeded Nat as its editor when he left for the USA; he solicited and published contributions from whites: Ingrid Jonker’s iconic poem *Die Kind* (dedicated to the child who was shot dead by police in Nyanga during the PAC’s campaign against the passes in 1960), and Julian Beinart’s reviews on his innovative workshops to stimulate the emergence of an African modernism in art.

But in growing disillusioned with America it seems that he had a Damascus moment. Masekela mentioned his “obsession with Malcolm X” whom he had first met in Dar es Salaam. “[I]t didn’t take too long for the two men to hit it off” (Brown; 127). And there is his reported rant during a seminar at Harvard “about drinking blood and judging civilisation, that the white man could never truly understand the position of the black man” (*ibid*; 141). Gordimer recalls having “heard shortly before his death he made an impassioned anti-white speech before a Washington audience”, though, knowing Nat, she doesn’t “know whether the interpretation of his address is a true one” (Patel; xxvi). But all this behaviour on the part of Nat points to a disillusionment that was turning him into a black nationalist hitherto so uncharacteristic of him. As we would say in South Africa, he had become *gatvol* with America – literally meaning an arsehole full of shit or, rather politely, fed up to the teeth.

So much then about Nat’s disillusionment with the USA. The other factor underlying his depression already mentioned, but worth repeating, was the repugnance he must have felt on discovering the rumours – which were widespread, gossiped at cocktail parties – that the Farfield Foundation was a front for the CIA, that his so-called friend Thompson was a conduit of CIA funding for his journal *The Classic* and for his Nieman Fellowship. What point was there for him of being critical of the USSR when the CIA operated like the KGB? Or, for that matter, of apartheid when the CIA operated like BOSS?

“Could it be”, to reiterate Zondi, that Nat confronted Thompson about the rumours? Independently speculating on more or less the same question is Susan Williams. “The fact that he had spent the night in the apartment of a CIA official suggests that any sinister explanation for the death would point to the agency, but it is unclear why the CIA would wish him dead . . . . . One can speculate that Nakasa had discovered the source of his financial support and was planning to expose it” (Williams; 473). At this time, in 1965 before the revelations in the *New York Times* two years later, exposure of the truth about the CIA covert funding by a beneficiary would have been too explosive for the CIA to countenance. Put candidly, given the secrecy of the CIA’s “eyes-only” abusive operations, any exposure was at the risk of the whistleblower’s life. Knowing of the rumours and eminent revelations, Josselson, as already observed, proposed new fronts as cover-ups for the CIA.

### **The CIA’s Assassination Manual**

The CIA was a two-headed hydra so aptly described on the jacket sleeve of Whitney’s book: “*Finks* is a tale of two CIAs, and how they blurred the line between propaganda and literature. One CIA created literary magazines that promoted American and European writers and cultural freedom, while the other toppled governments, using assassinations and censorship as political tools” (Whitney; *Finks*). So far we have been looking at the cultural head: CCF and Fairfield Foundation. But now we turn attention to the other head.

Williams further writes that “The nature of Nakasa’s death recalls the method of killing advocated in the 1950s CIA manual” (Williams; 474). That is an assassination manual according to which:

“For secret assassination, either simple or chase, the contrived accident is the most effective technique. When successfully executed, it causes little excitement and is only casually investigated.

“The most efficient accident, in simple assassination, is a fall of 75 feet or more onto a hard surface. Elevator shafts, stairwells, unscreened windows and bridges will serve. Bridge falls into water are not reliable. In simple cases a private meeting with the subject may be arranged at a properly cased location. The act may be executed by the sudden, vigorous seizing of the ankles, tipping the subject over the edge. If the assassin immediately sets up an outcry, playing the ‘horried witness,’ no alibi or surreptitious withdrawal is necessary. In chase cases it will usually be necessary to stun or drug the subject before dropping him. Care is required to insure that no wound or condition not attributable to the fall is discernible after death.

“Falls into the sea or swiftly flowing rivers may suffice if the subject cannot swim. It will be more reliable if the assassin can arrange to attempt rescue, as he can thus be more sure of the subject’s death and at the same time establish a workable alibi” (Albarelli; 723).

The above excerpt is known as the manual’s defenestration section. It was decades later described by a Manhattan district attorney investigating the death of Frank Olson, about whom more later, as “A perfect recipe for murder under the right situation. Its tailor made for Olson’s fall” (*ibid*; 348).

The mere fact that an assassination manual had been devised means that assassinations were deliberate and planned.

As state assassinations would never be acknowledged, their execution required the tightest security. In 1975 President Gerald Ford established a presidential commission to investigate CIA abuses. Chaired by Vice-President Nelson Rockefeller, after whom it was named, “it was stacked with conservatives like former California governor Ronald Reagan. Rosenthal asked Ford why he had chosen ‘such an obviously loaded commission.’ Ford replied that he had chosen people whom he could trust to keep secrets that deserved to remain secret.

“Like what?’ Rosenthal asked.

“Like assassinations’, Ford blurted out” (Risen; 195-6).

Ford had invited Abe Rosenthal, editor of the *New York Times*, together with editors of other top newspapers to talk about the fall-out from investigative journalist Seymour Hersch’s domestic-spying story. Hersch was a reporter for the *New York Times*. He had a reputation for scoops on big stories one of which was the illegal spying activities of the CIA (*ibid*; 159).

A further indication of the extent to which assassinations were kept clandestine relates to the executive director of the Rockefeller Commission, David Belin. He and Fritz Schwarz, counsel to the Church Committee which reviewed files of the Rockefeller Commission on CIA abuses, wanted the CIA’s assassinations to be the first subject of their investigation for the Rockefeller Commission. Belin wrote the chapter on the assassinations of foreign leaders. But Dick Cheney, White House Chief of Staff at the time, and Henry Kissinger, Secretary of State, blocked publication of the chapter (*ibid*; 199). “The Rockefeller Commission was deeply flawed and suppressed many of its most explosive findings; under pressure from the White House, it eliminated the chapter on the CIA’s assassination plots from its final report, and then kept its findings on the NSA [National Security Agency] secret” (*ibid*; 289). So assassinations were sanctioned by or known of at the highest level of the American Administration. They are not the figment of imagination or conspiracy theories as some would dismiss them.

“But the Commission’s final report still had some surprisingly strong elements . . . . . the Rockefeller’s biggest revelation was the existence of the CIA mind-control program” (*ibid*; 289).

### **Mind-control and biological warfare experiments**

The CIA began researching the use of drugs and hypnosis to control human behaviour in 1947. The research received greater stimulus following the trial of Josef Cardinal Mindszenty in 1949 in Hungary then a member of the Soviet block. This derived from Mindszenty being made to confessing to crimes of treason which he had not committed. “His performance recalled the Moscow purge trials of 1937 and 1938 at which tough and dedicated party apparatchiks had meekly pleaded guilty to long series of improbable offences. These and a string of postwar trials in other Eastern European countries seemed staged, eerie, and unreal. CIA men felt they had to know how Communists had rendered the defendants zombielike” (Marks; 23). Speculation by the CIA was that hypnosis had been used to control him. And so this lent a greater drive to the CIA to research the effects of hypnosis so they too can use it in interrogating double or enemy agents.

Documentation by the CIA stressed that the research aimed at “controlling an individual to the point where he will do our bidding against his will and even against such fundamental laws of nature as self-preservation” (*ibid*; 25). The research was code-named BLUEBIRD undergoing name changes as it grew wider: ARTICHOKE and lastly MK-ULTRA. The behavioural research was mostly done by the Technical Services Staff (TSS), a division of the CIA which employed many PhDs in the sciences who had experience serving in the army (*ibid*; 32).

The CIA developed or experimented with drugs that would make a person confess during interrogation. Experiments with the drugs were conducted on unwitting subjects. Procedures employed included brainwashing, mind-control and psychological torture. LSD seems to be the drug mostly used in the experiments.

LSD was first exported to the USA in 1949. Some universities received covert CIA funding to research the effects of LSD. “Academic researchers would study it in search of knowledge that would benefit



mankind. Intelligence agencies, particularly the CIA, would subsidise and shape the form of much of this research work to learn how the drug could be used to break the will of enemy agents, unlock secrets in the minds of trained spies, and otherwise manipulate human behaviour” (*ibid*; 58). It fell to the TSS “to find a truth drug or hypnotic method that would aid in interrogation. Concurrently, the Technical Services Staff (TSS) was investigating in much greater depth the whole area of applying chemical and biological warfare (CBW) to covert operations” (*ibid*; 59).

Without their knowledge or consent, or to use the oft-repeated word in all accounts exposing what transpired, unwittingly, subjects would be administered doses of the LSD drug. Other procedures, among too many to mention, employed to manipulate the minds of subjects included hypnosis and electric shocks, verbal and sexual abuse. Heading the MK-ULTRA project was Dr Sidney Gottlieb – “the man responsible for some of the worst abuses ever committed by the CIA”, and who “travelled to Congo to deliver the toxin intended to be used to assassinate Patrice Lumumba” (Resin; 284). He also prepared a toxin to poison Fidel Castro. He led the CIA’s mind-control experiments with drugs. “He became obsessed with the supposed mind-control potential of one drug – LSD” and, in utter disregard of medical ethics, “began to test LSD on unwitting subjects, pursuing his fantasy that LSD would allow him to unlock and control minds” (*ibid*; 285). All MK-ULTRA files were destroyed in 1973 by him on the instructions of CIA director Richard Helms in order to leave no evidence not only of the experiments but also of persons who died in the course of being subjected to the experiments. So the names of his subjects are lost to history except for the scientist Frank Olson.

Clearly, the research raised moral and ethical questions. “It would be unfair to say that all moral awareness evaporated. Officials agonised over the consequences of their act, and much of the bureaucratic record of behaviour control is the history of officials dealing with moral conflicts as they arose” (Marks; 33). One such official was Dr Frank Olson.

“Frank Olson knew many of the secrets of the overlapping Army and CIA drug programs; he had attended sessions at the CIA black sites where people were fed drugs or tortured to death. But there are indications he was turning against the abusive nature of the drug programs; in 1953, citing stress, he stepped down as acting chief of the Special Operations Division, a joint Army-CIA drug unit at Camp Detrick in Frederick, Maryland” (Risen; 287).

### **The case of Frank Olson**

Williams has drawn attention to circumstances of other deaths very much like Nat’s. One of the deaths she mentions is of Olson. “There are similarities between the tragic deaths of Frank Olson, of Abraham Feller, the chief legal counsel of the UN, in 1952, and of Nat Nakasa: all three men were described as depressed; and all three fell from balconies of New York high-rises” (Williams; 474). Yet further similarities I would like to note is that in the case of Nat and Olson, their deaths took place at the dead of night; and both were in the “care” of CIA officials at the time of their deaths, Nat in Thompson’s flat and Olson sharing a hotel room with Gottlieb’s deputy, Robert Lashbrook.

Olson’s case is the one that has had the most intensive investigation and written about in several books. It is also featured in a documentary, *Wormwood* (2017), made by Netflix. Because of the secrecy that shrouded the circumstances of his death, it took nearly five decades to arrive at what had actually happened to him, each stage of the investigation driven at the instigation of his sons, Eric and Nils, who never believed that their father had taken his own life, and the discoveries of what had happened to him in the week before his death being made by a matter of sheer chance.

Dr Frank Olson was a CIA-cleared biological weapons researcher employed as a civilian of the United States army and based at the secret Biological Warfare Laboratories at Camp Detrick in Maryland.

His specific area of interest was airborne delivery of lethal micro-organisms and the development of aerosols for their delivery. The project was “top-secret, eyes-only” headed by Gottlieb and in collaboration with the CIA.

Olson was disturbed by his research and experiments which involved applying gas and poison to laboratory animals. “He’d come to work in the morning and see piles of dead monkeys”, his son Eric said. “Olson witnessed horrific brutal interrogations on a regular basis. Detainees who were deemed ‘expendable’, suspected spies or ‘moles’, security leaks, etc., were literally interrogated to death in experimental methods combining drugs, hypnosis, and torture to attempt to master brainwashing techniques and memory erasing” (Kinzer; 112). All of this he found disturbing. He said it aggravated his ulcers and talked of quitting his job.

On November 18 1953, at the invitation of Gottlieb, CIA and army scientists involved in the mind-control experiments, Olson amongst them, gathered at Deep Creek Lake for a two day retreat, what we South Africans understand as an *imbizo* or *bosberaad*. Such a get-together was frequently arranged for them in order to assess progress on their researches and plan ahead.

On the second evening, Lashbrook treated the scientists to Cointreau. Twenty minutes later Gottlieb told them that their drink was spiked with LSD. “This news was not well received. Even in their altered state, the unwitting subjects, now witting, could understand what had happened to them. Olson was especially upset” (*ibid*; 114).

The *imbizo* came to an end the following morning when the scientists then repaired back to their homes. “Olson headed back to [his home in] Frederick. By the time he arrived, he was a changed man” (*ibid*; 114).

On his return from the *imbizo*, Alice, his wife, “sensed something was wrong the moment he walked in the door. There was a stiffness in the way he kissed her hello and held her. Like he was doing something mechanical, devoid of any meaning or affection. His eyes betrayed him right away. It was as if he wasn’t focused on anything, like something more important had hold over him. At the dinner table that evening Frank didn’t have a word to say. She asked him how things had gone with his trip and he mumbled, ‘fine’” (Albarelli; 31).

Hardly communicating at all, when his wife asked what is wrong, all he said is “I’ve made a terrible mistake”, and then told her he was going to resign his job. He didn’t explain what it was all about (*ibid*; 31).

Two days later he told his wife that at work they think it was best for him to be seen by a psychiatrist. Neither he nor Alice understood why.

More than four days after he and others had had their drink laced with LSD without their knowledge, Olson turned up at work feeling not in a good condition. Nor did his immediate boss, Vincent Ruwet, who described his experience of LSD as the “most frightening he’d ever had” (Kinzer; 115). According to Ruwet, Olson’s condition had become worse by the next day. Olson, he said, was “disoriented”, felt “all mixed up” and said he had “done something wrong” (*ibid*; 115). He had asked to be sacked or if he should resign his job.

The work that Olson and others had been involved in under the MK-ULTRA project “was one of the government’s deepest secrets, guarded by security that was, as Olson had been told when he joined the Special Operations Division (SOD), ‘tighter than tight’. The SOD “was the rigidly compartmentalised group dedicated to offensive biological warfare projects for paramilitary and covert operations” (Albarelli; 101). “Barely two dozen men knew its true nature. Nine had been at

Deep Creek Lake. Several of them were surreptitiously dosed with LSD. Now one of them seemed out of control. This was no light matter for men who believed that the success or failure of MK-ULTRA might determine the fate of the United States and all humanity” (Kinzer; 115-6).

Olson had been in his job for ten years. He knew most if not all of the SOD’s secrets. “The prospect that he might reveal any of what he had seen or done was terrifying” (*ibid*; 116).

Some of the research which disturbed Olson was directed by William Sargent, a psychiatrist at Britain’s top-secret Microbiological Research Establishment at Porton Down in the UK. Following their second meeting, during early 1953, Sargent wrote a report. He stated that Olson was “deeply disturbed over what he had seen in CIA safe houses in Germany” and “displayed symptoms of not wanting to keep secret what he had witnessed” (*ibid*; 117). Sargent presented his report to his British principals knowing that they would forward it to the CIA as “we and the Americans were joined at the hip in such matters. There were common interests to protect” (*ibid*; 117).

Years later Olson’s friend Norman Cournoyer recalled that after Olson returned from the *imbizo* at Deep Creek Lake, “he was troubled. He said, ‘Norm, you would be stunned by the techniques that they used. They made people talk. They brainwashed people. They used all kinds of drugs. They used all kinds of torture. They were using Nazis, they were using prisoners, they were using Russians – and they didn’t care whether they got out of that or not” (*ibid*; 117). Olson told him he is going to leave the CIA. “I am getting out of that. Period”, he said (*ibid*; 117).

When five days after having been given LSD, Olson still was “disorientated”, Gottlieb advised he sees a psychiatrist, so his family was informed. Told he was being referred to a psychiatrist in New York, why New York Alice wanted to know. They lived in Frederick, Maryland, fifty-five miles north west of Washington DC. Accompanied by CIA officials, Ruwet and Lashbrook, he was flown to New York to be seen by Dr Harold Abramson. However, “Abramson was not a psychiatrist, but he was an MK-ULTRA initiate” (*ibid*; 118). “Abramson had no formal training in psychiatry and did not hold himself out to be a psychiatrist. He was an allergist and immunologist interested in treating the problems of the mind” (Marks; 86). In another confirmatory view: “Abramson was not a psychiatrist; he could offer no real treatment for Olson. Instead, he was Sidney Gottlieb’s medical fixer” (Risen; 288).

Gottlieb saw Olson on Thanksgiving Day – a week since the ingestion of LSD. He reported that Olson appeared to be “very mentally disturbed . . . . . his thoughts were confused. He again talked about his incompetence in his work, the hopelessness of anybody helping him, and the fact that the best thing to do was to abandon him and not bother about him” (Kinzer; 120). To Ruwet he said, “Just let me go. Let me go off by myself” (Kinzer; 120).

The CIA to abandon him? The CIA to let him just go? Kinzer rebuts this: “Given what Olson knew, and his state of mind, that was impossible” (*ibid*; 120).

The day after Thanksgiving, on 27 November 1953, after a session with Abramson, Lashbrook and Olson checked in at the Statler Hotel in Manhattan. They booked into the same room: Room No 1018A on the tenth floor. Then at about 2.30am, Olson’s body was lying on the sidewalk below Room 1018A. Dead.

All week before his death he acted strangely: not elucidating the “terrible mistake” he said he had made, not eating, afraid to eat in a restaurant, afraid he was going to be poisoned, afraid “they” were after him and going to kill him. Could it be that with his experience in the CIA he knew what his fate would be now he was talking or made to talk after being drugged with LSD. Was the talking “the terrible mistake” he made, talking about the unease he felt at the experiments he was involved in

and talking about quitting his job? Or, was the “terrible mistake” that his tongue had been loosened, thanks to LSD, to confess to some security violations?

### **Some odd behaviour in Room 1018A**

Arnold Pastore was the night manager at Statler Hotel on the night Olson died. A doorman who saw Olson dropping to the sidewalk alerted Pastore who then went out to see. The doorman “has long since disappeared” (Albarelli; 17). Two policemen and passers-by had gathered at the scene. Olson tried to tell him something but was in too much pain to speak. He stayed by the side of Olson until his last breath. Immediately thereafter, he went back inside the hotel. He wanted to know from the hotel’s receptionist if anyone inside the hotel had called to report “a jumper”. No one had called, he was told (*ibid*; 19).

He went back to the street and from across the street he looked up the hotel building. He wanted to spot an open window, if any, above where Olson’s body was lying. There was none. Noticing a window’s shade blown by the breeze he worked out it was Room 1018A. He and the two policemen and the hotel’s security official all went up to the room. Before entering the room, one of the policemen asked if the other person who had checked in the room with Olson, that is Lashbrook, had called the front desk. “No”, Pastore answered, “there were no calls to the desk” (*ibid*; 20).

Inside the room they found Lashbrook sitting on the toilet bowl, the oddest sight Pastore recalled on being interviewed forty-five years later. Asked what happened, Lashbrook said, “I woke up when I heard a sound. I’m not sure what happened” (*ibid*; 21). Looking around the room, Pastor noticed that “The window was smashed out completely. I mean it was gone. There were just a few small slivers of glass left sticking out of the frame. I didn’t see any glass on the radiator beneath the window, or on the carpeted floor or the windowsill” (*ibid*; 21).

Expressing astonishment at Lashbrook for not going out to see what had happened to Olson, the man with whom he was sharing a room, Pastore said he had never in all his working life, three decades in Manhattan’s skyscraper hotels, come across “a case where someone got up in the middle of the night, ran across a dark room in his underwear, avoiding two beds, and dove through a closed window with the shade and curtains drawn. I mean, how the hell do you do that? Christ, even when they tossed Kid Twist out of the window, they opened the damn thing first” (*ibid*; 21).

Later that night, both Pastore and the policemen likened Olson’s death to that of Laurence Duggan in 1948. Duggan had been subjected to intense investigation by the FBI about secret contacts he maintained and secret communications he conducted with Soviet intelligence agents. He was a former chief of the Latin American Division in the State Department in Washington from 1933 to 1944, and thereafter a diplomatic adviser to the UN Relief & Rehabilitation Administration. He fell to his death from a sixteenth floor window of a Manhattan building. “They ruled Duggan’s death a suicide, too”, said Pastore, “even though he had an overcoat and one galosh on when he fell. I mean, who takes off a galosh and then decides to jump out the window?” (*ibid*; 23).

On the way down after leaving Room 1018A, Pastore decided to check with the hotel’s telephone operator about what calls were made from the room after about the time Olson’s body was seen tumbling down by the doorman. In those days, Pastore remarked, telephone calls from a hotel room were made via a switchboard operator. One call was made, he was told. The call was to Dr Harold Abramson. Because of the time it took for calls to go through, the operator, perhaps checking that the call had gone through, caught the conversation on the call. “She told me that when a man answered, the caller said, ‘Well, he’s gone’, and then the man said, ‘Well, that’s too bad.’ That was it, nothing else was said. Then the guy hung up” (*ibid*; 24).

Significantly, the CIA did not allow an autopsy to be performed before the burial of Olson; nor did it allow the family to see the father's body before the funeral. "At the funeral the casket was closed, because [Alice] had been told that [Olson's body] was so maimed that the [family] would not want to see it" (*ibid*; 600). Reading this reminded me of my friend Suliman 'Babla' Saloojee. Detained under apartheid's 90-day detention law, he too was said by the Special Branch to have committed suicide but it was they who threw him out of the window of the interrogation room on the seventh floor of Gray's Building, their headquarters in Johannesburg, in 1964. Taking advantage that Babla would be buried under Muslim rites, that is before sunset on the same day he died, the Special Branch refused to release his body until the very last minute. But Muslims don't inter their dead in a casket. The family and friends had an opportunity to see his body before burial. Evidence of extreme torture were all over his face bruised beyond recognition from the beating\*\*. Babla was not the only one to be thrown from high out of a window or pushed down a stairwell while under police detention in South Africa – clearly, a copycat of the CIA's assassination manual.

### **Twenty-two years later**

Just how tightly the CIA kept the lid on its secrets is shown by the decades it took for Olson's family to discover what had happened to him. The family, particularly the sons, Eric the eldest aged nine at the time of his death, never believed that their father had committed suicide. Nor did the family know to what he had been subjected to at the Deep Creek Lake retreat.

"Suicide Revealed", that was the headline to a report in the *Washington Post* of June 11, 1975. Eric's brother-in-law, Greg Hayward, called him to get the paper. "It's about your father", he told him. "A civilian employee of the Department of the Army unwittingly took LSD as part of a Central Intelligence Agency test, then jumped 10 floors to his death less than a week later" (*ibid*; 478), was the opening sentence of the report. The Rockefeller Commission's report had been handed to President Gerald Ford the day before, and it was on its findings that the report in the newspaper was based.

No name was mentioned in the report. But Eric worked it out. "At long last, after all this time, some sort of news", he said. "This is my father they are writing about. This 'civilian employee' drugged by the CIA with LSD, this man who fell from ten floors up, this must be my father" (*ibid*; 478). Thus, it was by sheer accident that the family learnt of the circumstances leading to that fateful night of Olson's death.

Twenty-two years after Olson had died only then did the family learn he had been dosed with LSD. Angry at Vincent Ruwet, not only a family friend but a CIA colleague who was instructed to inform Alice that her husband was dead, that for over twenty years he knew but said nothing. "I was under orders of the strictest secrecy", responded Ruwet (*ibid*; 480).

That, of course, was in compliance with an oath of secrecy sworn to by every CIA official, many of them doing so in the genuine belief that it was their patriotic duty during the Cold War to ward off what they perceived as a communist threat. When interviewed about Olson's death or any matter about the CIA, either they did not remember or divulged nothing unless assured of the strictest anonymity or simply lied. If they made any statements for public consumption they were statements officially sanctioned by the CIA to make sure they all sang from the same hymn sheet.

But public outrage at knowing what the Olson family had gone through led President Ford to invite the family to the White House and make an apology (Risen; 290). He recommended an amount of \$1.25 million as payment in compensation to them. But after passing a special bill Congress reduced the amount to \$750 000 (*ibid*; 295).

It was to be yet another twenty years before the family learnt more of the circumstances of Olson's death.

### **Forty-two years later**

Learning that their father had been drugged with LSD the week before his death did not, as far as his sons were concerned, resolve the question of what caused his death or how he died. They still did not accept their father had committed suicide. "For a brief moment in 1975", Eric said in his testimony before a House of Representatives Committee in 1994, "I thought the lights had been turned on again. Unfortunately, the feeling of illumination did not endure. In the years after 1975, my brother and I became increasingly convinced that we still did not know the truth about what happened to my father" (Albarelli; 600).

"Over the past two decades," Eric went on to say, "my brother and I have become increasingly convinced that, in fact, my father was murdered" (*ibid*; 600).

Olson's wife, Alice, died on 19 August 1993. During her lifetime she showed no interest in having Olson's remains exhumed for an autopsy to be performed. Nor would she have agreed to one. Now she was deceased, Eric and his brother Nils had the body exhumed in June 1994. "I thought the opportunity had arrived to put all my questions, suspicions, and doubts to the test and possibly rest" (*ibid*; 606).

The brothers consulted James E Starrs, a professor of Law and Forensic Science at George Washington University. They asked Starrs to undertake a scientific examination of their father's remains ostensibly to find out what caused his death. Starrs was the foremost expert in forensic science and had carried out investigations into some of America's most notorious cases.

When they saw the body, Eric in his testimony stated that the body was "remarkably intact" and that in "its mummified state" the reason the CIA had refused the family to see the body before burial, that they would be distressed by its state, was not true (*ibid*; 600). The body's undecomposed state was due to embalment. "The remains are in exceedingly fine condition and that's attributable to the embalming done in New York and to the container", Starrs told the *Los Angeles Times* (June 3, 1994). "We have remains in mummified condition. We even have an opportunity to get fingerprints."

Starrs put together a formidable team of experts: "'qualified and eminent specialists' in the multiple scientific disciplines required to perform a comprehensive forensic investigation." That is what he said in an interview in 2002 though in 1994 when he tried to assemble such a team with experts he had worked with before, "they all said no because the CIA was involved" (*ibid*; 608).

The team went on a site inspection of Room 1018A at Statler's Hotel. They focused primarily on the room's window, the widow through which though closed and its shade and curtain drawn, Olson was alleged to have ran into to plunge to his death on a sidewalk ten floors below. "Of perplexing interest to the team was that the autopsy . . . . . found no lacerations at all on the body's mid-section and legs, except for wounds caused by multiple, compound fractures produced in the fall" (*ibid*; 611).

Regarding the absence of lacerations, Starrs noted that this was significant. He was "commenting on the way Dr Olson exited through the window. Certainly, exiting through an open window would be one feasible explanation for the lack of lacerations. And that can be said with assurance without even testing the hypothesis. If, on the other hand, the window was closed when Dr Olson crashed through it, it is reasonable to hypothesize that the glass would have cut his skin at some place or

other. But if the glass were separated from Olson's body by the drawn shade, then it can be reasoned that the buffering by the shade blocked the glass from piercing Dr Olson's skin. The lack of cuts on the front of the lower extremities from dragging across glass shards on the bottom edge of the window is nevertheless quite inexplicable" (*ibid*; 612).

Pastore, the former night manager at Statler's Hotel, was present during the site inspection by Starrs' team. Asked if he thought Olson had jumped, he said "No, I never thought even for a minute that he had jumped. I think he had a lot of help going through the window, if you know what I mean." Reiterating what he said on the night Olson died, "I worked for over thirty years in the business and never once heard of anyone else jumping through a closed window" (*ibid*; 616).

Starrs' conclusion: "The confluence of scientific fact and investigative fact points unerringly to the death of Frank Olson as being a homicide, deft, deliberate and diabolical" (*ibid*; 623). A most definitive discovery and finding coming forty-two years after Olson's death, thanks to the persistence of his sons who never in the first instance believed that he had committed suicide.

Still the CIA stuck to its spin on what happened to Olson. "The role of CIA employees in the events leading to his death was extensively investigated in the 1970s. The facts were made public at the time. President Gerald R Ford made a formal apology on behalf of the federal government and a monetary settlement was awarded to the Olson family. The investigations indicated no reason whatsoever to suspect that homicide was involved" (*Los Angeles Times*, June 3, 1994).

Starrs, together with Dr Katherine Ramsland, "a highly respected forensic scientist and writer", co-authored a book, *A Voice For The Dead*. The book includes a chapter on Olson. According to Albarelli, "the chapter contains many unsubstantiated claims and factual errors that serve to cloud Starrs' findings and in some ways his credibility." But Albarelli seems not to be challenging the findings (Albarelli; 623).

### **Frank Olson: Pushed**

Forty-eight years later, the truth of what really happened to Frank Olson finally emerged.

Based on Starrs' findings, in May 1995, Eric supported by his attorney submitted a memorandum to New York District Attorney, Robert Morgenthau, in which he pointed to a need for a criminal investigation into his father's death. Almost a year later in April 1996, Morgenthau decided to open an investigation and passed on the case to be handled by his assistant District Attorneys Steve Saracco and Daniel Bibb.

On perusing the CIA file on the death of Olson and observing that Olson jumped through a closed and shaded window, Saracco remarked that he had never had a report of a death resulting from jumping through a closed window. The case, he said, was "out of the ordinary and outlandish" (*ibid*; 628).

A breakthrough in Saracco's and Bibb's investigation came in 2001. Two former CIA sources whose identities remained secret provided information that Olson was indeed murdered. They disclosed that when Olson was given a spiked drink at Deep Creek Lake, it was not to test its effects – these were already well-known. It was to make him talk – the "terrible mistake" he made but was too distressed to elaborate.

Gottlieb had explained that adding Meretrician to LSD was to "loosen tongues and persuade subjects to speak freely about matters they otherwise wouldn't share" (*ibid*; 686). Olson was suspected of a security transgression talking to "the wrong people". "The CIA and Army, deeply concerned about

his security violations, wanted to know the full extent of his indiscretions. Frank Olson had been given the drug at Deep Creek Lake to ‘enhance’ his interrogation” (*ibid*; 687).

Saracco and Bibb received a letter from the two former CIA sources in which the killers of Olson were named: Pierre Lafitte and Francois Spirito. Lafitte was a Federal Bureau of Narcotics and a CIA “special employee” assigned to Statler Hotel; and Spirito was a heroin trafficker, suddenly released from prison the previous week (*ibid*; 689). Whether Spirito was Mafia or not is not known. But the CIA did engage the Mafia in its assassination plots. It “even forged an alliance with the Mafia to assassinate [Fidel] Castro” (Marks; 204. Risen; 203).

On the day before he died Olson was again taken to be seen by Dr Abramson. He recommended that Olson be taken for confinement at the Chestnut Lodge Insane Asylum in Maryland for “intensive treatment” which according to the informants meant “rounds of shock treatment and chemical therapy. Nobody wanted to take any chances with him [Olson] coming out and continuing to be indiscreet” (Albarelli; 692). Lafitte was instructed to keep an eye on Olson. “It only made sense; Lafitte was still working undercover jobs at the Statler. Everyone knew him there, by a different name, of course, but he could roam the place at will with no problems” (*ibid*; 692).

During Olson’s last night at the Statler Hotel in New York, the informants told Saracco and Bibb that Lashbrook grew concerned that “Olson was once again becoming unhinged” (*ibid*; 692). A decision was then taken to immediately take Olson to Chestnut Lodge. But, according to the two informants, “when a late night attempt was made to remove a subdued Olson from the room to transport him by automobile to Maryland things went drastically wrong. The short and entire explanation is that [Olson] resisted and in the ensuing struggle he was pitched through the closed widow” (*ibid*; 693).

Pitched? “It may not be the correct word” said one of the informants, “but it will have to suffice. Anyone can imagine that in such a situation things can become confusing”, suggesting that the intention was first to take him to Chestnut Lodge before deciding what to do with him (*ibid*; 693).

Asked how Lafitte and Spirito got into the room shared by Olson and Lashbrook, Norman Covert, Fort Detrick’s public relations officer and historian, said they came in “Through the adjoining room door. Lafitte worked at the hotel and had ready access. It could not have been easier” (*ibid*; 694).

### **Concurring views**

Just to show that there are many who, like me, question that Nat died as a result of suicide and all the reasons given for the suicide, and somewhat agree with the views I have expessed, I quote at length below from an article by Mahala.

“When he [Nat] later realised that America was not anywhere close to becoming the utopian society he had envisioned, he was so devastated that he became rebellious and extremely radical.

“This emotional breakdown is believed to be one of the major factors that led to Nakasa’s ultimate demise.

“Nakasa’s death was presumed to be suicide but over the years, there have been a number of revelations that raise different possibilities about his death. The two leading theories are that he simply jumped.

“The other is that Nakasa was actually pushed, and in this regard, fingers point at Thompson.

“Nakasa was oblivious of the fact that the Farfield Foundation was a conduit of the CIA.



“This substantiates the theory that he may have caught the wind of the CIA involvement and started asking questions, which led to him being pushed out of the window.

“Thompson may not have physically pushed Nakasa through that window, but his association with the CIA raises questions about the authenticity of this friendship.

“The mere realisation that Nakasa was unwittingly associated with the CIA for five years could have driven him to emotional turmoil of extreme proportions” (Mahala; *The Sunday Independent* June 22, 2014).

Thompson, Mahala observes, “may not have physically pushed Nat through that window”. This is very plausible. It is simply not in the nature of a person of Thompson’s standing – a man of letters – to carry out such a dastardly act. And as a matter of fact he did have compassion for fellow human beings. But, as in Olson’s case, could there have been a CIA contracted hitman in Thompson’s apartment the night Nat died?

Thanks to Olson’s sons, the circumstances of his death did not escape scrutiny. They simply did not believe he had committed suicide and, in the end, after more than four decades they were vindicated. Nat’s family also did not believe he had committed suicide. He was supporting his father and siblings financially (Brown; 167). It was very common in those days for older sons, once in employment, to support their parents and younger siblings because of the pittance in wages paid to black employees and there being no state pensions for the aged. How could he, they must have asked themselves, leave them without such support by committing suicide? One person who came out of South Africa, attended Nat’s funeral in New York and could have pursued an investigation of his death is his brother, Moses. But, shortly after Nat’s death he mysteriously disappeared without trace to this day (*ibid*; 3) and his family have not seen him since (*ibid*; 159). His disappearance is as ominous as that of the doorman who saw Olson come tumbling down from the high rise.

But scrutiny of what led to his death has been sidelined by a narrative of suicide whose origin is none other than the CIA speaking through its official, Thompson. No one else but Thompson and Nat, so it appears, were allegedly present in the apartment: they went to sleep and “suddenly a persistent pounding on his front door jarred him awake” (*ibid*; 156). That was the story, too, in Olson’s case: only he and Lashbrook, CIA official, were in Room 1018A at Statler Hotel, and Lashbrook said he was awoken by a knock at the door.

Also common to the narratives of the deaths is that both Olson and Nat were said to be undergoing a deep-seated depression. “The combination of depression and suicide is often the easy way out in cases of mysterious deaths” (Mahala; *Sunday Times* February 12, 2022). In the case of Olson his family did not believe it was depression as neither he nor his wife could understand why he must be seen by a psychiatrist, who turned out not to be one but a CIA fixer. In both cases, the underlying cause of the depression, if at all it is that, is completely unaddressed: Olson disturbed by the experiments on mind control and Nat disillusioned that America was not what he had idealised and betrayed by being an unwitting recipient of laundered CIA funding.

### **Tell one lie and the rest of the truth is in question**

In the letter Thompson wrote to spender, he dismissed as “ridiculous the claim that the Farfield Foundation was a front for the American government”. He was wittingly lying.

He said that Nat talked of suicide. What does he do on hearing him talk of suicide? He doesn’t call or refer Nat to a help organisation like Suicide and Crisis Helpline or any that existed at the time. Nor does he refer him to one of the CIA’s in-house “psychiatrists” like was done to Olson. Instead, he -

not a therapist by any means - claims to have calmed Nat down and let him stay overnight in his spare bedroom.

He says that Nat was in “dire financial straits”. He is in charge of dispensing CIA largesse so lavishly splashed on conferences, travels and cocktail parties Mphahlele and others spoke of. “Suddenly, there were limousines, parties with lashings of smoked salmon, and so on”, said editor and publisher Jason Epstein giving an idea of the scale of the largesse the CCF deployed. “People who couldn’t normally afford the bus ticket to Newark were now flying first class to India for the summer” (Wilford; 102-3).

As another instance showing the scale of CIA largesse and how liberally it was lavished, Richard Rive, a South African writer, wrote about how in 1962 he received a travel grant from the Farfield Foundation for which he had not applied. “After Nigeria, Zeke [Mphahlele] left for Paris to become a Director of the Congress for Cultural Freedom. Without my knowledge, and entirely unsolicited, he was instrumental in having me nominated for an American award, the Farfield Foundation Fellowship, which paid for ‘promising African creative artists’ to travel abroad. I was flabbergasted when a letter arrived confirming that I had been awarded a travel grant I knew nothing about and asking me to list the countries I wished to visit. I reached for my school atlas and compiled a long list starting with Afghanistan and ending with Zanzibar. Commonsense prevailed and I decided on selected countries in Africa and Europe” (Rive; 31/32). And so he went on a grand tour, all expenses paid courtesy of the Farfield Foundation, of Mozambique, East Africa, Ethiopia and the countries of the Nile, Greece, Italy, Switzerland and Paris, London, Germany West and East, Denmark and Sweden, London and Paris, USA, West Coast and Hawaii, Oxford, Rio and Miami to Texas, East Coast and Canada, England again – these are countries, cities and places which he visited each one being a chapter heading in his book, *Writing Black*.

With this kind of funding at his disposal, could Thompson not have helped Nat out even with a short-term loan? It’s said that he had offered Nat a job at the Transcription Centre in London, a job Nat would have assumed at the end of his Niemann Fellowship (Davis; 54). The Transcription Centre was established by the CCF in February 1962 with offices in London, and directly funded by the Farfield Foundation (*ibid*; 23). “Its brief was to record interviews with African and Caribbean writers, artists and intellectuals and to make the recordings available to radio stations in Africa” (Williams; 469).

A job in the UK such as the one he was offered would have resolved Nat’s problem regarding where next to land on an exit permit in exactly the same way as it did in my case. Could it be that Nat turned down both offers, financial help and a job, because by this time he knew the source would be the CIA?

Also worth bearing in mind is that Nat’s best and childhood friend, Lewis Nkosi, was at this time, 1962-66, employed by the Transcription Centre. Thompson himself told Nat this in a letter he wrote to him on 17 October 1963 (Wits University; Historical Papers Research Archive). Both were first employed at the Durban newspaper *Ilanga Lase Natal* and then again together at *Drum* and *Golden City Post*, at each turn Nat following Nkosi. Lastly, as Nieman Fellows they went to Harvard, the one following the other as had become a pattern in their lives. Having been tied together so closely in the past, what is it that made Nat, despite the dire straits he is said to have been in, not accept a job at the Transcription Centre?

When Nat asked Thompson about the rumours of CIA funding, Thompson could have denied as he and all the others who knew the truth had consistently done when asked. But if he had offered Nat a job at the Transcription Centre, I can only speculate that he did not deny the source of the funding

and most probably said to Nat now that you know who has been funding you, your magazine and your Nieman Fellowship, how about joining the club?

It is also said that Nat was under watch by the FBI. "Soon after his arrival in the US, he became a subject of surveillance intelligence of the FBI" (Williams; 473). This would not have been unusual for anyone funded by the CIA or about to be employed by the CIA or one of its front organisations. Whitney writes of "The dual role that the CIA played by (likely) spying on and (definitely) funnelling money to figures like Wright and [James] Baldwin was positively schizophrenic, Wright himself calling it 'the CIA's vacillating between secretly sponsoring and spying'" (Whitney; 123). Background checks had to be carried out to ensure that enemy organisations were not being funded. Even CIA officials would themselves be under continuous security surveillance lest they be double agents. CIA employees had their friends, neighbours and university alma maters visited by the FBI to find out about them.

On further speculation, what does it mean to an organisation as secretive as the CIA for someone disturbed by its covert funding and declining its offer of a job? Would such a person let loose, knowing about CIA funding but not bound by a secrecy oath, not be a risk to the security of the CIA? The consequences could be dire as they were in the case of Olson who was similarly disturbed by his work and threatening to resign.

"He was unemployed and his visa about to expire, and his mood continued to sink. Mr Nakasa had petitioned the government to extend his visa, but he was denied" (Massey; *New York Times*). That Nat was refused an extension to his visa can have one meaning only: his relationship with Thompson had broken down. Broken down because of Nat's unhappiness at knowing the source of his funding and refusal of employment at the Transcription Centre. If the relationship had not broken down why couldn't Thompson, using his "hidden hand" as a CIA official, secure an extension of his visa? The CIA was so powerful that there was nothing it could not extract out of the government.

The account of Nat's last night emanates from Thompson. It is on hearsay, the say-so of Thompson, that it is believed that Nat committed suicide. As a CIA official, how can he be trusted to be telling the truth about what happened in his apartment between the time Nat arriving there and his body lying on the pavement? As Tom Braden, himself a former CIA and thus speaking with an insider's knowledge, said "CIA men learned to lie, to lie consciously without the slightest tinge of guilt that most men feel when they tell a deliberate lie."

Was Nat pushed? Or did he jump? There was never a public enquiry into Nat's death which should have been held. The jury will remain out for as long as there is no enquiry or independent witness or whistleblower of what actually transpired in Thompson's apartment. In itself this is good because it means the suicide story does not go unquestioned.

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**A sample of Nat Nakasa's writing in Drum magazine and his column As I See It in the Rand Daily Mail is included in:**

- Nicol, M. (1991). *A Good-looking Corpse: The World of Drum – Jazz and Gangsters, Hope and Defiance in the Townships of South Africa* (Secker & Warburg)

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