
Reviewed by Linda Bowles-Adarkwa, San Francisco State University, CA

“Each morning our class… started with a prayer and a Bible story. I was the only Jewish child in the class, in the entire school, for that matter. So, I had no choice but to join in with the rest of the class. We lowered our heads, but I kept my eyes open, as Mrs. Duminee began to pray in Afrikaans, ‘Liewe Jesus…’ The prayer always ended with her thanking God for making us white.” So begins Lorraine Lotzof Abramson’s memoir, My Race: a Jewish Girl Growing Up Under Apartheid in South Africa. Abramson, a championship runner, won three gold medals as a member of the South African track team in the 1965 Maccabia Games in Israel. The title of her memoir thus has a double meaning, referring to both her race as a white Jewish South African and her life as a professional runner. Although apartheid provides an inescapable framework for Abramson’s narrative, her focus throughout is on love of family and validating the power of her inner wisdom. Inspired by her American born son Gregg’s interest in family history, Abramson began the project to document the period of her father’s arrival in South Africa in 1920 until she left the country to settle in America in 1968. Abramson’s book takes the reader on a fascinating journey that spans five generations and several countries from South Africa to Israel, to the U.S. and to Ludza, Latvia. Although this remembrance of family history is written primarily as a legacy for her children and grandchildren, the general reader will find this first-hand account of life in apartheid South Africa and coming of age story compelling.

A number of Jews were among the first settlers of Cape Town in 1652. However, the greatest wave immigration occurred between the 1880s and 1930s with the arrival of Jews from Eastern Europe, particularly the countries of Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland. One of those immigrants was David Lotzof, the author’s father, who in 1920 left Latvia with his parents and siblings for South Africa. Ironically, new arrivals like the Lotzofs, who came to South Africa fleeing ethnic and religious persecution in Europe, found themselves in another equally oppressive society. By virtue of their white skin, however, Jewish South Africans enjoyed the benefits of a society founded on white supremacy. Abramson’s purpose is not to answer for the behavior of South
African Jews who found themselves on the same side of the oppressors, but to show how an ordinary South African Jewish family dealt with the political reality.

Sitting in Mrs. Duminne’s class described above, Lorraine was already recognizing her inner voice that told her race discrimination was wrong. “Even at the age of ten, I knew that her words were dark and ugly, but I also knew better than to contradict her…I wanted to ask, ‘Didn’t God make black people too?’ But I knew that if I asked that, I would surely get my knuckles rapped with the wooden ruler.” Thus, in the first chapter, Abramson introduces the motif of silence as a prudent response to the atrocities of the apartheid system.

Silence in face of repression was also how her parents coped with the political environment. Neither of them supported the ruling Afrikaner Nationalist Party and her mother held views that are even more liberal. “We are living in a fool’s paradise…how long does the government think it can get away with suppressing the blacks and all others who are not white,” she would ask. In response, Abramson’s father would remind his wife that there is nothing they could do about apartheid and warn her not to be so outspoken. “You can get in trouble if the wrong person hears you and reports you.” This conversation always ended with Lorraine’s mother voicing her desire to immigrate to Israel. It would take a convergence of circumstances to make them eventually leave South Africa for the U.S.

Throughout the history of South Africa, Jews faced substantial discrimination. Although freedom of worship was guaranteed to all in 1870, Jews were barred from holding certain government positions. In 1930 and 1937, quotas were enacted to curtail the immigration of Jews. And during World War II, many Afrikaners supported Nazi Germany and promoted anti-Semitic sentiments. Abramson, however, recalls that her family encountered very little anti-Semitism. In fact, Jews were thought to bring luck to such unlikely events as a prayer service for rain (it actually drizzled after the service) or as members of a national sports team.

Growing up in the sun-drenched, but ‘Fool’s paradise’ was not really so difficult for the young Lorraine. David Lotzof was a respected farmer of modest means. But even a white family of modest means could afford live-in domestic servants, including a house cleaner, a child-minder, and garden ‘boy.’ Although Lorraine had been cared for by Gracie, the Lotzof’s maid, she recalls that she never knew her last name, or asked her about her life or family. Such regrets would
come later when Lorraine was older. But at the time, her life was very full. Friends and family surrounded her and she even got a pony for her 2\textsuperscript{nd} birthday!
At five years old, she discovered that she could beat the neighborhood boys at running races. “Running provided me the sensation of freedom, both physically and spiritually,” she wrote. And running would change the direction of her life. She competed successfully in several local races and was selected as a member of the South African team at the Maccabia games in Israel in 1961. These games were the equivalent of the Jewish Olympics and were held every four years in Israel. The best Jewish athletes from throughout the world gathered for competition, camaraderie, and to strengthen their Jewish identity. Lorraine also trained for the 1964 South African Olympic team, but her hopes were dashed when South Africa was boycotted because of its apartheid system. This occurrence underscored for Lorraine how apartheid hurt both black and whites. The disappointment was bitter, but 1965, 19-year old Lorraine won three gold medals at the 1965 Maccabia games. She also met the “American,” who would become her future husband.
Although her parents were skeptical about the “American,” Lorraine followed her inner voice and waited three years to marry Richard. After marrying and relocating to the United States, Lorraine started a family and continued her life as a runner. She represented the United States at the 1973 Maccabia Games and won a silver and bronze medal. Although this was her last professional race, she was proud that she now represented the USA. Just as South Africa had been a haven for her parents, the United States represented safety and freedom for Lorraine. It was a country where her son could “…disagree with his government openly, unlike his mother who—by virtue of living in a police state—was forced to be complicit in a society I disagreed with.”
The remaining chapters deal with her life as a mother and proud grandmother, her parents’ eventual immigration to the United States, a family trip to her father’s childhood home of Ludza, Latvia, and the death of her parents occurring just three months apart. The journey to Latvia is surprising and dramatic, bringing the family story from Latvia and South Africa to full circle. Abramson is a novice writer and at times the narration is stilted. However, she recalls her story with clarity and compassion. In the last two chapters, she touchingly writes about the illnesses
and death of her mother and father. By telling her story, Abramson keeps her their memory alive for the next generations.

Other South African Jewish autobiographical accounts of apartheid-era include: *The Wild Almond Line* (Larry Schwatz), *Hershel’s Kingdom* (Dan Jacobsen), *Spilt Milk: Exposing White Lies* (Leonard Lotzof), *Shared Lives: Growing Up in 50’s Cape Town* (Lyndall Gordon), and *Let Me Create a Paradise God Said to Himself* (Hirsch Goodman). Abramson, however, presents a woman’s and athlete’s viewpoint of the South Africa’s apartheid era.

This book serves as a great primary source for Jewish Studies and Ethnic Studies researchers. It is an encouraging story, celebrating the survival and continuity of one Jewish family. In the epilogue, Abramson ends fittingly by provoking the reader to consider the similarities between anti-Semitism and other forms of religious intolerance and between apartheid and all forms of racial injustice.