

## Melville Segal

The biographical sketch that follows is the substance of an interview I held with Melville in March 2016. It was after he had suffered a stroke, which severely impaired his short-term memory but left an astonishingly lucid long-term memory, as this account proves. His story goes back to the beginnings of Anthroposophical development in South Africa after the war – a long, fruitful involvement that found him many friends and admirers throughout the country. Here are his words:

“I was born in Stellenbosch but as a 3-year old we moved to Port Elizabeth. My father was the manager of Ackermans in PE. His older step-brother was one of the directors of Ackermans. He played the part of the royal family within the Segal family. His oldest son took over this role of the prince afterwards. My father arranged for me to go and work for him when I finished school. It was the design, clothing and fashion department, looking after the fabrics. There were many different types of material. I was sent to Rhodesia, where they gave me a travelling salesman’s area of what was then Northern Rhodesia up to the northern border. At the time there were mainly these strip roads. With 19-year old bravado I had little respect for such strip roads and crashed. My cousins took this in their stride, especially my oldest cousin, the prince, who was only



concerned that I get the car fixed so I could go back again. I did feel pain, but I had had pains as a child and I thought this was coming back. The specialist, when I was a child, called it growing pain. Then after a year of very painful travelling, I finally landed up in hospital and soon after that, in May of the next year, I went to Cape Town for surgery and was all plastered up.

The leading surgeon at that time examined me and said he needed to operate on me. It turned out to be a long and complicated operation of some four and a half hours. In hospital I had to learn to walk again after a month or more. My parents had come to see me but had already returned, so I was flown back to PE when I recovered. I went back to that dress factory, as I didn’t want to work for my father. They were glad to have me back at double the salary. My first job was as a dispatch clerk looking after the parcels. In my second job I looked after their material store, a big job because there were thousands of different materials. I strained my back again with these rolls of materials, so I landed back in Port Elizabeth with extreme back pain and the surgeon there was the one who saw me in childhood. He put me on traction, hoping things would come right. When the Cape Town

surgeon heard about this, he told the doctor to keep me there as he had mucked up everything he had done. I spent a long time in hospital with lots of hospital stories.

My oldest brother took me on as a partner because that uncle, the leader of the family, had left each of his nephews 1000 pounds, a lot of money in those days. So we bought a second shop in Uitenhage. All worked well until my brother got married and needed the income from both shops, so he wanted me to start a third shop. I opened one in a place called Dispatch, which is about halfway to Uitenhage from P.E. It was very boring and very quiet. At that time I was writing and my mother was very proud of my writing, must have mentioned it at one of the meeting circles and so I got a call from Minnie Gibaud, the wife of Basil Gibaud, who asked me if I wanted to join the Anthroposophical Society. That was the beginning of my contact with Anthroposophy. They introduced me to Ralph Kaplan who was there, and Estelle Bryer. We were a tight circle, mainly around Ralph, who was married to Estelle at the time. Basil Gibaud read lectures of Rudolf Steiner.

I discovered that I had the possibility of mind reading, I would call it. The first time it happened my assistant in this small shop where I happened to be was looking into a teacup. We didn't have teabags at that time. She was looking at the tea leaves so I asked her why she didn't have this done by someone who knew what they were talking about. She was startled and asked how I knew that. So I looked into her teacup and I saw a black revolver. That night her husband came home with a black revolver and my fame spread immediately to the bigger shop. I was never wrong. I had the most unbelievable experiences while looking into teacups and seeing what was in those people's minds. My mother was very proud of her son, who had few other distinguishing factors and she mentioned it to Jack Margolis, a pharmacist and anthroposophist. He explained to me that by means of the teacups I had the ability to read people's mind. It led me to a lot of trouble. I stopped when one of the assistants came to me and I saw in the teacup the outline of the shadow of an angel that looked very similar to this person. I quickly said, no I hadn't seen anything but I must have gone quite pale. After lunch she came to me full of tears. She had heard that her cousin had died and told me she had looked exactly like her cousin.

So my mother got more and more proud of me. She took me to a cousin who wished to talk to me, after which I wanted nothing more to do with teacups. As a test there was a visitor present. No tea, no cups, just sitting quietly to see if anything arises.



In PE there was a rich cafe owner who drove a red Porsche. It was the only one in the city, so I couldn't say, "I see a red Porsche", as the woman would take great offence if this was indeed on her mind. So instead I said, "I see a red sports car". Her husband said, what nonsense and stormed out of the house, but my vision was proved quite true, as it turned out. So, I had this kind of vision but stopped

using it after bad experiences. Whatever it was, when people came to me I sometimes had very frightening premonitions. Batya Daitz had made very similar experiences. She was running a funfair pretending to be a Gypsy fortune teller and she also came to that unknown ability. She told me this after I told her my story.

*1 Estelle and Ralph Kaplan with Basil and Minnie Gibaud and visiting lecturer Elizabeth Mulder (centre)*

Anyway, I had my own shop and was frightfully bored and had started writing. When my mother told Minnie Gibaud, she introduced me to the Anthroposophical Society. The people, mainly Jewish, were all very educated, had degrees and that sort of thing. But they often couldn't understand what Steiner was saying. I found it perfectly logical, on the other hand. So I soon became well-known and well thought of. Minnie Gibaud was my mother's friend and asked if we could use our own house to entertain an anthroposophical meeting because a great anthroposophist was coming from Holland. So we had a meeting at our house and I spoke to Dr Zeylmans about a certain book I was reading and he said, "My dear man I think that particular person is a journalist. You don't want to read a journalist. You want to read the person who knows what he sees." So I read a lot of Rudolf Steiner because Basil Gibaud had a huge library and he and Minnie Gibaud were lifelong friends of my family.

Since my 13<sup>th</sup>, my Bar Mitsvah year, I had been very religious - the religious one in my family and my Hebrew teacher discovered I had a wonderful singing voice. He taught me to read the service, which I did for my Bar Mitsvah, carrying the Holy Arc down the steps. I was terrified I'd fall down the steps with it. The family were very proud of me, believing I was going to be the new rabbi. But through meeting Steiner, for the first time I received an explanation of the Christ which made sense to me. Now my Christianity came to the fore.

I came to Camphill because I was interested in Anthroposophy. I was about to get engaged to a Jewish girl and met this cousin of mine and in discussion my interest in Anthroposophy came up. So he said, "But your future wife, does she know about this?"

So, I said, "No but it's not a big thing."

"Not a big thing! You're going to live with this woman into the future!"

Well, the next night, she, the woman I wished to marry, told me, "Enough's enough, let's break it off."

It was very amicable and very fortuitous.

Then Dr. König came out because Basil Gibaud was a very rich man and he bought this Lake Farm and wanted it to be part of the Camphill Movement, although after König and Gibaud met, they were arch-enemies. One was really English and the other a Viennese German and it just didn't click. But Lake Farm was part of Camphill. I doubt that Basil really had a prejudice against Germans. But he had a lot of people around, those moving in his wife's circles, and at that time there were terrible anti-German prejudices among the Jewish community.

To the same cousin who convinced me about the teacups and sparked my interest in Steiner, I admitted for the first time that actually, I should like to work with handicapped children. Well he told me that I should either have to go to university and study remedial education, or I could go to Camphill, Lake Farm. Then they began to have a training course, not in Lake Farm but in a place called Hermanus. I was 25 years old and heard they were

going to have a conference at Dawn Farm. That is actually why Dr. König came out, I think, but in the process, after I heard about a conference I was very keen to be noticed by Dr. König. I never got noticed and I was very disappointed. I didn't have the guts to tell him, look, this is my interest and I was so depressed on the Sunday when he held his lecture. I joined a long line after the gathering saying thank you very much for your lecture, but I never met him face to face and told him. And I berated myself afterwards! Ach, you silly goose!

On the Wednesday there was a note in the post about the conference, Regards, Dr König. I went to my parents. I had the shop and knew the conference was going to be during the Easter Weekend. The shop would have been closed but I wanted to go already on the Thursday morning.

My father wouldn't hear of it. "You can't do that. You got this shop from my brother, you're a shopkeeper and you can't go."

I said, "I'm going, whether you like it or not."

It was the first time I ever stood up to my father.

"Well, I'm not letting your mother run the shop on that Thursday and I'm not going to fetch her," he maintained, putting up all sorts of barriers.

I said, "Dad, I'll close the shop, but I'm going to the conference."

It was the first time that I ever dared to gainsay my Russian father, who had been through a very hard time in those years after 1918 in Russia. Not that the Segals were in the pail. They had money and they made the uniforms. But when the war started they moved somewhere in the Ukraine, about 300 kms from Kiev. There was a terrible pogrom there at the time.

Anyway, I went to the conference with Walter Brecker and Jack Walker, by car. I was going to Cape Town. I didn't tell anybody but I was going to leave, finally. On the last day, after I hadn't said a word to anyone, not a word; I was there and I found myself standing next to Dr. König. You can imagine the difference in height. And he said; "So Mr. Segal, when are you coming to join us?"

You can imagine, if there would have been a hole to dig I was digging it. It was embarrassing. So I said to him, well, I'd very much like to, but I have a shop and I have to sell it. He said, "To waste your time is a pity. To waste our time is even more of a pity, but to waste the children's time is unforgivable." I'll never forget those words.

I saw this as a sign and having met Anthroposophy and joined the Anthroposophical group, I went to Ralph Kaplan in Cape Town and asked him if he had a job for me. He had his designer, Tony Prichard and other workers, but Ralph kept me on a string for a long time.

So it was a call and I wouldn't say that I always got on with Dr König but we had a good correspondence until I wrote an article on positive nationalism. Julian said it was very good and that I should send it to be published in the Camphill magazine, *The Cresset*. The editor of *The Cresset* was still Dr. König at the time, so I sent it off to him. He always called me Melville but now a letter came back: "Mr Segal, I would suggest that you read the following lectures by Dr. Steiner, in which you could be convinced that there is nothing positive about nationalism. Regards, Dr König"

We did our training course with Hans Müller-Wiedemann and Susanne. I found I had two left feet so I was Suzi's despair but she still volunteered to be the godmother of our first child. I joined Dawn Farm in 1963. Before that I had been at Lake Farm, but it was in the same year. I only spent about three months in Lake Farm and then they sent me to Dawn Farm.

Sometime later, Julian Sleight and Heinz Maurer were sent over to become priests in Germany. After they came back I went to the first service that they held in South Africa with the Camphill friends in Johannesburg. They brought with them Michael Heidenreich's father, who impressed me no end. He was fantastic. I spent a week in Johannesburg in which time my dear wife must have heard about my comings and goings, because he came to Dawn Farm. By then I had joined Dawn Farm and met my wife there.

I met my wife, who was told by her aunt, my mother's best friend - you know how it is in Jewish circles, everyone's related, "There's that Jewish chap in Hermanus (because Desiree came from Hermanus), and you must look after him."

She took her aunt very literally. It was about three weeks later that we were wanting to announce our engagement. There was an Easter weekend coming and we decided that we'd have our engagement announcement then. My parents were coming and they were so delighted that I'd finally met a Jewish girl.

I went to this first Christian Community service because I'd been at Dawn Farm and heard about or met Julian Sleight and he told me he was going with Heinz to become a Priest. Then I was a free thinker with a very open mind about religion and Desiree was also Jewish, so we got married in the Synagogue and didn't think I was losing out. But then Alfred Heidenreich came out and Julian finally became ordained. Alfred Heidenreich came with them to South Africa and I went to that first Service in Johannesburg and spent a week there. Friday night I arrived back. Heidenreich had already given his talk at Dawn Farm. I remember telling a girl over supper on Friday about a book, I think by Heidenreich, on the Christian Community. I explained to her how, in the rising years of 1933 to 1939, Christianity was seen as the religion of a dead Jew. His book was on the history of the Christian Community. Desiree was adamant that she wanted to tell me about the lecture of Dr Heidenreich at Dawn Farm. She had taken notes and now told me about this lecture. She had not had any interest before and told me "I'm not intellectual", but this had absolutely captured her. It was amazing.

Our first child arrived. It was very difficult with her parents in Hermanus because I insisted that our first child be christened. Her mother wouldn't come and Desiree came out in a terrible rash all over her body, so it was all a big emotional turmoil that my Jewish child should be christened. Hans van der Stok was the godfather and Suzi was the godmother. It always amused me because when Michelle was born I said, congratulations to your godfather. I wanted to call her Michaela, but that was too unusual so we called her Michelle.

We finished our training course there and I had become very friendly with Julian. We had groups of people in the community, what we called the Camphill community. Julian was the leader of that group, which was worldwide. Dr. König in our correspondence said to me, you know, after you've finished your training you should go to Israel. There's a lot of

Anthroposophy there. But I didn't want to be killed by an Arab bullet. I wanted to be in the village. I hated that Hemel-en-Aarde valley, as I felt so claustrophobic there.

Then Hans and Suzi went back to Germany and Mark and Rosalind Gärtner came to replace them, with Rosalind becoming the principal. I wrote a very strong, horrible letter to the powers that be, asking why they should have to import a principal. It could have been one of us who took on the role of principal. But no one listened to me, because I was only the administrative secretary who used to take the notes of the meeting out of my business experience. Finally, the village was found by Mark Gardener. Julian moved there; he had returned, and so was his wife and his sister-in-law, Veronica. There was also a strange man, whose name I've forgotten who made a lot of trouble.

Just before I left, there was this tragedy in Hermanus, more or less at the time Julian came back. It was 16<sup>th</sup> Dec., Dingaans' day and a very independent, strong-minded co-worker took a group of young adults to the top of Babylon's tower, which was the mountain overlooking the valley. As they got halfway up, the mist came down and these being handicapped people, he had to stop. One of the handicapped person's took the weakest person by the hand and said he would go back and look for help. The young person who was taken by the hand was never found. Eventually the one who was supposed to look after him turned up at a neighbouring farm the next day without him.

John, who was in my dormitory, had, while they were waiting, his precious hat blown off. As he went to fetch it, his back was broken when he fell over a rock. This tragedy on the mountain where John and Michael were killed was in 1965 and I spent the night on the mountain with the bodies, which was like an initiation. Pictures going through my mind - pictures of the previous life of John, with a Zulu connection somewhere, though this might not be related to the incident. In the morning at 5 o'clock, I could no longer walk. They took John's body away, and I was helped home and after a steaming hot bath, as it had been freezing cold even in December. I was completely spaced out because I'd had this huge experience. So, the 16<sup>th</sup> of December has always been a special day.

We finished the training course, Julian was ready to start the Camphill Village. Mark Gärtner had taught me woodwork. His father was the man behind the development of Iyre. He taught me and I was most surprised that I could do it, but I liked it. So, I took over the woodwork shop at the new village when it was finally built. They had in the meantime built a prefab house, which still stands, as the next house in the village and the acting state president did the opening because his niece had Downes Syndrome and was at Dawn Farm. Then, because he was coming, they undertook the renovation of the terrible road that led to the village. Julian got Murray and Stewart, with their big machinery, to make the road, which had been drawn up years before but had always been viewed as just a dream, according to the people that drew the outline of the road - the town planners. That is now the road that is there came about.

I wanted a change and Desiree wanted a change because our daughter was ready to start school. She started at a little Afrikaans school where the teachers insisted on teaching her in English but their own English needed teaching, so we both wanted to go. Karen von Schilling wanted us to come to Cresset House, which was what eventually happened.



So we were in Cresset House from 1977 for about 7 years. This is where I get a little hazy because it is nearer the present, because my normal memory doesn't exist anymore. I was still writing and wrote a play which was seen by Lionel Abrahams, the great South African poet and he wanted it performed. Unfortunately, the Market Theatre wouldn't buy it unless I invested about R3000, a ridiculous sum. I had one of the best producers look at it. She loved the play, but we couldn't persuade the Market Theatre to take it on. That is one of the things I really regret. It would have been a real stepping stone for me. Then my back caved in. A German anthroposophical doctor said I had to find a way of not sitting anymore, to do my writing standing up. But it went from bad to worse as I visited various specialists, orthopaedic surgeons etc. Then particularly Desiree wanted us to be in a home of our own and not a house mother, because of the four children, two of which needed a lot of help, oddly enough. Today they all have degrees. Joel and my daughter are now supporting us in the home here. They've been wonderful.

Then Tuppy Manton grabbed us to join Cluny Farm, opposite where Novalis House used to be. It was in a valley and was run by a very eccentric woman, Helene MacDougall, who was a darling. They didn't want anything to do with Anthroposophy, especially the Trustees. Tuffy Manton was a naval officer and he sat looking out at the world as if he were still standing on his ship. You could almost hear the seagulls cry. I really was very unhappy there. And Julian was so happy that I was unhappy.



But I wouldn't come back to Camphill. However, just that time, Veronica Jackson did a project as an outreach to a newly developed township called Atlantis. She started what came to be called Orion. During those first years, Orion was run outside of Atlantis, on a plot covered with Wattle and completely unknown. There was no local support and hardly anyone knew about it. Veronica wanted to move on and Julian then arranged for the

Community Chest to fund Orion, for three years, with the aim of helping us stand on our own feet by the end of that time. Veronica was very pleased to find me having one of my Sunday depressions when she told me all about the project.

"Don't worry, Melville, we're inviting you to be CEO of Orion!" I could have danced, I was so happy. And Desiree was so unhappy because she had a very good job at Pharma Natura working for Stan Witfield in the financial department.

So I took over the Orion project. Those were, and will always be, the crowning years of my life. What I managed in that period truly amazed me. I've written a book about it. It was

published; self-published. I was at that stage selling books. Renate Sleight's translation of a German book and my book. Annette Chouler was my outlet at the church.

I built the organisation up, starting from this place outside of Atlantis. We got funding from overseas, and quite a lot from Camphill and from the business sector. I was the fund-raiser, and soon became good fundraiser, a professional fundraiser. I attended a kind of forum for fundraisers. I even got the man who founded that particular group of fundraisers, an experienced fundraiser, as a personal friend. He took on Orion and raised a lot of money especially from one of the Rotary clubs that took us on. As a family we didn't live there, so I had to commute every day and that finally got to me. We were living in Plumstead, near the Waldorf School, so that my children could go there."

At this point the interview itself ended and a discussion on Melville's writings continued. Not just his book on the Orion project, but also what he wrote on the Kabbalah in its relationship to Anthroposophy. None of these are available in published form at present.

*Rehabilitation in a deprived community* Rehabilitation in SA | . v35 n1 (1991): 2-7

[Turn right at Magnolia Street](#), Parklands, Western Cape 15 Seafarer Close, West Coast Village, Parklands 7441: Tiferet Pub., 2006.

*Sounds of Creation from the Tree of Life – The Harmony of Soul and Spirit sounding today out of the ancient Tradition of Kabbalah* Unpublished manuscript.