The Sunday Independent (South Africa)

May 18, 2008
e1 Edition

In search of Spinoza and Adebayor:
Jeremy Gordin recalls a family pilgrimage that rekindled his faith in philosophy, football and the study of Hebrew

SECTION: DISPATCHES; Pg. 13

Length: 1686 words

Geoffrey Chaucer wrote that it is at the start of spring in the northern hemisphere, “when the short showers of April have pierced the dryness of March to its root”, etcetera, that folk “long to go on pilgrimages, and pious wanderers to visit strange lands and far-off shrines in different countries”.

And so it was that in the middle of last month my family set forth on a pilgrimage – or, rather, a few pilgrimages. For though there are only four team members – my wife Deborah, my son Jake, 13, my nine-year-old daughter Nina, and me – each of us, except Deborah, had a different agenda.

For example, last year, when he turned 13, I offered my son a trip to the proverbial land of his forefathers (spiritually speaking, that is – not Lithuania but Israel). But, apparently more interested in Emmanuel Adebayor, a footballer, than Theodor Herzl, a sometime journalist, Jake said the only place he wanted to visit was the Emirates Stadium in London, preferably while his beloved Arsenal were playing.

As for me, since the European leg of our grand tour was to be based in The Hague, where my sister-in-law and her husband live, I wanted to visit the house in which philosopher Benedictus de Spinoza had spent his last years, which is in The Hague.

Spinoza (1632-77) is billed as one of “the most important philosophers, certainly the most radical, of the early modern period” and was one of the few people ever excommunicated from Judaism. David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s first prime minister, tried to have him reinstated and even called in writer Amos Oz, then a young, unknown soldier who had written an essay on Spinoza, for a discussion on the matter.

“Spinoza’s views”, an entry on the internet continues, “also lay the foundations for a strongly democratic political thought and a deep critique of the pretensions of scripture and sectarian religion. Of all the philosophers of the 17th century, perhaps none has more relevance today than Spinoza.”
Still, though it seemed perfectly normal to my family to be interested in English premier league football or shopping at the world’s premier toy shop, it seems less so to want to visit the final home of a philosopher about whom most people couldn’t care less. Oh well, my family knew that normality was not a condition of which I could be accused.

I remembered that the official Spinoza museum (closed for a year for renovation) was in Rijnsburg. But I also recalled that Antonio Damasio, a Portuguese-born professor of neurology, had started a recent book on Spinoza standing in “Spinoza’s room” in The Hague. If Damasio could do so, why couldn’t I?

It was easy enough to find the actual address of the house where, as a reviewer of the Damasio book noted, “the prescient philosopher spent his last years, leading a frugal life, supported by his lens-grinding business, content to receive visitors in the intellectual “salon” of his small rented room, while smoking his pipe”.

According to the internet, it was necessary to telephone a certain number to make an appointment for “a tour” of the house. But there was no answer from the number, which was also listed in the local phone book.

I noticed too that there was a Spinoza Restaurant listed at an address not far from the house. I imagined some sort of tastefully lit, gourmet establishment, devoted to the memory of the august philosopher.

But when I telephoned the restaurant relatively early in the morning (Europe just doesn’t start happening until 9.30am), hoping for some information about the house, there was no reply.

According to the internet, the Spinoza Society of The Hague was hosting a dinner for eminent Spinoza scholars the following week. But, again, no one answered the society’s telephone. I tried the local tourist information bureau. But the person on duty said that “strangely,” there was no available information about visiting hours for the house and the only available telephone number was the one I had already.

There was a pesky cold wind blowing grit into our eyes and through Den Haag as my family and I set forth – into an older area of the city and one now mainly lived in by immigrants from Holland’s former colonies and Turkey. Finally, however, after an hour of misdirections and incomprehension from the inhabitants, we found, at the southern end of Paviljoensgracht, an 1880 statue of the thinker thinking.

But street works were obviously in progress and the rear end, so to speak, of the great man – “the devilish atheist” – was cluttered with spades, plastic traffic cones and various other detrius, and the sea gulls did not seem to think much of Spinoza’s head and face.

Still, there across the road stood the house where Spinoza rented a room from about 1674-77: a narrow Dutch dwelling, sandwiched between others, not especially noteworthy, but well kept and now with a plaque on it.
The curtains were all drawn – it was about 4pm – and no one answered the bell. It was then I noticed the Spinoza Restaurant three doors down the road. It was a tiny place with a greasy front window - a schwarma joint.

We went in for Cokes and fruit juices (at R45 a pop). The owner was a jovial and rotund Turk who had been in Holland for some 20 years and could understand my bad Dutch, based on even worse Afrikaans.

“Yes,” he said, “there is someone in the house but, you know, he,er,likes the bottle, and he is not really right in the head” – the restaurateur, or schwarmateur, put a finger to his head, turning it in a tight circle – “so you must just keep ringing the bell. But you should be able to go in, I think.”

I walked back up the street and kept my finger on the bell. My family, including my sister-in-law, mindful of the warning about the person in the house, stood to one side.

A window was flung open on the first floor. The person in the window was florid, unkempt, had no teeth and, though it was now 4.30pm, was dressed in a stained dressing-gown.

“What do you want?” he asked. “This is not a museum, you know.”

“I know that,” I replied with my most charming smile. “But it is the house where Spinoza lived, we’ve come a long way, and I believe that some of Spinoza’s library is still kept here and wondered if maybe we could just…”

I never finished my sentence. The man banged the window shut and, though I spent another three minutes with my finger on the bell, the house remained silent an apparently empty.

I don’t know whether the man was the owner of the house, in which Spinoza had just happened to stay 300 years ago and on which the city fathers had insisted on putting a plaque, whether he was a caretaker, or whether his hangover happened to be particularly bad that day.

But if Spinoza was looking down from heaven or up from hell (the existence of both of which he would have denied), the wily and privacy-loving philosopher must surely have cracked a smile.

And so the pilgrims moved onwards.

Everyone told me that it would be impossible to get two tickets for Arsenal’s game (against Everton) at the famous new Emirates stadium. Arsenal games are wildly over-subscribed – it is one of the most loyally supported football teams in England – and this was to be its last home game.

“Not for love or money are you going to get tickets,” was the prevalent wisdom, “and, if by chance you do, it’s going to cost you more than your monthly house bond.”
So for weeks, before we left on our pilgrimages, I worked the phones, as the Americans say, as well as the e-mail, writing or telephoning a mixture of pretty well-known bankers, politicians, attorneys, journalists, all with “serious connections” in London and a passion for football and Arsenal.

It would be unfair to name names because they did warn me that it was a lost cause. But, at the same time, they intimated that if anyone could find me tickets, it was one of them.

But, when we arrived in London, there were no messages for me. And the hands of my London family, who had also pitched in, trying to get some tickets, were also empty. My son was a picture of utter dejection.

“You can’t just walk into an Arsenal football match, dad,” he said. “What were you thinking? We’ll never get in.”

“Well, let’s head for the stadium,” I said to him on the fateful day. “I’m sure I’ll be able to find a tout.”

But it was the last home game of the season, not to mention the last appearance of Jens Lehmann, Arsenal’s famous German goalkeeper – and at the Arsenal tube station, and on the road from the tube station to the massive, gleaming stadium, there were no touts to be found. It was getting closer to kick-off time.

Then I spotted, close to one of the main gates, a pleasant-looking man in his mid-thirties. He seemed to be carrying a number of tickets. I walked over – noticing, as I did, that he had been speaking Hebrew.

“Do you perhaps have any tickets available for this game?” I asked in English.

He looked at me as though I had leprosy and started moving away (it is illegal to tout). So I tried Hebrew: “Not even a ticket for some South Africans who have come a long way to see Arsenal play? Not even for a young boy who wants, more than anything, to see Arsenal play?”

Five minutes later, after the man had made a mobile phone call, I had two tickets for the match. And the “contribution” that I had to make – over and above the ticket’s printed price of 46 pounds – was left to me to decide on.

Not until we had walked through the turnstiles and into the awe-inspiring interior of the Emirates – what a truly remarkable stadium it is, and what an amazing crowd spirit there is during the game – were Jake and I certain that the tickets were for real. They were.

Abedayor played – not especially well, as it turned out. In fact the star of the game, in which Arsenal beat Everton 1-0, was Steven Pienaar, a dreadlocked South African who plays for Everton.
Some pilgrimages you lose. But some you win. I will probably never see Spinoza’s room, but I have seen Adebayor and the rest of Arsenal cavorting in the London sun on an immaculately manicured pitch.

It seems you might simply have to keep up your Hebrew studies and keep your faith, even though Spinoza might have argued that neither one was the most important thing in life.