

Seeking justice in South Africa and Israel

By Steve Linde

BE WARNED! Once you pick up, “Train in the Distance: A journalist’s search for truth, freedom and revenge” by Larry Butchins, it will be hard to put down. It is the kind of book that will make you laugh and cry, as you uncover the intricacies of the riveting story, which starts in South Africa and ends in Israel. It is told through the eyes of “Adam,” an investigative and idealistic journalist who begins his career by exposing the evils of apartheid – and opposes the death penalty – during what the author calls “the years of struggle” in South Africa, but ends up moving with his family to Israel, where he is recruited by the Mossad to uncover the evil mastermind behind a suicide bombing.

The story begins when Adam Marks, a Jewish reporter who lives in Durban, is given the scoop of a lifetime: an interview with a top anti-apartheid leader via Rashid, a friend in Johannesburg. He becomes a target for the apartheid regime, and for reasons which will become clearer in the book, Adam and his wife, Francie, decide to leave South Africa with their children and move to Israel. There, in a terrorist tragedy, Francie’s sister and her mother are killed in a Hamas suicide bombing at Tel Aviv’s Dizengoff Center. And Adam, as it turns out, is picked by the Mossad to interview the man who ordered the attack. The climax comes when his two worlds come together in an explosive ending, which I will not spoil for the reader.

The book is fabulous “faction” – dramatic fiction based on facts – and is dedicated “to the memory of all victims of apartheid and terror.” The title, incidentally, comes from a Paul Simon song, whose lyrics are, “Everybody loves the sound of a train in the distance... everybody thinks it’s true./ What is the point of this story? What information obtained?/ The thought that life could be better is woven indelibly into our hearts... and our brains.”

Despite its tragic backdrops – apartheid and terror – the book somehow keeps your hopes up right until the end, when it’s difficult not

to gasp and smile. Butchins’ protagonist’s life mirrors his own life.

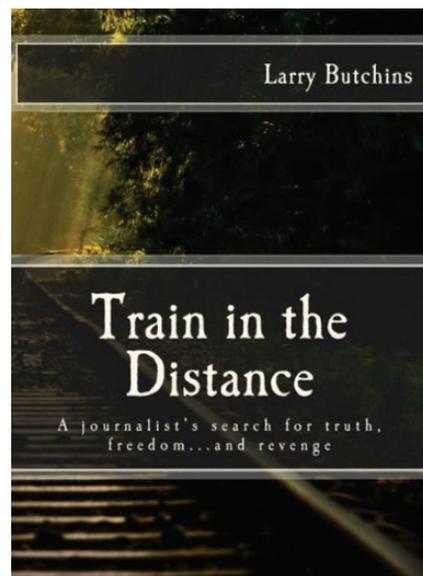
“As a journalist in Johannesburg during the early 1970s, I covered many of the actual events fictionalized in this story,” he says. “Several of the characters in the story are real-life individuals who I interviewed, and who did many of the things ascribed to them.”

Born in Cape Town, Butchins started in journalism as a cub reporter in Durban and moved with his wife, Marlyn, and three children to Israel in 1987, where he went into hi-tech marketing, wrote travel blogs and children’s books, became a professional actor and founded the Guild Theater in Ra’anana. The Butchins family now live in Tzur Yitzhak, north of Tel Aviv, and have three grandsons.

The book, he says, had been “on the boil” for about 15 years. Among other things, the protagonist – a journalist with integrity and high moral standards – opposes the death penalty.

“I felt it was important to bring a different story about apartheid-South Africa to the world. Not the usual story told from a point of view of a black person suffering under apartheid, but from that of a young, privileged white reporter with a strong social conscience, who hates what the policy is doing to his country and its people,” he says. “The spark to write it arose from a personal tragedy some years earlier, in which two members of my family were killed in a suicide bombing in Tel Aviv. While the story is not specifically about that event, it does highlight the protagonist’s personal conflict regarding his lifelong opposition to the death penalty (one of the cornerstones of apartheid government power) and the calls by many people in Israel to impose the death penalty on those planning and supporting acts of terrorism, of which his family has been a victim. One of the motivating factors for the protagonist to move to Israel was because it has no death penalty.

“I felt that, with the value of hindsight and viewed from another country, I could bring a different perspective to the fight against apart-



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heid, tyranny and hatred. I would like people to understand that the good fight anywhere in the world is predominantly fought by ordinary people who decide at some stage that enough is enough.”

It is important to note that Israel has carried out the death penalty once in the past – against Nazi mastermind Adolf Eichmann in 1962 – and after the latest wave of terrorist attacks, former defense minister Avigdor Liberman is again pushing for the Knesset to pass legislation that would allow courts to sentence terrorists to death.

Still, the book raises some important questions about the death penalty, apartheid, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and journalism as it tells a fascinating tale of a man in conflict in two countries in conflict. Being a journalist from Durban who considers Larry Butchins a friend and colleague, I am biased. But I highly recommend this book and, after imagining every scene as I read it, strongly believe it should be turned into a film! It will be woven indelibly into your hearts... and brains! ■