

To be black and gay in Soweto

In an edited extract from the original essay, *Edenvale*, published in *Granta* this month, **Mark Gevisser** introduces Edgar and Phil — and what it was like to lead a double life under apartheid

Edgar had two wedding rings, he told me. He wore one on his left hand and the other round his neck. The first was a solid gold signet, conjuring the respectability of a Soweto patriarch: his marriage of over 50 years; his decent clerical job; his home shared with his wife and 15 of his progeny — children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

The second was a lush red silk tie, given to him by a male lover, since deceased. His family might have seen it as another item in his snappy wardrobe, but he wore it with purpose, to commemorate the man: “He worked for Liberty Life and he treated me so well. He was amazing! We would go places. It’s still there, the tie. It’s red, beautiful. I love that tie!”

Their wedding bands were the first things I noticed when I met Edgar and his friend Phil in 1998, at a Soweto tavern named Scotch’s Place. Both rings were assertive and masculine, planed rather than curved, and spoke of the substance and solidity of their wearers. Phil, like Edgar, was a married grandfather; he owned a home in a middle-class part of Soweto and drove a car; he was approaching retirement from his own clerical job at a commercial company in town.

These were the days when a wedding ring still meant you were straight, or in the closet. And so Edgar and Phil’s fingers flashed a particular code as the men sat in the semi-obscurity of Scotch’s interior, having chosen a table that put them in the direct flight path between the door to the yard and the bar. As patrons streamed in and out, Phil or Edgar would mutter something sotto voce, and a young man or two would linger for a moment, engage in conversation, and maybe sit down. By the time I left three hours later, chairs had been pulled up all around them and tables pulled together. All these young men had impossibly waspy waists, with button-down shirts neatly tucked into the smartly pressed jeans, or tank tops riding well above the navel: *amaphophodlwana*, Edgar and Phil called them, using *isingqumngqum*, the township gay slang, derived from Zulu migrant labourers; “small boys”.

“Look at them,” Phil said, with desire and disapproval. “We were not as free as they are today. Today they are very free. Very showy. You can see them miles away. I won’t go around with a boy in a skinny top and a belly button outside, no. No, no, no, no.”

Edgar and Phil themselves dressed with conservative style — sharp shoes, crisply ironed slacks, Pringle shirts, fine watches. Phil was diminutive and light-skinned, wiry and twinkly, with a neatly trimmed peppercorn beard and expressively creased crescent-shaped eyes. Edgar was tall, dark and well built — “a typical Zulu man”, Phil riposted playfully, pinching him in the side. He had the easy, straightforward confidence of a matinee idol or the lay preacher that he was: his shirt collar was opened to a gold chain, and he



Solidity and substance: A portrait of Edgar’s wedding ring, which formed part of an exhibition in mid-2008 of gay, lesbian and transsexual people in Johannesburg. For gay men during apartheid wearing a wedding ring meant you were straight or in the closet

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was given to exuberant laughter and emphatic stress. The two men bantered gently with each other, their intimacy suggesting that they might be old and comfortable lovers, which is how many saw them, although neither used this term to describe the other. Their friend Roger — a white man who introduced them to me and who has known them both for 40 years — believes that in another life, a free life, they might have made a home together.

Phil married for love. He met Mo on a train and fell for “her beautiful country smile”. She was on the way to the city to finish her teacher’s training. He carried her luggage for her from the station to her lodgings and kept an eye on her once she was there. Their courtship was urban and sophisticated, even in apartheid Johannesburg. On their first date he took her to the movies at Sophiatown’s famous Odin Cinema.

Such was Edgar’s love of men, on the other hand, that he paid no attention to the possibility of marriage until his parents died in 1957. After his father’s death he discovered that he would only be able to keep his meagre inheritance if he married, so he accepted the woman chosen for him by his relatives, and they quickly had a family; he gave up carpentry, and found the clerical job he would keep until retirement.

After Phil married, a neighbour found him work as a messenger in town. His wits were such that he was soon promoted to a desk job. It did not take him long to understand, as he put it to me, that “you have to be rich to be gay”, not least because you had to support two parallel lives. “In married life you should be a responsible and trustworthy man,” he told me. “That’s why I’m still in the closet.”

Phil and Edgar held much stock in being exemplary family men: to provide, to be home for dinner, to be sober. Gay men, Edgar had it, were particularly good at this. “The wife knows that you are responsible. She knows, at least, that you like to

improve the house!” This cut them the slack they needed to lead their complicated lives.

They never discussed their sexuality with their wives but Phil still cringes with humiliation when he recalls how he was once caught out. He had borrowed a book from a friend on homosexuality, and his wife came upon him reading it. He spluttered an excuse — it was just something he had picked up — and when the book went missing he assumed she must have thrown it away. Unbeknown to Phil, she had actually read the book, and loaned it to several of her girlfriends so that they might better understand their own marital circumstances.

I know this from the book’s owner, a younger black gay man, whom Mo once told: “I know what he is. I can deal with it. He’s a good man. And at least he is not running with other women. I’m not going to lose him.” Such are the tragic silences in marriages that she was not, ever, able to say this to Phil himself.

The last time Phil and I met, it was shortly after the polygamous South African president, Jacob Zuma, had been forced to concede that he had had a baby — his 20th child — as the result of an extramarital affair with a young Soweto woman. Phil disapproved strongly of Zuma but had some sympathy with his situation: older men needed younger partners, male or female, to keep the lifeblood — the bloodlines — coursing. Like their fathers, Phil and Edgar were patriarchs, with scant regard for the intimate needs of their women. They too were polygamists; unlike their fathers, though, their second “wives” — their second lives — were secret.

At that time Phil and Edgar barely ever saw each other any more. In recent years, they had been getting together once a month, when Edgar went to Baragwanath Hospital to collect his medication. Phil, who lived nearby, would drive over to meet him, bring him back to his house for tea, then take him home. Now Edgar was

too ill to get to the hospital and Phil did not like to drive the distance, all the way across sprawling Soweto, to Edgar’s home in Protea.

The last time I had seen Edgar had been in mid-2008, when I had asked him to participate in an exhibition I was curating, which told the story of Johannesburg through eight gay, lesbian and transsexual people. Although he was already ill and lame — he needed a wheelchair — he had agreed to take part, as long as we did not identify him in any way. For this reason, we used as his signature portrait a close-up photograph of his left hand, blown up into a 4m-high banner; his wedding ring a flash of gold on the ashen parchment of his wrinkled hand.

We had arranged for a van to transport him to the museum, and I wheeled him into the auditorium for the opening event. I had not seen him for a few years and I was startled at the change: the only memory of his heft was to be found in the folds of skin hanging off his gangly frame. Still, he was sexy, an outrageous flirt, his face igniting every time a younger man paid him any attention.

I watched Edgar intently as the South African Chief Justice, Pius Langa — a black man of his age — gave a keynote address underscoring the constitutional equality that gay people now had in South Africa. “This is wonderful!” Edgar said to me afterwards, gesturing expansively at the crowd. “Just seeing these young people makes me feel free even if it is too late for me.”

All the names in this piece are pseudonyms, and certain details have been changed to protect Phil and Edgar’s confidentiality. Some of the material used here is from interviews conducted by Zethu Mathebani and Paul Mokgethi for Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action. For a special subscription offer to *Granta* for *Mail & Guardian* readers, the quarterly magazine of new writing, visit www.granta.com/guard