

## A Commemorative Feature

by

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<b>DR ANTON RUPERT: An extraordinary life</b>
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It is no coincidence that Dr Anton Rupert, one of the most outstanding men that South Africa has ever produced, was a son of Graaff-Reinet, for what other backdrop but the wide open vistas of the vast Karoo could have nurtured a man of such breadth of vision? What other landscape but the sparse, scrubby vegetation of this arid plateau could have created a man with so little artifice or ostentation? What panorama but the craggy mountains of the Valley of Desolation could have inspired such great humility and instilled such a sense of perspective?

At the core of his being Dr Rupert was an Afrikaner, a man of Africa, and his unshakeable sense of himself within this context and within the context of his rich cultural heritage was what enabled him to move within the circles of the global elite with ease and charm. Princes, statesmen and international business leaders dined at his table, yet he never forgot who he was or where he had come from.

The oldest of three sons, Anthony Edward Rupert was born two years after the outbreak of World War 1 on 4 October 1916. Growing up in a rural town in the South Eastern Cape with no electricity, running water or tarred streets, young Anton or Boetie as he was known then, displayed a lively curiosity. Having inherited his mother's love for reading, he would often sit up at night reading by the light of candles or paraffin lamps. He also absorbed important moral teachings from his mother Hester during the formative years of his childhood, one of which admonished him not to conquer the world and in the process lose his soul, a lesson that he never forgot.

Another of his mother's maxims that was to have a great influence on his later thinking, leading to many philanthropic actions, was to "Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shall find it after many days". These and other teachings helped to shape his character. They also enabled him to successfully steer his way through the many moral and political quagmires that he found himself in when doing business in national and international arenas.

Anton's great love for nature grew out of the long walks that he took with his father across the veld. John Rupert, a lawyer and respected community leader, provided his oldest son with an ethos of hard work, honesty, sobriety and being true to one's word. He advised him to be wary of praise and instilled in him a keen sense of social responsibility. He also impressed upon Anton the importance of minute attention to detail, a lesson that he was to employ to great effect in his later business life.

Oom Kootjie van Eeden, Anton's maternal grandfather and a descendant of one of the oldest Dutch families in South Africa, discussed national affairs with his young grandson at his farm Gannavlake and his Aunt Florrie, a teacher, took him on outings to museums and factories such as the Pyotts biscuit factory, Ford and General Motors and the Mobs shoe factory during annual family holidays in Port Elizabeth.

These provided Anton with tantalising glimpses into other worlds including the magical world of manufacturing which he found fascinating. He was also instructed in the wonders of the printing process, learning about typefaces, colour and form from his uncle Fred Knoetze, a printer at Somerset East who published the local newspaper. This instruction was also to serve him well in his later career.

Educated in Afrikaans, he matriculated in 1933 with three distinctions, winning a prize for the best matriculant in Graaff-Reinet. He wanted to study medicine but because of the financial strictures imposed by the Great Depression and exacerbated by the Great Drought of 1933-1934, this was not to be. Instead he did a B.Sc majoring in chemistry at the University of Pretoria, following this up with an M.Sc in applied chemistry. This divergence from his intended career was to have far-reaching consequences, not only in his own life, but also in the lives of many people both in the country of his birth and around the world, and he later said "I often thanked Providence for not receiving what I wanted at the time".

### **Important influences of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

As a young man Anton was inspired by the ideals of Dr Albert Schweitzer, the great German humanitarian and doctor, which centred on the belief in reverence for life. He was also shaped by many of the momentous events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century both at home and abroad.

By the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century many Afrikaans people had been reduced to abject poverty in South Africa. This situation had been brought about by the combined effects of the Anglo-Boer War, the Great Depression and the Great Drought. Afrikaners at the time also had a narrow career focus which concentrated mainly on agriculture, the professions of teaching and the law, and the church.

Believing that the remedy to the "poor White" situation lay in commerce and industry, Anton was convinced that only through an attitude of self-sufficiency would his people "pull themselves up by their own bootstraps". Deploing hand-outs he believed that "Economic independence is hard-earned, but it is the only real independence". His enormous drive to succeed was shaped in part by this belief.

The austerity of the Great Depression instilled in him lifelong frugality and an abhorrence for waste. It also brought about the belief that "An entrepreneur keen on entering the business world should concentrate on products that would sell even during a depression". He felt that in this regard he couldn't go wrong if he concentrated on cigarettes and liquor because in times of hardship people didn't smoke or drink any less. This astute observation helped to make him the second wealthiest South African in his time.

The greatest lesson of his life, however, came when the atomic bombs that finally ended World War 2 were dropped on the Japanese port cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, obliterating them. Incongruously codenamed Little Boy and Fat Man the bombs which had a combined force of 15 000 tons of TNT, were the most powerful weapons that had ever been unleashed in the name of war.

Realising that "In the nuclear century where nations have the capacity to annihilate all of mankind, we live like scorpions in a bottle", he believed that coexistence through partnership was the only possible route to human survival. The belief that "Your future and mine does not lie in fear-ridden division, but in fearless coexistence" became the cornerstone of his personal and business philosophy.

### **A believer in miracles**

Another abiding belief of Dr Rupert's was that "He who does not believe in miracles, is not a realist. To see your dreams come true, you need to be a practical dreamer; a realistic optimist". This ability to create miracles of endeavour from an idea characterised his entire career; the well-documented creation of the Rembrandt multinational conglomerate from an initial investment of only 10 pounds, being just one miracle he accomplished in a pantheon of many during a long and intensely purposeful life.

Dr Rupert personally regarded the pinnacle of his life's work, the "grandest, most ambitious scheme of his life", as being the establishment of the Peace Parks Foundation. To-date the Peace Parks Foundation has facilitated the establishment of six transfrontier parks in which South Africa has partnered with neighbouring countries to protect wildlife and open up ancient migratory routes.

Believing that it is “essential to do something useful with your retirement otherwise you die”, Dr Rupert was rewarded on 4 October 2001, his 85<sup>th</sup> birthday, with the release of 25 elephants from the Kruger National Park to the Mozambican side of a 3 metre high electrified fence which was a realisation of a 10 year long dream.

This landmark peace parks project, known as the Greater Limpopo Transfrontier Park will eventually translocate 1000 elephants, which might otherwise have had to be culled, to Mozambique. It will also see some 147 mammal, 49 fish, 116 reptile, 500 bird and 2000 plant species repopulate the Mozambican side of the peace park which was devastated by civil war.

Nepad has indicated that 22 transfrontier parks could eventually be created in Africa extending over 100 million hectares, which is the size of France, Germany and Switzerland combined. With tourism being the world’s biggest industry and objectives such as biodiversity, conservation, economic development and job creation, other important spin-off industries and educational facilities such as the Southern African College for Tourism in Graaff-Reinet, which is an initiative to train women to manage guesthouses in game reserves, have been developed which have already benefited thousands of people in the southern African region.

From a global perspective the World Conservation Union has estimated that there is the potential for 169 transnational conservation areas to be created around the world, which could involve 113 countries. In 2000 the Worldwide Fund for Nature South Africa (WWF SA) awarded Dr Rupert the prestigious Gold medal and Gift to the Earth Award for his amazing contribution to the conservation of Africa’s wildlife.

### **Thoughts on leadership**

Quiet, modest and innately serious Dr Rupert nevertheless had a shy, infectious grin and a quick wit. When an American journalist once asked him what his favourite forms of exercise were he replied, “I do mental gymnastics and I jump to conclusions”. On another occasion when he was asked whether he ever got headaches he answered, “No, but I give them”. These incidents show an endearingly human side to the Rembrandt patriarch, a side that many people around the world came to know and love.

A refined and diplomatic person who was unfailingly courteous and considerate, Dr Rupert had the ability to draw able associates around himself, inspiring in them an intense loyalty which was reciprocal as he, himself, was an exceptionally loyal man, believing that “I do not let friends down, I prefer loyalty and friendship to money”. This loyalty amongst his staff members, many of whom stayed with him up to their retirement or death, contributed enormously to his business success.

Himself a businessman of legendary versatility, Dr Rupert preferred to have generalists rather than specialists in key positions, believing that “Leadership is often more a matter of good judgement than of specialised knowledge”. He also believed that because “the heart is the source, the fountain of leadership” to him good management “involved a broader humanity” evidenced by appreciation and attentiveness to people and their problems.

His definitive thoughts on the subject of leadership were as follows: “The great need for the future is the development of more and more leaders in all spheres of life – leaders who possess the knowledge, mettle, conviction and human understanding to master the problems of a shrinking world, of freer trade, of the population explosion and the necessity of better living conditions for all people”.

### **Observations about entrepreneurship**

The most important lesson that Dr Rupert learnt early on in his career was that quality and service delivery, in other words value for money, were crucial to success, consequently an enormous emphasis was placed on quality in the Rembrandt Group. This concept of quality

ranged from product excellence, a Rembrandt factory poster read “Every cigarette MUST be a masterpiece”, to the policy of bringing the world’s most distinguished people into their overseas partnerships.

In terms of wealth creation he believed vehemently in small business, private initiative and deregulation; the triumvirate of success being creativity, innovation and individuality. In terms of globalisation and strategic alliances he was far ahead of his time and he always took the long-term view.

Dr Rupert was never complacent or content with the status quo and he constantly looked for opportunities, building networks wherever he went. His restless intellect continually sought technological innovation and modernisation as ways of forging ahead of his competitors and he believed in “first doing and then disclosing”. A prodigious worker who sometimes signed more than 60 letters in a day, he had a policy of clearing his desk every evening before going home, and once home he kept in touch with what was happening in the world by reading journals and other publications.

Dr Rupert’s definition of business was “to serve all communities honourably, at a profit” and he believed that business had a moral duty to put back into the communities from which they derived their income. He was averse to excessive organisation, preferring things to develop “organically” in their own way and time and he tried always to look at situations from every possible angle.

His definition of courage was “to be aware of everything that stands in the way and yet to still carry on unceasingly”. He believed “not in mass production, but in production of the masses” as a way of solving the economic ills of a country and he adopted an unfailingly positive outlook, accepting setbacks as challenges.

An outstanding example of these principles put into action was the setting up of the Lesotho National Development Corporation which he was instrumental in doing in the 1960s, which helped to establish industries such as carpet and tapestry weaving, furniture manufacture and wheat and maize milling in the mountain state.

### **Marketing genius**

As one of the most brilliant international marketing men of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Dr Rupert displayed an uncanny ability to read markets, discerning what people wanted from a product or industry. He was an exceptionally creative person and for decades he personally selected the name, background, design, colour scheme and legacy of every product in the Rembrandt stable.

He believed that each brand should have a distinctive “personality”, making the product easier for the salesperson to sell, and great attention to detail was given to the name, target market, price, packaging, flavour, texture, aroma and feel of a product. An outstanding example of this philosophy is the Oude Meester brand with its connotation of refinement, balance, maturity and dedication to the highest cultural ideals.

Another groundbreaking philosophy was to align his company with illustrious historical names and personages such as Rembrandt, the renowned Dutch painter of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Peter Stuyvesant, the legendary 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch founding father of New York, and Braganza Tea, named after Catharina da Braganza, a Portuguese princess who married Charles II of England in 1662. An offshoot of this philosophy of excellence was the later acquisition of some of the world’s most luxurious, prestigious and enduring brands such as Cartier, Piaget, Baume & Mercier, Chloé and Montblanc in the Richemont stable.

Professor Derrick Dickens, Executive Director for the Association of Marketers from 1986 to 2000, remembers Dr Rupert’s emphatic insistence on “continuity and consistency” with regard to advertising and he recalls that the only time he ever knew Dr Rupert to agree to a change of name was when the Society of Marketers became the Association of Marketers; Dr Rupert, a past prestigious Protea winner, having remarked that “society sounds like a social club”.

Regarded worldwide as the king of trademarks, Dr Rupert ensured that early on in Rembrandt's history his products' trademarks were registered in 70 countries around the world, which is a telling indication of his self-confidence as a marketer.

Outstanding Rembrandt innovations included a paper packet lined with aluminium foil, which came about because the company didn't have cardboard carton making machinery, Rothmans King Size cigarettes, which were a departure from the normal cigarette size at the time giving the customer longer smoking pleasure, and Peter Stuyvesant miracle filter, a revolutionary filter tip which was soon emulated by competitors. These and other innovations clearly established Rembrandt as marketers par excellence, a major factor that contributed to the Group's global success.

### **An enduring love**

Central to Dr Rupert's life was his marriage to Huberte Goote, his intellectual equal, his sounding board and loyal supporter, his lifelong companion and the great love of his life. Having also grown up during the Great Depression, Huberte was unfazed when the couple drove off after their wedding reception on 27 September 1941 in a battered little DKW which had a canvas roof that leaked so badly when it rained that she had to sit in the car under an umbrella. Although her father had said to Dr Rupert when he came to ask for her hand in marriage "I know you can't support her, but I'm sure you will manage in the end" she believed in him and their ability to build a life together.

The official founding date of the Rembrandt Group is 22 September 1941, a week before their wedding, and right from the start Huberte provided assistance in the fledgling company, becoming the first unofficial company secretary, however it was on the home front that her greatest contribution was made. When Dr Rupert travelled, and one year he spent seven months overseas, she kept the home fires burning, being both mother and father to the couple's three children, Johann, Anthonij and Hanneli. In telling family photographs she is more interested in her children than in posing for the camera.

Professor Derrick Dickens remembers Huberte as being "an absolute sweetie" who was not too grand to help the organisers of a banquet held at the Lord Charles Hotel in 1993 clear the room of its decorations afterwards. Cultured, friendly and unassuming she was a warm and considerate hostess who welcomed many international figures into her home and country. Huberte was the guiding light behind the Rupert's patronage of the arts and as a woman of great inner strength; she was the rock upon which Dr Rupert's life was built.

In all respects Dr Anton Rupert lived an extraordinary life. Businessman extraordinaire, visionary conservationist, cultivated patron of the arts, far-sighted conservator of historical buildings, loyal friend, loving father, faithful and devoted husband, Dr Rupert reached out across language, personal, cultural and national barriers in his unceasing quest for coexistence. He saw himself thus: "I am a human being with a Christian conscience, a child of the Christian civilisation. Secondly, I am a speaker of Afrikaans. Thirdly I am a South African. Fourthly I am a Westerner and fifthly a citizen of the world". Dr Rupert you left the world a better place – may you rest in peace.

Sources:

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