

A Chief is a Chief by the people.

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF
STIMELA JASON JINGOES



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GLASGOW NEW YORK TORONTO MELBOURNE WELLINGTON
CAPE TOWN IBADAN, NAIROBI DAR ES SALAAM LUSAKA ADDIS ABABA
DELHI BOMBAY CALCUTTA MADRAS KARACHI LAHORE DACCA
KUALA LUMPUR SINGAPORE HONG KONG TOKYO

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This book is dedicated to
The Chiefs
and the people of Lesotho

CHAPTER FOUR

France—1917

WHEN the First World War broke out, I, as a member of the British Commonwealth, felt deeply involved. The picture that the newspapers drew of men doing battle in trenches in the mud and the cold of France, fascinated and horrified me. I followed closely the progress of the war, as our papers wrote it up, and I felt growing in me the conviction that I should go and help in some way.

There had been many appeals in our Bantu newspapers for black people to volunteer. One such appeal was along these lines:

‘The present war is a world war. Every nation must take part in it. Even we Bantu ought to play our part in this war. Some of you have done a great deal in German East Africa and South West Africa already. You are still expected, even across the seas, to go and help.

‘Without you, your white comrades cannot do anything, because they cannot fight and provide labour at the same time. So you must go and do the labour while your white fellows are doing the fighting.

‘Please, everyone who loves his country and respects the British Government, join this war without hesitation. Forward! Forward!’

The newspaper *Leselinyana* printed word songs, like this one, exhorting us to join up:

Europe is our work
Of our head the King.
Who are going?—Boys!
Who are going?—Girls!
Europe is our work.

When I read words like these, my blood rushed in my veins and I felt, *Why should I hesitate? I must go and die for my country and my King!* I had not talked to men returning from the war then,

and I had not heard of any of my home people volunteering. Some people in the Germiston location had recently returned from German East Africa; I had not talked with them, but I had seen them in their khaki uniforms.

Then again I argued: *Why should I go? I'm getting a good salary here; Mr. Sacks is a fine employer. I'm having an admirable time right here. Over there, people are dying!*

One evening, in the midst of one of these arguments with myself, I jumped up and went to the table. Before I could change my mind again, I wrote to my father asking him and my mother to give me their permission and blessing to go to war.

The next week passed slowly.

At last I realized I was simply trying to put off having to take this plunge into the unknown. I said to myself, *I'm a pure coward! What am I waiting here for? My father fought against the Boers; his older brother was also there and, more to the point, so was his younger brother. Why am I putting these things off then? I must have been born a coward.*

Then a novel and splendidly silly thought struck me: *How nice to die without having a wife!*

That decided me. I rushed to the table again and wrote to my father, telling him that I had already gone to join up; by the time he received my letter, I wrote, I would probably be on my way to France.

About five o'clock the next morning I was knocking on Mr. Sacks's door.

'I'm sorry to disturb you,' I said to him, 'but I must tell you that you have never done me any harm. You have always treated me well.'

'Whatever has become of you, Jingo?'

'No, nothing. I just want to tell you. . . .'

'Have I ever said you've made mischief?'

'No.'

'Then why, man, are you talking this way? It's five o'clock in the morning!'

'I want to join the army.'

'The *army*?'

'Yes.'

I had not seen or heard Solomon walking up behind me, but now he exclaimed, 'You don't know what you're saying!'

'Yes I do. I want to go to France.'

'Think it over, man. Does Mr. Sacks treat you badly?'

'No, he treats me very well. But the time has come for me to go to war.'

I left them talking, shaking their heads, and ran to my room to fetch my order book. I thrust it into Solomon's hands saying, 'Go and collect this money for these orders.' I explained to him about a suit and a pair of trousers that were on order and told him where to deliver them.

'They're nearly ready now,' Mr. Sacks interposed. 'Why don't you wait a day or so and deliver them yourself?'

'I can't. I'm sorry.'

I was afraid that my father would come to stop me from going to France.

At 7.15 I was on Germiston Station and at 7.30 I boarded the train to Johannesburg. There I stopped people in the street and asked them where I should go to join up. Someone directed me to the Native Commissioner's offices, where, on 3 March 1917, I presented myself.

'Are you prepared, of your own free will, to join the army to die for your King and your country?'

Oh yes, I said, I was.

'Sign here.'

I signed.

I think about fifty of us joined up that day.

I took a train back to Germiston at four o'clock to collect my things and take my farewell of my friends. I left some of my belongings, like two paraffin stoves and three blankets, at Abnar Molupe's place. The rest of my blankets and trousers I left with Laban Moeti in Johannesburg. Both these chaps were from my home, but not from the same village.

I went to see these two fellows to try to persuade them to join up with me, telling them at length how it was their duty to go to war. Abnar said he was too young to die. Moeti said he wanted to live long enough to look after his children. Another friend from home, Paulus Marabe, said, 'You're crazy! You want to go to war before you're even married. I couldn't do that! Marry first, and then think about volunteering. If I were to die, I'd like to know I'd left a wife and children behind me.'

'By all means,' I told him, 'go and get married if that's what you want. As for me, I have decided *never* to marry.'

There was a girl at home, Jemina Mkuzangwe. We were in love, and we wanted to marry. It was all perfect; even my father was fond of Jemina. When I said I wanted to die rather than marry it was because of that girl, because I did love her a great deal. But some people persuaded her to drop me.

It was a stupid thing. I had visited her at her home at Cana, and people saw us together; rumours like that spread so fast. Some of her people went to her after I had gone, and asked her, 'Why are you so quick to admit that you love Jingoos?' They reminded her of their own Zulu customs.

'You disappoint us,' they said, 'for among our people we let the man walk several times before we confess our love. We don't accept a man in one day, as you have done.'

The next day I received a note from Jemina:

Please don't be surprised that I have turned back on our agreement. My relatives and some of my nation have blamed me for accepting you so quickly. I have had to listen to them. Please don't mention the matter of our marriage to your parents, as we agreed with each other, until later, when we can come to a good understanding with everyone.

When I had read the letter, I threw it down. My cousin Mone picked it up and asked, 'What is it? What's wrong?'

'The girl is mad!' I shouted. 'She thinks I'll keep going to her home for the sake of some old women!'

Mone tried to persuade me that Jemina meant well, and that I should do as she suggested, but I refused.

'There are many girls expecting me to court them!' I snapped.

I was present the day Jemina married, after I had come back from France. I was proud of myself that day, for I had come a long way, and seen many things; I was not sad at all. But it was because of Jemina that I wanted to die in France without a wife.

* * *

When I left my friends Abnar and Moeti I returned to the Native Commissioner's offices, where we volunteers were put up for two nights in a hall, with meals of bread, fish, beef, and other things provided.

We left for Cape Town by train on 5 March 1917.

We were a mixed bag of recruits. I could find no one from my home among us, but I soon made friends. Many youngsters in our position, having volunteered to die in a strange land fighting someone else's war, might have considered themselves superior,

feeling that their fellow human beings owed them some kind of debt. And this was exactly how we did feel.

We behaved so badly on that train that at Colesburg our four coaches were uncoupled and the rest of the passenger train went on without us. We were young, scared, and excited, and we got up to some amazing high jinks. Whenever we stopped at a station, we simply poured out of the train, and took whatever we wanted from the railside stalls: food, fruit, magazines, anything that took our fancy. When people tried to get us to pay, we told them gleefully to ask the Government, for we were off to war. When the train was ready to pull out, and the last whistle blew, we would all leap off the train again, forcing it to wait for us. There were some white volunteers on the train with us, and they were in the same mood.

So the train simply left us behind at Colesburg. The people of Colesburg were sorry. The station-master was even sorrier. He rang someone to ask for an engine to be sent at once to get us off his station.

When that engine arrived, we tried to behave soberly, and we were a pleasure to be with until the 7th, when we pulled into Worcester Station. There we found a small store-room on the platform, packed to the ceiling with boxes of grapes. We made a real mess there. We pulled all those boxes aboard our train. Orders were given to the guard and the engine-driver that if they came to a station where there was anything edible, they were not to stop but were to pass straight by. Our next stop was at Paarl, where we were given a meal. From there we went straight to Cape Town, where we arrived the following day.

It was the first time most of us had seen the sea, and we all spent hours talking about it and repeating, 'So this is the sea!' The thing that amazed me about it was how the sun came up out of it every morning. We were not at all frightened of the sea then; the time was to come when it would strike fear into us.

We boarded another train which took us to Rosebank where the army camp was pitched on the Show Grounds. One novel experience I remember about Rosebank was that when we arrived there, some white and Coloured ladies met us at the station with tea and food. This was the first time it had occurred to any of us that a White or a Coloured would consider serving an African with food.

Officers met us at the station and marched us to camp in four lines. After we had eaten our midday meal it all started. Many of us did not understand half of what was going on; when someone

shouted '*Attention!*' you could hear people all around you asking, 'What's he saying?'

We began to realize that being a soldier was not a pleasant matter. Our officers, we thought, were very rude to us, but it might have been worse, for it soon became clear that most of our people were dunderheads, and the officers were not so rude to those of us who could follow what it was they wanted. We slept about ten or fifteen to a tent and every day we were drilled. Within seven days, seven of our group had disappeared because they could not stand the life.

When we had been in Rosebank for about two days, another group of volunteers arrived from Johannesburg and among them were two friends of mine, from my home. Filemon Marabe, the brother of the Paulus I had left behind, was from Mats'ekheng; we were overjoyed to see each other again. Also among them was Nuoe Lechesa, related to me on my mother's side, from Cana. Nuoe's father and mine had been friends from their youth. I did not feel lonely any longer.

Filemon and Nuoe told me how they had joined up. They had met my friends Paulus and Moeti in Johannesburg, and had learned from them that I had volunteered.

'Why did you allow him to go by himself, without friend or relative?' Nuoe had asked them.

'We are afraid of dying,' those two had replied. 'It seems to me that you people are not following the newspapers. If you had been reading your papers you would not have asked such a question. Nowadays the Kaiser and Hindenburg are angry; they have been telling us through the newspapers that they don't want black men in this war. They say that this is a war among Whites; that we should keep out of it.'

So Nuoe and Filemon had left them and come to join me.

I soon realized that drilling was not a waste of time, because I was always conscious of the fact that we were going to war, and I found that we were being trained in how to behave on the battlefield as soldiers and how to react when we came under fire.

We were given uniforms and other kit. Our commissioned officers were all white; they addressed us through an interpreter, a Mochuana, who was not very popular because we Basotho could not follow him easily and the Zulu and Xhosa were completely in the dark. Later an assistant interpreter was appointed to solve this problem.

On 27 March we were called out early and told to be on parade at seven o'clock. We were informed that we would be leaving that day for Europe, and we mustered on the parade-ground again at ten o'clock with our kitbags. We were brought to attention, and then the Major, a Scot, came out to address us. He was a fine, grand man. When he walked, his back very straight, he would tilt his hat and swing his stick, showing by his every gesture that he was *alive*, you know, and a *Major* indeed.

'You are about to go to the place where, when you joined up,' he started, 'you knew you would be sent. While you were here, I may say, you behaved yourselves well. You were quite different from what I had been led to expect by the reports I had of you on your journey from Johannesburg.'

There was a long pause.

'I am sorry', he resumed, 'to have to inform you that your ship is the first to follow the *Mendi*, which has been sunk in the English Channel. The *Mendi* was carrying troops of the South African Labour Corps—men like yourselves.'

Our hearts fell.

'I do not mean to imply', continued the Major, 'that your ship, also, will be sunk, but you ought to know what has happened. You knew, when you volunteered, that you might have to fight; you knew what war is. Go in peace. Fight a good fight. Honour the name of South Africa. Let South Africa be honoured by all involved in this war. Make a name for your country. Make a name for your King, King George the Fifth. I shall look forward to hearing that you are doing good work in France, where I shall be following you.'

The Major's words were followed by a bugle call which put heart into those of us who were still trembling. Then we marched from Rosebank to the Cape Town docks, having been told that we should be prepared for conditions in France, where we would not travel about in trains much. When we arrived at the docks, a further seven men had disappeared from our 21st Company; nobody knew how, but they had gone.

■ We went aboard our troop-ship, the *Durham Castle*.

When my feet touched her decks, I thought of my ancestor Jingoos entering his 'house on the water', and I felt misgivings, but I reminded myself that I was not sailing as a slave, but as a proud volunteer, and I soon cheered up again. We had accomplished a great deal in three generations.

We took about 45 days from the Cape to Liverpool.

Along the way, one has to pass through the Bay of Biscay. Have you ever come across that sea? When I think of going overseas, now, my trouble comes when I think of that Bay. *It was a very wild sea.* The water of this Bay rises up into something like hills; it gathers itself up . . . up . . . up . . . into a mountain and with it the boat goes up. When the ship is right up there, suspended far above the rest of the water, the water suddenly spills down, and down comes the ship, spinning and sliding and *PUKHE!* hits the bottom.

We were in that Bay for three full days and nobody liked it one bit. All of us were told to put on our life-belts, and to keep them on, day or night. We asked why, and were told that should some accident happen, that life-belt would protect us in the water—unless, like Jonah, a whale found us first.

It was not being seasick that worried us here, because we had all spent our first two days at sea vomiting and with upset stomachs. After two days we were all right again and could say to the sea, 'We know you now, so let's move!'

As soon as we escaped the Bay of Biscay, a destroyer in our convoy was torpedoed by a submarine. Fortunately only the rudder was damaged, and another destroyer could take the damaged one in tow. Some torpedo boats arrived from England to meet us, and they chased the submarine but did not locate it. Those little boats were as fast as lightning.

It took us a long time to sail from the Cape to England, and this was because the Kaiser did his best to stop us. Off Sierra Leone we were driven back a long way by German submarines; at other places we had to steam ahead carefully because the water had been mined.

That was the Kaiser, or Mkiza, as we named him, after a legendary Zulu warrior who, we were told, feared no opposition at all, but crushed whatever came in his way.

Our papers reported that the Kaiser did not want us Africans in the war. He said, according to the reports, that he had been about to win the war when we entered to help the British Government. Before we came to provide labour, England and France were weak because their supplies of food and ammunition were not getting through to them. We had changed all that by working on the supply lines, leaving the other troops free to fight, and the Kaiser was being driven back. So the Kaiser tried to dissuade us from entering the war which, he said, was a European one and not our

concern at all. By then he had already lost his possessions in East and West Africa.

I have had many arguments about the two world wars; Basotho fought in both. I maintain that the Kaiser and Hindenburg were men of far greater stature than was Hitler. They fought their war directly and bluntly, whereas Hitler was more devious. Some men in this village say that the Second World War was the more horrifying to have been involved in, but I disagree, and I have also read that the trench warfare of the First World War involved far more casualties among soldiers and civilians than did the Second. Trench warfare in mud was hell. While I was in France, it seemed that the Kaiser's presence was everywhere: on the land, in the air, and on the sea.

The more we learned about what the Kaiser had to say about us, the prouder we were to have caused so much discomfort to that strong man.

* * *

We disembarked at Liverpool at about ten in the morning, delighted to find an electric train waiting for us on the docks, under a large shelter, so that we did not have to go out in the rain. It was, for me, as though all my geography lessons at school were coming alive. I knew, for instance, that when the wind came from the Atlantic, we would get snow at home, and now I had sailed on the Atlantic. I had learned at school that England is a beautiful place, and I was pleased to find that my teachers had been right. Cape Town is a lovely city, but not as exciting as a place like Liverpool.

Thrilled by the speed of the train, I watched the lush countryside race by. English mountains are so different from ours, being covered with grass and rounded, with not a stone or rock in sight. Its trees are of a different green, and very beautiful.

When we boarded the train, before we left Liverpool, the girls of that place arrived with teapots, cups, and biscuits to serve us with tea. They were so friendly, and we warmed to their concern for us.

'Go and fight', they said, 'for your country and for your King, but we think that most of all you will go and fight for us, because you would not like us to die.'

Although white women had served us with tea in Cape Town, we knew they were only doing it because we were going to war. These girls were different.

One of our preachers had told us that we would find no colour bar in England, but we did not believe him: how could there be a country where black men were treated the same as white men? On our ship coming over there had been an Indian called Cassim who had told us the same thing. He seemed to be very well informed. He had come from German East Africa with his Captain, whose batman he was.

'I've been there,' he told us on the ship, 'and I assure you that there is no colour bar in England or France.'

'You tell a good story, my friend,' we mocked him.

'As you look at me, I am a French-speaker.'

We only laughed louder.

'You'll believe me when we get to France!'

The girls at Liverpool talked to us so easily that it seemed Cassim was right, but it was a little early to judge yet, so we kept open minds on the subject until we had had more experience of the place.

There was another thing that amazed us. When we disembarked we were told by our officers to put our watches forward by two hours, for we were then to go by European and not South African time. *Khelek!* We had been taught at school that places are not alike; that in some places it was night while we were having day, and we had found that hard to believe. We learned now that it was possible, for we had left home in autumn and in England it was spring.

It had been announced that a trainload of African soldiers would be stopping at certain stations along the route to London, and all along our way we were met by parties of women who brought us tea and whatever food they could spare. We behaved ourselves like people on that train, not wanting to disappoint our Major or the ladies who were being so pleasant and kind to us. At about six that evening we reached our destination at Folkestone.

* * *

On our first evening at Folkestone there was an announcement circulated—the British can be expert liars when they choose!—that our ship, the *Durham Castle*, had been lost at sea with all its African troops, and that there was no news to be had about its fate. We were astonished, and started questioning our officers about what was going on, but they told us to be quiet: they were playing a trick on the Germans. If they could spread the rumour that no one

knew where we were, the Germans would not know when we were going to cross the Channel to France and we would then have a good chance of a safe crossing.

Two days later we went to Dover and embarked on a short, wide ship that would take us to France. That morning the whole Channel was full of torpedo boats—it seemed that every torpedo boat in England was there that day to escort us to France safely. These tiny, swift craft were darting about like bishop birds, moving in three rough lines, circling back, changing course, keeping the water safe.

We were told that had the morning not been misty, we should have been able to see France across the Channel, and that staggered me: I had always thought the Channel to be at least a hundred miles across, so well did it guard England from her enemies.

On board, we put on our life-belts, and Captain Hees gave us detailed orders.

‘My people,’ he said, ‘wear your life-belts all the time. If anything were to happen, and we tell you to abandon ship, try to swim as far from the sinking vessel as possible, because when a ship goes down, she sucks the water around her down with her and you will drown if you are in it. Those who cannot swim must move their arms like windmills; this will move them forward and the life-belts will hold them up.’

‘I must warn you that the water is very cold, but these torpedo boats will be near by, and they will pick you up from the water as soon as they can. Look at them carefully now. When they come for you, do not try to fight them, thinking them your enemies. They do not look anything like submarines, which are your most likely enemy in these waters, so do not fear them. If you should be in the water for some time, do not give up because of the cold. Keep moving until you are picked up. I believe, however, that we will cross over safely, because the enemy is not aware of our existence.’

With the birdlike boats around us, playing in the water it seemed, it did not look as if we were going to war; it looked more like a gay feast. We watched them entranced, and forgot that we were crossing the water perhaps to die.

We sang songs all the way. The first one was started by a chap called Basson. He turned to watch the cliffs drawing back from us into the mist and sang *Home sweet home*, and we joined in, . . . *there's no-oo-o place like home*. . . .

We landed at Calais within the hour, to be met by French people,

men, women, and girls. All were laughing and shaking our hands. 'Bonjour, messieurs,' they cried, '*comment allez-vous?*'

We felt utterly foolish, not understanding a word of their friendly gabble. Someone shouted for Cassim to come and interpret for us. This was his chance to be proved a linguist, and we found he had not been boasting: that fellow spoke French like a native. We later found he was right about the other thing as well.

After we had eaten, we entrained for Dieppe, where we arrived at about ten at night, and marched to our camp. The next morning we were taken to the docks, and we started our work, unloading ships bearing food, fodder, ammunition, and other supplies for the front line.

* * *

At first our food was reasonable, but after about two months it seemed that someone from South Africa decided that we were being treated too well. At our homes, it was said, we ate porridge, so it was not necessary to give us things like bread, rice, or potatoes any longer. We tried to see our officers about this, to complain that when we joined up in South Africa we had no idea that we would be ill-treated in Europe by our own side. We held a meeting which we invited our officers to attend to hear our grievances.

I arrived at the meeting some minutes after it had started, and when I had listened to some of our chaps speaking, I stood up and made the following speech:

'My people, we must not be surprised: in South Africa, Bantu are often treated badly. I'm not surprised that this is starting here as well. We have brought that system with us.

'Look at the confusion that has been caused by the word *Native*; this word has been written on our lavatories so that Whites and Blacks need not use the same ones. But in doing this they have forgotten that here in France it is the French people who are *natives*, and they are white, and they are now using our lavatories, to the utter confusion of the South Africans here. You know how much wrangling this has caused.

'We Bantu are often treated like dogs here by the white people from home, yet they forget that we are all here at war against a common enemy. Actually I made a mistake in saying that they treat us like dogs, because usually they treat their dogs very well indeed. They ignore the fact that we have left South Africa for the moment. We are in Europe, and we are at war, and we were

promised decent treatment as soldiers if we would fight the Germans.'

It was the first time in my life I had made this kind of speech about the lot of the Bantu. I was to make many more.

At that point the minister attached to our two companies got up and left the meeting. He returned soon after, when the meeting was breaking up, with our Sergeant-Major, to whom he said, 'This is the one who spoke so strongly!' He was pointing at me.

'Why do you speak of me like this?' I asked him. 'You know that when I came in several people had already spoken.'

'Lance-Corporal Jingoos,' said the Sergeant-Major, 'do you remember what you were told about martial law?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Then what right have you to speak as you did about your officers and your Government?'

'I stated things that are true, sir—things that are happening in this camp.'

'You are, none the less, subject to martial law, Lance-Corporal.'

I was ordered not to go to work the following morning, but to present myself for a hearing. I well knew that soldiers can be shot under martial law.

That evening before I turned in I went to the place where I used to go to pray. There I prayed to my God and my ancestors, saying, 'If I have committed a sin, by saying that our officers and our Government forget that we are in Europe, and treat us as if we are in South Africa, if that is a sin, Almighty God, then let me die, and receive my soul. But if I was not sinning, then let them not use martial law upon me.'

The thing that worried me most was that I was not on good terms with our Captain, who would be presiding over my hearing; he thought me above myself. We had had a disagreement on the ship, and I knew that he would speak strongly against me.

In the morning, however, it seemed that my God had turned things in my favour, for that Captain had been transferred to the front that very day, and it was the man who had been sent to take his place whom I faced when I walked in.

'You are a lance-corporal. What came over you to make such a grave mistake?' was the first thing he asked me.

'I have committed no offence, sir.'

'You have been charged with making mischief here yesterday. I have to consider your case in terms of martial law.'

'I said yesterday, sir, that in Europe we are not *natives*. Is that an offence, sir?'

'Did you say that?'

'Yes, sir.' Then I plunged straight in. 'Sir, our meals have been changed from the usual rations to mealie-meal, which we are given from morning to night, sir, Monday to Monday, and the mealie-meal we get is bad. There are weevils in it. It is for you, sir, to judge where justice lies in this matter.'

The Captain stood up without a word and walked straight to the kitchen, where he scooped up some porridge and some uncooked mealie-meal in bowls. Both bowls had weevils moving about in them.

My accusers were the minister, the Sergeant-Major, and the Sergeant of our platoon; I had no friends among them. After the Captain had seen this food, he went back to his office and asked them, 'After you had heard this man speak strongly against his officers, and after you had heard the men complaining about their food, did you go to the kitchen to check on whether they were telling the truth?'

They said they had not.

'What did you do, then?'

'We did nothing, sir.'

'Then your complaint is that this man said black people are not *natives* in Europe, thereby implying that Whites are *natives* here?'

'Sir, I am a European, not a *Native*!' one of them exclaimed.

All these terms can be very confusing.

Each was asked to state his complaint. The Sergeant's was that I was insolent.

'Did you report his insolence, Sergeant?' he was asked.

'Yes, sir, I did. Nothing was done about it.'

Then the Captain called them closer to look at the dishes of food on his desk, and they had to admit to seeing the weevils.

'Why do you complain when your men tell you that their food has weevils in it?'

'As *Natives*, we did not think they were telling the truth. . . .'

'What do you mean by this word *natives*?'

'We mean these black people.'

'Reverend, you and I were at Fort Hare together. I saw you preach there to *Natives*. If you preach to people one day about love, and turn around to speak of them like this the next day, do you expect them to respect you or to attend church services where you preach?'

There was silence.

The Captain said that I was innocent of offence, and that he was grateful we had drawn someone's attention to our rotten food.

'Even now', he continued, 'I am afraid that this group of men might fall sick because of the food they have been compelled to eat.'

I was dismissed, jubilant.

At lunch-time, when the men returned from the docks, they were served with meat, potatoes, rice, and bread. They told me they had waited all morning to hear the shots of my firing-squad; seeing that I was still alive, they asked when my hearing was to be held. I told them of our good fortune, and that meal was a joyful, noisy one.

When they had eaten, the men started filing into the Captain's office to thank him. At last he came out to speak to us all.

'My people,' he started, 'I am not here to be praised. I have just returned from the front. Since you people have been in France, our troops have had the time to fight; we are receiving sufficient food and ammunition there now, and our mules and horses are getting their provender. Bear in mind that I will not be with you, probably, for the duration of the war. I have been sick, and I was sent here to this command only to convalesce.'

Because of this incident I foolishly started to hate all white ministers of religion, feeling that they were not the Christians they pretended to be, but my friend Nuoe and another chap told me I was wrong to judge all Whites on the basis of this one clash. They reminded me that among our own ministers there were some we knew who were uncharitable or downright unfit to guide others, and they mentioned one in particular.

'You must believe', they told me, 'that this one you say you hate failed in his Christian duty, and therefore you cannot judge others by him. His God will see him one day.'

Because they were my friends, I listened to them, but I no longer attended that fellow's services.

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At that stage of the war Mkiza, the Kaiser, had crushed Belgium, and King Albert of that country had fled to England. The King paid a visit to France to cheer the troops, and one day he visited us at Dieppe. He was a short fellow who seemed very pleasant, and he encouraged us with a friendly speech.

'You people must not believe that you are doing nothing in this war because you are not actually fighting. I say that you are the

men who are carrying a large portion of the burden of this war. Before you came, we were hard pressed. This very place, here at Dieppe where I am standing today, this place was once overrun by the Germans. It was behind that hill over there that they were turned back.

‘What you are doing here, you are doing not only for your Government and your King: you are also helping Belgium and France and our other allies. Since you have been here, the pressure on us has eased; we have turned the tide of the war. I have every confidence that I shall return to my country, one day, as King.’

We received another visit that really shook us.

We were told one day that some of France’s great men would be coming to our camp, among them members of the French Parliament. When they arrived, there was a black man among them, and we assumed that he was simply there to accompany his white masters. We were staggered when these men were introduced, for the pitch-black man held a high position in the Government.

It seemed that Cassim was right again.

When we asked how he had come to occupy such a position when he was black, we were told that there was no colour bar at all in France, and that a person was elected to office because of his education and ability; the man in question had degrees behind his name. We asked whether he had been elected by a white or black electorate, and we were told that the people of his constituency, both black and white, had voted him in.

One of us asked, ‘Would such a thing ever happen in our country?’

Some replied, ‘Who knows?’

But others said quietly, ‘It might. . . .’

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Although we were not combat troops, we did come under fire. One day we heard the wail of the siren. Looking up, we saw the British soldiers racing to their trenches, and our Captain ordered us to do the same. I was in the shift that was in camp that day. When we were about fifty yards from the trenches, Lieutenant James Berry yelled, ‘Stand where you are, and *stand still!* Those who want to can fall down flat, but once you’re down, *don’t move!*’

A Swazi called Seven—perhaps he only called himself a Swazi, for I’ve never seen such a cowardly Swazi before—did not seem to hear Berry, for he ran around in circles, screaming, ‘Mother! We’re all dying. . . .’

As he ran past him, a Xhosa called Matjolo drove his fist into Seven's jaw. He staggered on a few paces and then a Mosotho called Molise grabbed his shoulder and gave him another fist blow. When Seven collapsed they told him, 'You lie here! Don't even blink your eyes!' A man called Pieter, from Kroonstad, threw himself upon Seven and started trying to throttle him, calling to others to help him finish this coward off.

At that instant the sound of planes was heard, and five German aircraft came into view. Everyone froze. The planes started dropping bombs on us. One fell close by, but it buried itself in the sand and no one was hurt. Our soldiers were shooting at the planes until they passed over us and disappeared.

They reappeared shortly after, only three of them this time, diving in low from the direction of the hospital, skimming over the top of the pine and gum trees. The soldiers warned us not to move until they had gone. Then one of the planes was hit and it crashed to the earth while its two companions flew on over the town of Dieppe.

When we found the wreckage, there were three men in it. Two were dead, but the third was still breathing. The Basotho wanted to finish him off, but Captain Geddes stopped us, and the fellow was taken to Dieppe Hospital. We learnt later that when he was told where he was, he asked whether the town had been bombed flat; when he was told that it was still standing, he explained that their orders had been to clean Dieppe off the face of the earth. He said that their aim was to kill the black troops working on the docks because since their arrival the German lines had been pushed back, and the British could not be stopped. He said they had flown over one day and seen how fast supplies were being handled on the docks. They had also tried to bomb a train bearing supplies, but had also had bad luck with that. He did not think they would try for Dieppe again, he said, because it was clear that the town would be prepared for them.

After the bombing, everyone crowded around the unfortunate Seven, and tried to beat him, but the Sergeant-Major stepped in to protect him, saying, 'Gentlemen, you must know that not all men are alike; not every man is brave. Although you all came to war, no man knows how he will react when he sees death at his door; many tremble and say things they did not know they would say. This is what happened to Seven. I always thought he was a strong man. . . .

'Seven,' he went on, 'what are we to do about you? You have just been promoted to lance-corporal, but you have disappointed yourself and us. What kind of N.C.O. will you make? You were screaming like a woman today. You cannot lead men if you cannot stand fast under fire. I don't know what the Captain will say, but as for me, I am disappointed in your behaviour.'

'All new N.C.O.s had better listen to me now. When you are promoted from the ranks, you are not placed over men because we like you; you are only promoted because your superiors believe you will stand up well to fighting and hardship, to lead and encourage your men. You are lucky, Seven, that I did not see you from near by when you behaved like a woman, for I think I might have shot you. It is better that you be dead than that you live to terrify the other troops.'

Seven was demoted.

It is very bad luck indeed for a man to cry out as Seven did in the middle of a battle, very bad luck indeed. He was lucky we did not kill him, because he put us all in danger.

From that day we all felt fear stirring in us, because we did not know what would become of us the next day, or whether, like Seven, we might run screaming, 'Mother! We're all dying!' I do not believe that poor Seven was simply screaming because he was a coward; I think he was remembering a propaganda bulletin dropped from the air the week before by the Kaiser's planes. This is what Mkiza had to say to us:

I hate you, Uncle Sam, because I do not know what caused you to come and enter this war. I hate Belgium, and I will crush it, because I have already taken most of it. I hate France. I hate England the most, because she takes other countries into her Empire.

But in this war, I hate black people the most. I do not know what they want in this European war. Where I find them, I will smash them.

Seven must have thought this was the day the Kaiser was going to smash us. Perhaps he was calling on his ancestors. Perhaps he was, after all, simply a coward. We shall never know. We know only that he screamed like a woman, and not like a man. We have a proverb that says a man is a sheep, a woman is a goat. A woman always cries, no matter what you do to her; you can cut the throat of a sheep and it does not make a sound.

We worked at Rouen as well as Dieppe until one day there came an order from the Lesotho Paramount Chief, Chief Griffith Lerotholi, saying that all Basotho in France should be placed together, not mixed with men of other nations, so that their work for the war could be seen by all. This was shortly after a group of conscripts had been sent to France from Lesotho under Chief Molapo Maama and Chief Thabo Lerotholi Mojela, representatives of the Paramount Chief. In accordance with this command, our orders came to leave for Le Havre, where the Basotho were to be based.

There were 57 Basotho in our 21st and 22nd Companies; we had come across together, and we felt pain at having to leave our comrades. We were also sad to part from our officers; the one we would miss most was Captain Lionel William Geddes, a fine man.

When he took leave of us he said, 'Here is Lieutenant Edmunds, who will accompany you. He is a Mosotho like yourselves. He will be in charge of you. You know him well, for he was one of your trainers at Rosebank. Go in peace, my people, as we have lived together in peace. If it happens that we meet again, let it be soon and swiftly.

'I have never mentioned this to you, but I feel you should know that about a month ago I received word from Headquarters to say that 21st and 22nd Companies are our finest, in the good work they do. I believe that you will hold high the name of these Companies where you are going now, and never let it be spoiled.

'Mr. Edmunds, don't let this group of yours be mixed up with those who have just been sent from Lesotho; keep them separate, that everyone may know that although they are Basotho, they are men who volunteered in the Union of South Africa.'

We were all standing at attention, and now our Lieutenant saluted the Captain. We picked up our kitbags and went to Le Havre.

When we arrived at the camp of the Basotho, we were a great sight, proud of whatever we did, and acting like soldiers. Mokhahla Senekal from Phiri's village, near where I live today, was among that new group of conscripts, and he can tell you a good story about how splendid our entry was. The new men could not stop staring at us. They copied us in everything, even the way we worked and carried ourselves on parade. We were happy to be among our countrymen, but we missed our friends badly. Four or five months later the war was over for us, and we were free to return home.

In April 1918 we boarded the *Norman Castle* at Southampton, bound for Cape Town, and this time the voyage took only 25 days. At Rosebank we were given our pay for the last time, as well as train tickets to our homes.

I still remember Moferefere Rantuba left the train at Gumtree, while Hope Mosaasa, Khama, Malefane Johnstone (a Coloured), Letsatsi Molukoane, Filemon, Nuoe, and I got off at Ficksburg. The others took the road to Leribe, while Filemon and I walked home. We arrived at midnight.

We stopped outside my father's house, and shouted a greeting to those within.

My parents were up and dressed in minutes. When my mother came out, she was crying, but in a moment she started ululating. We had heard women ululating like that all along our route through the Free State and Lesotho, and had heard exclamations: 'So these men are back! We never thought we'd see them again. . . .'

We were very joyful, close to tears, all of us. I need not describe that night, but we did get some sleep, and the next morning my mother cooked a tasty fowl for us, the first we had eaten since we left home.

At mid-morning I accompanied Filemon to his home, both of us still in uniform. Few people believed we really were soldiers; they thought we had dressed ourselves up to look like soldiers.

'No one can return alive from Mkiza,' they whispered.

Some recognized us and greeted us with shouts of joy, but others said, 'It can't be them. It must be two men who look like them, that's all.'

It was so strange.

We found some of our girl-friends engaged and others married, because we were never to return from Europe, so they had been told. It was a superstition that no black person could cross the sea and return again.

We tasted our second fowl that day. People kept coming to greet us where we sat, reporting that their daughters were engaged or married, all who had been girls when we were boys.

We simply kept quiet and looked at them.

After two weeks my father made a great feast for me, slaughtering an ox. He said he was thanking God for my return, but he was really praising his ancestors.

Although at that time politics and Independence were a long way off, we were aware, when we returned, that we were different from the other people at home. Our behaviour, as we showed the South Africans, was something more than they expected from a Native, more like what was expected among them of a white man. We had copied the manners and customs of Europeans, and not only copied: we lived them, acted those customs right through.

Home was a little unreal to us. As I have said, we kept quiet and looked at people; we did not know how to tell them the things we had seen.

I am reminded of rumours we heard on Rouen docks about a certain South African colonel who was a survivor when the *Mendi* sank. What we heard was that he was in a dinghy after the sinking, and when drowning men tried to pull themselves aboard, he beat their hands off his boat with an oar. The people who witnessed this gave evidence against him afterwards, for more men would have survived that disaster if he had let them into his dinghy. As it was, more than 600 Africans were killed, along with about a dozen white officers. This Colonel, it was said, was barred from going to the front line, and had to remain on the supply line with the Labour Corps; his case, we heard, would be dealt with after the war. We never discovered the outcome of his case, nor what became of him.

This Colonel was on the Rouen docks one day, so the story goes, when some French ladies arrived to serve the soldiers with tea. The Colonel was a man who upheld the colour bar. It seemed he could not stomach the nasty fact that Africans were served tea before him or that they used the same cups. He was heard to comment, 'If, one day, I arrive in South Africa to find it like this place, I'd rather die than live there!'

Captain Geddes, who had overheard this remark, retorted, 'I'm sorry for you, my dear Colonel. Perhaps you don't understand what you're saying. You hate Africans as if they were not human beings like yourself. Both Black and White were created by one God; their only difference lies in the colour of their skin. What would you say if, one day, you arrived in Heaven to find Africans there—would you refuse to stay there?'

'Yes! Yes! Yes!' cried the Colonel in Afrikaans. He turned to the Bantu standing near him and told them in that language, 'When you people get to South Africa again, don't start thinking that you are Whites, just because this place has spoiled you. You are black,

and you will stay black, and there's no room for you in Heaven!'

Well, we did not think of ourselves as white people, but we had learned many things since we left home and in some ways it was not easy to settle down.

You see, we had liked our stay in France. It was our first experience of living in a society without a colour bar. When the time came for us to leave, some of us hid in the houses of our French friends. The military police caught most of us, but there were others who never went back to South Africa. So I returned to my home, but I was a fool; I should have got back to France *somehow*. Ignorance is always the death of a person.

We tried to keep our memories alive, and our determination to return to France, by corresponding with our friends. I kept in touch with Lieutenant Berry at Elliot in the Cape until early in 1919 when I was notified that both he and his father, Captain Berry, had succumbed to the influenza epidemic.

I had met a fellow called William Johnstone of Folkestone on the docks at Dieppe, where he was also working. We hit it off at once and we spent our breaks drinking tea and talking about our two countries, until at last we were close friends. After the war we corresponded for many years, but at last we lost touch and I do not know what has become of him.

* * *

My father sacrificing an ox for me was symbolic of my return to Lesotho: family ties were strong again and I was thrown back into the old, traditional ways. My father thought I had had plenty of time to sow my wild oats, and that I should settle down with a wife. He had a girl lined up for me, too.

While I was in France, he kept writing to me about a girl called Maria Mkuzangwe, Jemina's cousin; she was a Zulu, the granddaughter of my father's mother's brother. I knew Maria, of course, and I had always thought her ugly, so I kept my letters non-committal on the subject of marriage.

When I returned, I paid a visit to the school at Cana where both Jemina and Maria were teaching, and asked the principal whether I might speak to Miss Mkuzangwe. Instead of calling Maria, he called Jemina.

I knew that Jemina was already engaged by then, to Mofolo Khakala, a brother-in-law of Chief Masupha II. I had heard that she did not really want to marry Mofolo, but that people had put