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THE MONTHLY REVIEW

The moral struggles roused by Verwoerd

● The apartheid mastermind's deeds had a life-changing impact on the political convictions of his grandson and the two men who wanted him dead



MARK GEVISSER

Verwoerd: My Journey through Family Betrayals, by Wilhelm Verwoerd (Tafelberg)

The Man Who Killed Apartheid: The Life of Dimitri Tsafendas, by Harris Dousemetzis with Gerry Loughran (Jacana)

An Unwitting Assassin: The Story of my Father's Attempted Assassination of Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd, by Susie Cazenove (Rainbird)

There is this thing of the blood on my hands, linked to the blood in my hands", Wilhelm Verwoerd, the grandson of HF Verwoerd, said these words in a recent radio interview. They are a nifty summary of the predicament he explores in his new book.

He begins it with a startling image: his mother's trauma at having had to wash his grandfather's bloodstained clothes after his 1966 assassination. The water stayed red no matter how many times she repeated the process, and she carries the smell of the blood in her nostrils to this day.

Of course, the clothes needed to be washed to preserve them for posterity. They are now on display in a memorial museum in the white homeland of Orania. But while the rest of the family – and some South Africans – view them as holy relics, Wilhelm uses them to try and make sense of what one reviewer called his lifelong "vroeging": the word means "internal struggle" and has the onomatopoeic resonance of "churning".

He became estranged from his family when he joined the ANC in the early 1990s and later participated in a ceremony at Stellenbosch University to take down a plaque honouring his grandfather. For this he was disinherited.

The body of the book is a bildungsroman of sorts: the young man's awakening, as told through journal entries, letters to his betrothed, imagined letters to his grandfather, and memoirs. These are presented along with fascinating diary entries by Ouma Betsie from the 1960s, some quite mystical thinking about reconciliation, and interviews with black SA friends and neighbours, about what the name "Verwoerd" means to them.

The book is soaked in blood metaphors. Wilhelm believes, correctly I think, that the bloody nature of the two attacks on Verwoerd's life had a sacramental effect on his grandfather's legacy, evoking biblical sacrifice and the blood spilt by Afrikaners in the SA War. Similarly, the revulsion towards Verwoerd by black



Seminal event: Emergency staff carry prime minister HF Verwoerd down the stairs outside parliament in Cape Town in a stretcher to an ambulance after he was stabbed on September 6 1966. In the background is a policeman holding the assassin's dagger. / Photographer unknown © TISO BLACKSTAR

South Africans – and many whites – attaches itself, in a visceral way, to the violence of these two events.

Verwoerd survived the first attempt, a close-range gunshot to his head by the farmer-businessman David Pratt at the 1960 Rand Show in Johannesburg three weeks after the Sharpeville massacre. He succumbed to the second, of course, six years later, when the parliamentary messenger Dimitri Tsafendas stabbed him repeatedly on the floor of the House of Assembly.

Two books have recently been published on Pratt and Tsafendas: read together with Verwoerd they provide fascinating new insights into those bloody events, their causes and their consequences – and an intense seminar on the workings of conscience, the meaning of madness and the dynamics of family trauma.

Harris Dousemetzis's magnificent biography of Tsafendas demonstrates convincingly how the state covered up mountains of evidence about Tsafendas's political history and motivations, in its efforts to have him declared insane.

It shows, too, how the accused's own defence team collaborated in this fiction – as did Tsafendas himself, trundling out the tapeworm to stop the unspeakable torture inflicted on him after his arrest; a tried and tested ruse.

The Dimitri we meet is a garrulous trickster and a political hothead, a stateless polyglot who wandered the world before coming home to commit to what he believed was his destiny; a destiny that

resulted in one of the most unconscionable injustices of both the apartheid and post-apartheid eras. Although he was declared insane, he spent as much time in brutal solitary confinement on death row as Mandela did on Robben Island, with no triumphant release: he died at Sterkfontein in 1999, forced to stay there because no one else would have him.

Dousemetzis insists that Tsafendas was a sane revolutionary acting according to his conscience rather than a madman listening to a tapeworm. But the story he tells sometimes challenges this, and does not quite reckon with its subject's psychological instability. Time and again Tsafendas up-ends the stability he resourcefully establishes for himself, as when he leaves a well-paid teaching job and a



Tapeworm defence: Dimitri Tsafendas in October 1997 at the Sterkfontein Hospital near Johannesburg. / Ellen Elmendorp

loving community in Istanbul, Turkey. Dousemetzis argues, though, that "there was nothing aimless about Tsafendas's life": like the ancient Greek hero Odysseus, he was on a constant mission to get back to southern Africa, and his life of "forced globe-trotting", as Tsafendas himself put it, was imposed upon him. Certainly, the circumstances of his life contributed to his instability, not least his "half-caste" status (he never knew his mixed-race mother) and the way his radical politics rendered him stateless.

He believed he committed an act of tyrannicide, legitimated by the Greek polis and even in Christian theology by Thomas Aquinas. As to the consequences, he liked to cite some verse from his favourite poet, the Turk Nazim Hikmet: "If I don't burn, if you don't burn, if we don't burn, how will the light banish the darkness?"

Particularly given his proximity to Verwoerd once he got the job of parliamentary messenger, Tsafendas believed it was his moral responsibility to kill him; if not, he too would be culpable for apartheid.

In Susie Cazenove's memoir of her father, we learn that Pratt's background could not have been more different to that of Tsafendas: as the former owner of the country's biggest herd of Ayrshire cows, he was actually a trustee of the Rand Show at which he shot Verwoerd. But he had a similar conscience to Tsafendas, "a sense of mission to give South Africa a particular message" arising out of "a personal guilt in my mind for everything that was going wrong in South Africa", as he put it in his

eloquent speech from the dock. This is what triggered "this violent urge to shoot... the stinking monster of apartheid that was gripping the throat of South Africa". Since committing the act, he told the court, he felt free and happy: "If you live under guilt you are never free."

The judge took such comments as evidence of insanity – and as Tsafendas submitted to the minister of justice – that it might have been a murder: Pratt was determined to be retried as a sane man.

Pratt had submitted to the insanity plea against his will, at his daughter's urging: Cazenove, then a young woman, was told by his lawyers this would spare him his life as well as his fortune, as he had signed a power of attorney in favour of his avaricious estranged second wife. If he were declared insane this would be voided and he might also find himself deported to freedom. Cazenove believes she was used by the authorities, perhaps in collusion with the lawyers: "I am sure that he had decided from the beginning, that no matter what they would find him insane and brush the whole thing under the carpet."

Like Tsafendas, Pratt was not easy. He was prone to mood-swings exacerbated by a debilitating epileptic condition and the drugs he took to control it, and his own family difficulties. Cazenove describes a loveless childhood, the infant death of his son, and his estrangement from his second wife and their young children. Her book, originally self-published as a family history, is engaging and sometimes disconcertingly bright given the subject matter, like the highveld light under which she lived. Her candour about the insouciant world in which she was raised packs a punch, in the way it illustrates the source of her father's guilt.

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Cazenove does not highlight her father's politics, while Dousemetzis does. He had been a member of both the SA and British Liberal parties since a famously enlightened employer. In 1954, he tried to set up a "coalition government" by bringing English and progressive Afrikaners together in an attempt to save the country. This was cited, by his doctors at his trial, as evidence of his delusional nature – a "saviour complex" as one of them put it. In his work on both Tsafendas and Pratt, Dousemetzis – a Britain-based Greek academic – asks us to reconsider madness. Are Tsafendas and



Historic mission: Wilhelm Verwoerd's first appearance on a public ANC platform as a member of the party. Below: David Pratt in Switzerland. / Wilhelm Verwoerd / Supplied

assassination attempt. When Tsafendas followed suit four years later, the rupture was devastating, and final. Living in white SA, his stepmother and half-siblings suffered greatly after his arrest, and none ever visited him or even communicated with him. When it was mooted he be released after 1994, they refused to take him in (as, shamefully, did the Greek community).

What happened between Pratt and his daughter Suzie – and what she carries – is harder to intuit. Clearly, they adored each other, but she struggles to make sense of him.

Unlike the more distant historian Dousemetzis she cannot ascribe clear intention to her father's actions. Hence the title of her book, *An Unwitting Assassin*. She offers a bizarre theory: that her father was hypnotised by a friend, an Eastern European doctor named Werner Leigh. Leigh was obsessed with killing Verwoerd and spent hours discussing this with Pratt, who was also his patient. Cazenove reports that Leigh's former wife believes this theory too, and presents circumstantial evidence that Leigh was actually with Pratt at the Rand Show.

For his part, Wilhelm Verwoerd devotes himself to finding a way to reconcile the blood on his hands – as a white South African and as a Verwoerd – with the blood in them: his love for his parents and grandparents. Like his grandfather's assailants, he is driven by a sense of conscience, and an overarching mission.

"The more I see and read of you, the more I study our country's tragic history," he wrote to Nelson Mandela in 1990, "the more painfully I feel the responsibility and guilt" of carrying the Verwoerd name, and of using this name to address the effects of apartheid. He puts conscience above family loyalty, and if this means he has broken the "sacred bonds" of blood, then he has replaced these with a broader understanding of familial commitment, he writes: that of humanity.

One could argue, of course, that the younger Verwoerd is actually rehabilitating the family name by his laudable actions. And in his *wroeging* he second-guesses himself, wondering if he has embarked on his mission to feel better about himself. Unlike his grandfather's assailants, he seeks reconciliation rather than martyrdom, and his book is a compelling primer in this – and its limits.

The biographies of Pratt and Tsafendas offer tougher lessons about the thin line between madness and moral courage, and the value of suffering, immensely, for what you believe.

YOU'VE READ, NOW COME AND LISTEN

Please join Mark Gevisser in conversation with Wilhelm Verwoerd and Prof Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela on conscience, courage, inter-generational trauma and transformation.
Date: August 14 2019
Time: 6pm for 6.30pm
Venue: Mesh Club – 2nd Floor Trumpet On Keyes, 21 Keyes Avenue, Rosebank
Please RSVP to thabilem@tisoblackstar.co.za.