



JOHANNES MEINTJES

# LONDON DIARIES

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L O N D O N   D I A R Y  
1946 and 1958

*Johannes Meintjes*

## INTRODUCTION

The first part of this Diary was written at the age of twenty-two. Since early boyhood I had longed to go overseas, to see the art treasures of the world in the original, and to learn all I could about art and people and places. The war started while I was at school and any venture out of South Africa was discouraged and almost impossible until the end of 1945. By that time I had acquired a degree in literature and had established myself as a professional painter in Cape Town.

My first exhibition was held in Johannesburg at the age of twenty-one in 1944 and caused a sensation. I followed it up with my first in Cape Town which had a similar success. The war had brought about an unparalleled interest in the arts in South Africa, and this was to my advantage in launching myself as a painter. I was known everywhere and had more than my fair share of adulation and enmity. The war was drawing to a close and I knew that the time had come to spread my wings. Of the many young creative people who felt themselves trapped in Cape Town and elsewhere, I was the first to go.

I haunted shipping agencies and at last managed to secure a berth on a troopship, the vast old Aquitania, with about five thousand people on board, nearly all of them male. Being a troopship, and 'dry' on top of it, there was confusion as to how to deal with the handful of civilians. We had two meals a day, at the oddest hours, little comfort to speak of, and were not allowed to go ashore anywhere. Yet, having discovered beforehand who of the Capetonians were aboard, we found our own amusement.

My family viewed the whole adventure with misgivings, knowing how little money I had and how difficult it would be to come to my aid. My mother and three sisters left for a seaside village and I had to make do on my own. My mother told me frankly that she could not bear to see me off.

I have always been a bad traveller; I suffer from a ticket neurosis (even if I have it in my hand I have to look if it is really there), innumerable forms of Angst, a paralysing shyness and a gift for blunders.

As the huge ship sailed out of Table Bay, thousands of gulls screaming about us, it was lunchtime. I couldn't remember whether I was D for Dog mess or whatever it was, and having ascertained that it was B for Baker, I set out nervously for this mysterious destination. Soldiers and sailors streamed past at a run, clattering trays and cutlery, and having at last enquired about B mess, I was directed to a large sort of eating hall. It was down some steps and packed with men over steaming plates of food. I was ravenous. I descended the steps, feeling lost and alien. A tall officer in white stood at the bottom of the stairs surveying the surge of men. As I came up to him, I asked him if it was B mess. Yes, he said shortly. I gave an odd little laugh and said, well I suppose this is where I have to eat. Right, he said, where is your tray, knife, fork, spoon.... I blushed with shame, said I was a civilian, embarked at Cape Town, had no idea.... The man was quite young with startling blue eyes, and he stared at me with such a stern look that I felt truly frightened. Suddenly, and it was like a miracle, his face relaxed into one of the most beautiful smiles I have ever seen. Even those cold blue eyes sparkled. He put his hands on my shoulders as if

sensing my desire to flee — "I'll do it for you." This undreamt of gentleness came to me as through a haze. "Stay right here. I'll go and get the kit for you. No need to worry." He squeezed my shoulders and walked off briskly. Just then my sailor friend, George Gerhard, returning to the U.K. to be 'demobbed', yelled from the top of the stairs: "Johannes, what are you doing there! You are at the wrong mess!" I fled up the stairs. George had been on the lookout for me and his fears were well-founded. He helped me to the right mess. And often I have wondered about that trim officer with his extraordinary hidden charm, returning with the tray and the rest, to find me gone. It is not surprising that I never saw him again.

On arrival at Southampton the most important item of my luggage was missing: a suitcase with all my most valuable papers, cigarettes, best suits and so on. The customs would not let me through without it. The boat train was waiting. One by one my friends were cleared and sat in the train having drinks. Then Plum, as we called him — Lieut.Col. Plumbley -- took pity on me. He put on his coat showing his full rank and said to the custom's officer: "This boy comes from the backveld of South Africa, can't speak a word of English and is far too naive to smuggle anything. For God's sake let him through. The train is leaving!" And it was. A porter was hovering anxiously near me. The officer suddenly chalked my bags, the porter grabbed them, we rushed to the moving train, I jumped on, <sup>and</sup> my luggage was piled in. Cleland Finn pushed a beer into my hand. The angel of a porter ran alongside the train. I threw him notes and loved his grin, loved his English warmth, his humanity. And we were off, and I gulped beer and then whiskey, and thought oh God, I'm here, I'm in England -- I love the world!