

## Autobiographical excerpts from the letters

For collecting these excerpts we are indebted to the research work of Sue Atkinson and Gillian Eilersen. Thanks to Sue for sending us the graceful accompanying notes.

**I am always forced to give biographical information so everything on me begins rather pathetically: "Bessie Head was born the 6 July, 1937, in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa... One had to begin somewhere."<sup>1</sup>**

**You were born out of wedlock. Your father's particulars are unknown. Your mother was a European woman, Bessie Amelia Emery, who died on 13 September 1943. It is probable from the file that she was a South African citizen.<sup>2</sup>**

**My mother was a white woman, Bessie Amelia Emery. She had been married and returned to the family home in Johannesburg after a broken marriage. Her family reared racehorses for the Durban July Handicap and my father, a black man, worked in the stables. My mother acquired me from this black man. When the family found this out, they removed my mother from the family home to the Pietermaritzburg mental hospital while she was pregnant and that is where she gave birth to me.<sup>3</sup>**

**I am a very independent person, and it was quite acceptable to me that I should grow up with no relatives ... The family plan was to obliterate my mother even before she died. She had a grandmother who opposed this. When the family came down for the Durban July Handicap) she insisted on a stop over in Pietermaritzburg so that she could visit both my mother and I. My mother's brother used to shout in great anger at Nellie Heathcote: "We want to forget this matter but the old lady won't let us!" To him it was in order to pack a human being away forever in a mental hospital.<sup>4</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> From a letter in the archives of 27 December 1983. Beyond the barest facts of her place and date of birth, she was reliant on information given to her by others, by whom she was told that she had been fostered shortly after her birth in the Pietermaritzburg Mental Institution where her mother was an in-patient.

<sup>2</sup> From a letter in the archives of 13 May 1964. It was not until after Bessie Head's arrival in Botswana in 1964, when she was required to make information about her parents available to the authorities, that she contacted the Pietermaritzburg Child Welfare Society who had taken care of her shortly after her birth. According to Bessie, the brutal information above was all that she was given.

<sup>3</sup> From a letter in the archives of 25 June 1985. Bessie Head made another attempt to obtain information from the Child Welfare Society in 1984, two years before her death, this time for the autobiography that Heinemann had commissioned her to write (letter of 6 June 1984). This letter also failed to obtain any new information from the Society.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.