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The Incredible Journey of Freddy Reddy

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1. FREDDY'S STORY

1.1. A REMARKABLE JOURNEY[1]

"The bodies are stored here," Perumal pointed. It was Freddy Reddy's first day in the mortuary. "This is our office for paper work and out there are the autopsy tables used for opening cadavers. It's a smelly business at times."

A sanitised stench permeated everything. It was a curious smell; the odour of cut-open bodies preserved by cold and chemicals.

Freddy worked in the mortuary for one day. The next, to his delight, he was transferred to the X-Ray department. They needed a clerk who could read and write and Freddy had completed primary school.

That is how Freddy Reddy's journey starts – at Durban's King Edward VIII hospital in the year 1952. I meet him fifty-two years later, in the seventh decade of his unbelievable life. One Sunday afternoon, I get a call from Oslo telling me he's coming to South Africa for a conference and some workshops for the Mpumalanga government, could we meet.

His journey is reminiscent of myth and legend. I had wanted to make it into a film, a documentary to inspire fellow South Africans to reach for something big, something extraordinary in their own contexts. "Freddy Reddy was the guy who walked into exile in 1957, all the way over Africa to London," I told potential production funders "He studied medicine in Oslo – in the Norwegian language – and became a doctor, and later a successful psychiatrist. This is a documentary about his incredible journey."

[1] By the end of 2003 I had hoped to pursue the idea of making a documentary film about Freddy Reddy's journey out of South Africa. As part of my Masters degree coursework I had completed the Documentary Film and History course and followed this up, in the first half of 2004, with a Creative Non-Fiction Writing course. Using elements of creative writing often associated with fiction, I wrote a piece, included in this section, based on what I knew of the history of Reddy's journey. It serves as a summary of his story and an early expression of the creative process that accompanies the research and technical aspects of making a documentary film. The information was sourced from early correspondence between Dr Reddy and myself, from our first (unfilmed) interview, and from portions of his unpublished memoirs.

Of course, Freddy never walked the entire length of Africa. Not quite, but the history of his journey is no less remarkable, including how he became a doctor in Norway. "I did not just sit on my arse waiting for someone else to do things for me," Dr Reddy says.

His name might be a poem, but if Freddy Reddy were a part of grammar he'd be a verb. He was always doing something, going somewhere, performing an action.

While working at the hospital, Freddy managed to complete a high school certificate attending night classes at ML Sultan College. At the same time he was starting to awaken to the political situation in South Africa and the impact this had on fellow workers.

Wages were low, but workers were not permitted to operate or join unions. Freddy and a co-worker started a Social and Sporting Club – with the blessing of the hospital authorities. But it was a front for workers to discuss their employment conditions and low wages. Through the efforts of Freddy and his colleagues, workers got increases, as well as back pay the hospital had withheld.

More than anything Freddy wanted to study. He wanted to be a lawyer. Because of the institutional and personal incidents of racial discrimination he faced in South Africa, he felt he had a better chance of getting somewhere in Europe.

How would he get there? He had a week's wages and nothing but a passport. He tried to get a job on a Europe bound ship, this didn't work. He decided to go overland, northward across Africa and see if he could reach London. So this is what Freddy Reddy did.

To get to the Mozambique border Freddy and an acquaintance called Paddy got a lift with an Indian family returning to Nelspruit after a wedding. They rode in darkness, in the back of an enclosed truck to somewhere near the border where they were dropped off.

Freddy had with him the clothes on his back, a small rucksack with a few personal items and ten tins of sardines. At the border they handed the official their passport.

“You don’t have an endorsement,” the border guard said. “Sir, my passport is valid, what seems to be the problem?” replied Freddy. The man hesitated a moment, then said, “Indians are not permitted to travel outside of Natal without an endorsement from the immigration authorities. You’ll have to return to Durban and apply for permission from there.”

Freddy remembers this incident. “The situation was desperate,” he says. “My spirits sank. In my mind I could see the boys from my neighbourhood laughing and jeering at me.” Eventually the border guard, against regulations, let them pass.

In Mozambique, before sunset, they met a local celebrity, a soccer player known throughout the country. Intrigued, he wrote the travellers a letter of introduction and support. Freddy recalls that the letter would help them get lifts northward.

On their second evening, they knocked at the door of a church. The man who answered lived nearby and opened his home and shared his food. With his family the modest hosts slept on the floor while their guests, Freddy and Paddy slept in their beds.

Roads were hazardous or non-existent. After a stretch hitch-hiking north they were dropped off in dense bush. Using an old map, they walked for hours through the bush, crossing rivers, hoping to find a village in which to spend the night. The following days would be the same. It was slow and exhaustive travelling.

One late afternoon they came across an Indian trader who had built a shop of mud and thatch to trade with the locals. They were pygmies who hunted with bow and arrows and who smoked their tobacco with the burning ends inside their mouths. Freddy recalls them staying with the trader for a week or so, until they regained their strength.

To reach Beira, they took a canoe down the river Buzi. Freddy and Paddy rowed downstream, passing crocodiles and hippos, all the way to the ocean where they met up with a motorised boat heading up to the port city.

I marvel at his story. I tell Dr Reddy about my progress in the development and pre-production phases of the documentary. In fact, I only recently receive a call from the National Film and Video Foundation. They ask me to forward a draft script. I oblige and take it as a positive progression. Dr Reddy wears a light-blue suit and leather shoes; he drinks cappuccino and sits upright in his chair. He has aged well, he looks fit and healthy.

He recollects Beira. They had an unsuccessful stint with an elephant hunter who proposed they pool their money to buy a gun and ammunition. The hunter described how they would make a lot of money. But it turned out the man had no hunting experience at all, and the plan never materialised.

From Beira to Blantyre in Nyasaland, present day Malawi, they took a train. Freddy remembers the hard wooden benches and the view from the window: it was dense jungle for most of the way.

“The train driver was a Goanese man called Gomes,” he recalls. “At one of the stops I introduced myself. When we reached Blantyre he asked us to stay with some friends of his,” who lived in the same compound. “That Saturday night we all went to a dance together, and I did the jive all night” Freddy says.

On that Monday morning though, Blantyre police detained Freddy and Paddy. They were told they could not legally travel through the country without money to sustain them. They’d have to leave within five days. Freddy convinced the authorities he had rich relatives who were sending money. But the money never came and they remained in custody until a wealthy merchant put up the twenty pounds each required for them to continue their journey.

To get to Tanganyika, they took a cattle boat over Lake Nyasa. Freddy remembers the tempestuous waters and rank smelling cattle. It was a very unpleasant voyage.

In Tanganyika, present day Tanzania, they took trains or hitched rides on trucks. If they arrived at the next town or village late into the night, which they frequently did, they would sleep on verandas or under trees. Everywhere, Freddy told of his plans to reach London.

From Dodoma, Tanganyika they discovered a bus going to Nairobi. “The bus drove through the grassy plains of the Serengeti,” Freddy remembers. Giraffes were scattered across the plains, nibbling from the tops of acacias while on either side of the valley the landscape ascended steeply. “Suddenly like an extended thumb Kilimanjaro rose from the plains into the sky.”

Nairobi was a bustling city with a prominent Indian presence. The weary travellers found a few nights’ refuge at the Sikh Temple. “To get to Uganda we caught a lift with a beer delivery truck,” Freddy recalls. “At the Equator the driver stopped.” Then they continued into the northern hemisphere.

This was the first time Freddy felt he would make it all the way to London. “If they returned me to South Africa,” he says, “I would’ve held my head up and said, ‘I tried – I failed but I tried.’”

But there was still a long way to go with many obstacles ahead. Paddy would fall ill without money for the hospital account, and the border with Sudan would be permanently blocked off because of the war.

In Uganda, news of the two South Africans travelling across Africa to London had spread throughout the local Indian community. Freddy remembers befriending many people, particularly younger folk fascinated by their journey and ambition.

One such person, a young man named Praful, arranged for Freddy and Paddy to visit business associations, schools and community centres around the country where they spoke about South Africa, their journey and their plans. After each talk a hat was passed around for donations to send the two travellers to London by aeroplane.

This proved a successful course of action. Within two months they had spoken on dozens of occasions and Praful had collected enough to send Freddy to London. Paddy had decided to stay in Uganda.

That is how Freddy Reddy made it to London. It was not the end of his journey – in many ways it was the beginning. He would play an active part in the anti-apartheid campaigns with the likes of Kader Asmal and Mac Maharaj.

He would eventually move to Norway where he studied medicine. With only three months to prepare, he passed the entrance exam – in Norwegian. He emerged as a student leader and used this platform to create awareness of the conditions in South Africa and to fight apartheid.

For two decades Freddy Reddy was the foremost anti-apartheid activist in northern Europe. He lives in Oslo where he has a psychiatric practice. He takes on fewer patients these days, but is still remarkably active. He travels to South Africa and other countries where he lectures on aspects of social psychology.

Freddy Reddy's name is a rhyme – his life a saga. His first job was washing bodies in a mortuary. With one week's wages and ten tins of fish in his rucksack he made an incredible journey.

1.2. DISCOVERING FREDDY'S STORY

One of the most fundamental driving forces behind Freddy Reddy's 1957 journey was his desire to study further and become an 'educated person'.[2] Lack of economic opportunities and his displeasure at the prevailing racial prejudice in South Africa, and possibly encumbrances of class and latent caste discrimination prompted his departure. Other factors were his ambition, intelligence and a strongly developed sense of adventure.

Reddy first captured my attention in the late 1990s. He was one of the people interviewed in Hilda Bernstein's 1994 book, *The Rift – The Exile Experience of South Africans*'[3] in which well over a hundred South African exiles talk of the conditions and experiences of their life away from South Africa. Most notable in this collection are such names as Oliver Tambo, Frene Ginwala, Archbishop Trevor Huddlestone, Wally Serote and Hugh Masekela. In this volume of over five hundred pages, six are given for the experience of one Freddy Reddy. It is a personal account of his exit from South Africa, journey over Africa, and his eventual acceptance at a Norwegian university where he would study medicine.

For me, his story was particularly noteworthy for two reasons. Firstly, Reddy's was not a name I had recognised among the lists of political leaders, activists, musicians and writers. His name stood out in the contents page under the subheading 'Nomads and Pilgrims' because of its rhyming musicality – Freddy and Reddy somehow imbuing a comical yet mythical aura.

Essentially though, Reddy was an 'ordinary' person who left the country in 1957 to pursue the possibility of a further education. He had not been part of the nascent black political and community structures opposing apartheid nor had he any leadership or social

[2] From the filmed interviews with Freddy Reddy, July 2004 and January 2005. See the Documentary.
[3] H. Bernstein, *The Rift – The Exile Experience of South Africans*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1994. p. 46.

connections which would have helped him out of the country and into the overseas structures of opposition to apartheid.

Neither had Reddy triumphantly returned to South Africa in the early 1990s to rightfully claim a position of leadership in the new dispensation. He had been a contemporary of Kadar Asmal, Mac Maharaj and a young Thabo Mbeki in late 1950s and early 1960s London. But whereas those figures became prominent and established political leaders in post-apartheid South Africa, Reddy remained an 'ordinary' citizen.

This fact appealed to me, as the idea for a documentary film started to take shape – the history on film of a practically unknown figure to South Africans, who nevertheless had a remarkable story and life-journey within the context of recent historical experience.

The second reason I found his story particularly noteworthy was because the arduous and perilous nature of the journey itself seemed to hail a sense of shared South African-ness, being the story of triumph over exacting circumstances. The many pitfalls and obstacles he encountered, and his will power and determination to continue his passage to its final destination resembles the history of struggle against racial discrimination. It also resembles the reality of many South Africans' daily struggle up to the present.

His physical journey was remarkable; from the Natal coast, to Mozambique, over the length of that country to Nyasaland, from there on to Tanganyika, Kenya and Uganda; and from Uganda to London by aeroplane and eventually from London to Oslo, where this journey concluded. In Oslo, the high school certificate exam which was needed to gain entry into university was to be written in Norwegian, which Reddy managed to learn, first writing and passing the exam, then being admitted to university and finally qualifying as doctor and psychiatrist.

Thus, the documentary is not merely a physical journey but an intellectual and 'life' journey too. This, I believed, would find resonance with both the aspirational and intellectual faculties of a viewing audience. For these reasons I wanted to make a

specifically biographical documentary of a journey. Of course, Reddy's life encompassed many other interesting events, activities and relationships. This history though, draws on aspects of his initial life experiences in Durban, the reasons for his departure, and the 'episodes' and events of his journey, particularly the African leg.

1.3. FINDING FREDDY

At the time of my first learning of him, I did not know if Reddy was still alive – his story suggested he would have been in his mid to late seventies – nor did I know where I would locate him. I tried to get in touch with the author of the book, Hilda Bernstein and attempted to contact her through her publishers. I was hoping she would be able to point me in Reddy's direction.

The South African representative of Jonathan Cape, the publisher, did not have a forwarding address or phone number for Bernstein, but mentioned that she was living in London. In the meanwhile news had arrived of Bernstein's latest book which had been published in South Africa by Jacana. They in turn informed me that Bernstein had now moved back to South Africa, taking a message from me requesting her to contact me. Several days later, Ms Bernstein phoned me but was, unfortunately, unable to tell me of his whereabouts. After their interview she had lost contact with him.

I decided to conduct a search for Freddy Reddy on the internet. I initially confined my searches to Norwegian sites, which I thought might be the place to start because of his university studies there. Searches turned up several people in Norway with the surname Reddy, but no one called Freddy. Phone calls to the Norwegian telephone exchange, similarly, turned up no one by that name – he was not listed in their directories at all.

I didn't think to do a search of Norwegian mobile phone directories, but happened to stumble across one of these. It indicated a person by the name of Dr Freddy Reddy. Each time I phoned the number I received a recorded voice message in Norwegian. With the

help of Telkom's international dialling assistance, the operator in Oslo informed us that the number was not in use.

Fortunately, the last internet search also listed a residential address. So I wrote a letter to this address in Oslo. I explained who I was and about my plan to make a documentary about the journey of Freddy Reddy as an inspirational story from the past for a South African audience. Within a week or so, I received a reply from Dr Freddy Reddy himself. He was alive and well and residing in Oslo. In addition, he was planning a visit to South Africa. This is how I first established contact with him.

Subsequent to that we corresponded on a regular basis and arranged to meet. He came to South Africa for a Psychiatrists' Conference in late 2003 during which time we first met and had preliminary interviews. In July 2004 I conducted the first visually recorded interview with him, while in January 2005 we met for further interview sessions as well as recorded visits to various locations around Durban.