The Assassin: A Story of Race and Rage in the Land of Apartheid

This small volume deserves to be read by those engaged in the study of modern South Africa. It also has interests for students of biography. The Assassin: A Story of Race and Rage in the Land of Apartheid is the first biography of Demitrios Tasfendas. Were it not for his assassination of Dr. Hendrik Verwoerd, the South African Prime Minister, Tasfendas most likely would not have merited even a historical footnote. The Assassin saved Tasfendas from the historical anonymity accorded to the assassins of 20th century notables such as the Archduke Francis Ferdinand and his wife Princess Sophie, Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and John F. Kennedy.

Van Woerden reminds his readers that race was an issue in Southern Africa long before the rise of apartheid. Tasfendas was born in Maputo in 1918 to a Greece-born father who formerly lived in South Africa. His father refused to marry Demitrios’ Euro-Swazi mother because she was not white and was not Greek. Officially Demitrios was classified as Greek, and therefore white. Yet to prevent “the half-blood” from becoming “a shackle around his legs,” the father shipped the infant Demitrios to his grandmother in Egypt where skin color was less of an issue. At the age of nine, because his grandmother was too frail to continue to care for him, he was reunited with his father in Mozambique who had married appropriately in the meantime. The wife did not want the “colored” Demitrios in her house, and he was sent to a boarding school in Pretoria for English and Portuguese speakers. It was at the boarding school that a teenaged Tasfendas learned of his African heritage. He became ashamed of that heritage. An adult, though apolitical and having sought more than once to have his classification changed to colored, he still advantaged himself to positions and opportunities which were barred to non-whites. Tasfendas wandered over Western and Southern Europe, the Americas and Africa. He was deported or denied re-entry by a number of countries, including South Africa and the United States. He was treated for mental
illness on a number of occasions in different countries. Tsafendas was able nonetheless to re-enter South Africa and acquire the low level messenger job—in part because he was not seen to be a non-white—which provided him with proximity to stab the Prime Minister to death in the chamber of the South African Parliament.

Like Henrik Verwoerd, van Woerd was born in the Netherlands. He lived in South Africa for twelve years, beginning at the age of nine and until his re-emigration to the Netherlands in 1968, six months after the murder of the Prime Minister. He visited South Africa in 1989 specifically to meet Tsafendas and to learn what had happened to him in the twenty years since the assassination. For van Woerden, a celebrated artist and novelist, the quest became a passion to discover "the real" human being who became a murderer and his motivations and "to render something of the South African trauma." The resulting book, an "attempt to achieve an anamnesis, a bringing back to memory of that which has been forgotten," is a fascinating account of a scholar as detective. His passion for what might be judged a rather minor actor in history is captivating.

A methodical researcher, van Woerden seemingly examined all of the possible information, buttressing thin areas with interviews with Tsafendas and others and with psychological deductions. Part of van Woerden’s task was not difficult. In seeking to answer what motivated the assassin, what the death of Verwoerd would mean for the nation, and in preparation for the expected trial, authorities had gathered a massive quantity of documents on Tsafendas. After Tsafendas was adjudged insane and incapable of trial, the material went unused until van Woerden consulted them. Van Woerden fashions an urgent tale that in real life unfolded in fragments spread out over many years and four continents. His book deserves to be read not only by students of history and biography but also by anyone with an interest in the sociology of race. Jacobson’s translation from the Dutch reads well.

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