

Chapter One

If history teaches us anything, it is that freedom is not achieved in a day; nor, once achieved, does it necessarily last forever.¹

Family

I literally fell into politics at the age of fourteen, a happening that set my life on a path to prison, exile and finally return to South Africa. What triggered the event was a cycle ride round the streets of Hillbrow on my elder brother's bicycle when, not expecting to find a meeting by the side of the road, I made a sudden slide from the street onto the pavement. The speaker was Hilda Watts, Communist Party candidate for the Johannesburg Municipal Council. Her words, belted out in an unfamiliar English accent, somewhat clipped and rhetorical as I remember them, evidently made sense to me and I stayed to listen. The gathering she addressed was a street-corner meeting of a dozen or so individuals, most of them black, voteless, domestic workers, and a small crowd of bemused whites standing on the periphery of the assembly. A few onlookers turned their heads towards me, but the meeting continued as if nothing untoward had happened. Conspicuous in the gathering was "Ginger" who, while watching me re-set the handle-bars of the borrowed bicycle, introduced himself as Philip Lieberman, aged sixteen and a communist. He told me that if I was interested I could come with him to the next weekly meeting of the Young Communist League, to be held in the city. And so it was that I went in that same week, in February 1944, in search of Ginger and Communism.

I was not disappointed. The memory of that meeting is still with me. In addition to Ruth First, Ginger was there and so were Joe Slovo, Paul Joseph, possibly Ahmed Kathrada (Kathy), Lionel Forman, Lucas Masebe (the national chairman), and a few Africans, somewhat older than the rest of the group of about 30. As I write this over half a century later, I realize that many of them are more than names to me. Together we were comrades, ready to change the world. Some of them are dead, others are no longer committed, and the rest – a handful of veteran stalwarts – serve in the new democracy. There are some that I remember more than others from that first occasion. For instance, Ruth First, Paul Joseph, Lionel Forman, and Joe Slovo stand out most clearly. Ruth and Lionel were the stars, however, and whatever fired them also drove the others. Both their lives were cut short. Lionel, a self-assured Socialist at sixteen, died young in 1959, in his early thirties and Ruth First was murdered in 1982, still in her fifties. I still see her image

as she was at that first meeting: eighteen, curly-haired, short and ill at ease, pursuing her points at breakneck speed. She was earnest, self-conscious, and miserable with caring, but it was her energy and directness that marked her out from others.

It was not surprising that I joined the Young Communist League when I was so young. As far as I can remember, my mother was quite unsurprised by my association with communists or “communism” and it never occurred to me to ask her permission, which makes me think that I was sure of her approval. The stories I heard from her of the revolutionary events of February 1917 and the Bolshevik’s great victory had stirred my interest in the Left from an early age. She had come to Cape Town from Krekenava, a tiny village near the larger town of Ponevizh, in Lithuania, in 1908. This was two years before the whites in the four colonies embraced to form the Union of South Africa, leaving the majority of Africans virtually outside the constitution. She came to South Africa with her sister, Rosa, on the death of their mother. Mary was twelve and Rosa seventeen, but the younger sister, my mother, had the historical memory. She would tell us with all the dramatic flair at her command of the *pogroms* in her village, lowering her voice to a stage whisper at times, as if this conversation was not meant for the ears of the “gendarmes” whose brass buttons gleamed on their military tunics (in her imagination) as they searched for hidden draft-dodgers in the closets and cupboards, flinging doors open, ready to shoot if necessary; frightening the timid old men and women and leaving indelible memories of cruelty on the impressionable minds of the children. The militia searched for *Bundists* and young men hoping to escape from military service in the Tsar’s army. Years later, in South Africa, she would refer to the police as “buttons”, an epithet for the security police who in the 1950s conducted numerous raids on our small flat in Yeoville, Johannesburg. What she encountered on her arrival in South Africa in that fateful year of 1908 was a culture shock from which she never really recovered.

Her father, Ber Witten, had come to Cape Town with three brothers, Harry, Abe and David in the early 1890s. David Witten, the youngest of the three South African Wittens fought in the South African War – on the side of the British. I have a photograph of him in military uniform, small, very young, sallow in complexion, somewhat timid in appearance, intense black eyes half hidden beneath a pith helmet, his tunic complete with a broad medal-less sash. David emigrated to the USA soon after the war, joining four other siblings there (three brothers and a sister) whose descendants I only discovered in 1999, a century after the war began. My grandfather, Ber Witten, stayed in Cape Town, while two of his brothers later settled on the Witwatersrand where they established themselves as part of the immigrant community. Whether they sold wares to Africans who journeyed to the goldmines from their villages or were involved in other entrepreneurial activities, I never learnt. They were probably unaware of the affinity they shared with the migrant streams of African labourers who travelled back and forth to their

families over a regular cycle of time, sending monetary remittances and replenishing the family and the labour force.

Ber Witten journeyed to and fro in a parallel stream of migrancy, sent money home just as they did and similarly increased the size of the family on each occasion he returned. But it would seem that the act of replenishing the Witten family was not confined to the *shtetl* from which he came and went but was continued rigorously by the “bachelor” brothers in Cape Town, creating a “coloured” generation of Wittens who bear the family surname but about whom little is known. In Cape Town my grandfather, Dov Ber Witten, as he was formally known, lived in District Six in the inner city. His house on 84 Caledon Street no longer stands but it was there that he established a popular Jewish and Hebrew Bookshop and lived alone in the quarters upstairs until my mother and her sister joined him. In the yard at the rear of the bookstore he supplemented his income by killing chickens according to kosher ritual. I am not sure how he acquired this skill and nor do I know how he came to practise circumcising the male infants of the Jewish community, but whatever the source of this learning, Dov Ber was the *Shochet* and the *Mohel* in Cape Town. When he was not practising either of these professions, he provided the readers, prayer books and possibly the works of Sholem Aleichem and other popular Yiddish writers to the religious and literary local Jewish residents of Cape Town.

My mother and Rosa neither knew nor loved their estranged father. Their mother had died after a long illness in 1908, before she was forty. “Cancer”, my mother would say (too afraid to utter the word beyond a whisper). After her death, the two girls were sent by their elderly grandparents to join their father in Cape Town, from where they were taken on arrival by horse and cab and rode in silence from the foreshore to Ber Witten’s spartan space in Caledon Street, too overcome by the discontinuities of their lives to recall any strong feelings they may have had about their new home. They spoke no English and knew no friends. The culture of schooling in Cape Town was far removed from any learning they’d experienced in Lithuania, so it must have been quite a shock when Mary, the younger of the two girls, was sent to the Normal College, a secondary school in town. Her teacher asked the class if there was anyone present who spoke Yiddish. A slender, fair-haired girl approximately her age came forward. They sat together talked a great deal and became firm friends. She was Annie Kotkin, later a leftist activist, who after completing her schooling left Cape Town for Johannesburg. Mary soon followed and the friendship continued.

Annie married her second cousin, Lipman Kotkin. Mary married Mark Levy, my father, a Lithuanian from Weeds about whose background I perplexingly know almost nothing at all. For years after his death at the age of forty-four in 1935, his photograph, together with all those of their socialist immigrant friends, lay in a cupboard next to a large box of Black Magic chocolates, now holding Mark’s gold-rimmed *pince-nez*, his

false teeth, and under them notebooks containing his poems and short stories, written in Yiddish. They were never published as far as I know and the memorabilia in the chocolate box were discarded only in the 1950s. But the photographs remained. One of them, a photo of my mother and father was taken when they were still courting, the two of them much engrossed in each other and very young. She was probably not yet twenty-one and he about five years older, a tall, strapping man in a dark blazer, rather distinguished in his rimless *pince-nez* and elegant shirt collar. He had a long face, dark brown eyes and thick black hair meeting in a widow's peak in the middle of his forehead. She, slimmer than I'd ever seen her, was dressed in a loose black summer dress, looking obviously happy. In another photograph they appear together with a group of *landsleit*, next to a large wicker picnic hamper, very engrossed in what was being said by a dozen or so men and women whose faces I do not immediately recognise.

Some of them were Socialists. Most of them, I believe, became successful in business, prominent in the Krekenava Society and the other *landsleit* associations that linked them to the tiny *shtetls* they had left behind in Lithuania. Some later became active in the Communist Party of South Africa or the Jewish Workers' Club, made up of just such a band of social revolutionaries, enthused by Lenin (and Trotsky's) leadership and the victory of the Bolsheviks in 1917. It must have been Annie who introduced Mark and Mary to the Jewish Workers' Club and to the band of socialists who seemed to gather frequently in a series of formal picnics at the Johannesburg Zoo Lake. Maybe it was a clandestine style of meeting or simply a festive form of socializing, but I doubt whether my parents were formal members of the various Leftist organizations in existence at the time. These were the Jewish Workers' Club, the International Socialist League and the Communist Party, which was formed in 1921 at the time of their marriage. As far as I can tell from my mother's account, they shared the goodwill of their friends towards Socialism and like them fervently followed the advance of the fledgling Soviet state whose red star they believed was in the ascendant.

My father's death in 1935 sent my mother into seclusion. She mourned his departure for years and kept the memories of their life together private, sharing virtually nothing of their relationship with the family. None of my siblings knows much more than I do about him and his memory is even fainter because of the loss of his poems and stories which might have given us insights into how he felt and thought. He had volumes of works written by Sholom Aleichem and other Jewish writers but these were bequeathed to either the Krekenava Society or the Jewish Workers' Club, as none of the family (with the exception of my mother) read Yiddish. The books were bound in green leather covers and lay gathering dust under the divans in one of the bedrooms of our flat in Yeoville. We were nevertheless proud to share something of his legacy with his compatriots, little as it was.

The burden of providing for the young family was left entirely to my mother. Leon, my twin brother, and I were barely six years old, my sister Goldie thirteen, and my brother David, nine. Goldie was already involved in the rituals of courtship and marriage and David was away at boarding school. Leon and I, as alike as two peas in a pod, were similar in dress, interests and attitudes. He may not always be mentioned in this memoir, but we almost always discussed everything we did and felt strongly about. We took each other very much for granted as we did the shifts in the family's fortunes.²

As far as I can judge our finances were in a parlous state and rapidly declining. It was this slide in our fortunes that led to our moving from the rented house in Loch Avenue in the Johannesburg suburb of Westcliff, to a boarding house, the Villa Georgette, and then to a flat in Hillbrow. I was nine years old at the time (it was 1937 or 1938) when Germany was already in the hands of Hitler, and my relatives – momentarily trapped in Lithuania – were among the last batches of Jewish émigrés to leave their home and escape the Holocaust. Not all members of the family emigrated and those who remained suffered the fate of most of the Jews in Eastern Europe, especially those from countries that alternated in ownership between Lithuania, Poland and Russia. I remember my mother setting off to the Johannesburg train station to meet the new arrivals. As they climbed off the train she confidently named them, one after the other, Manny, Minnie, David and Harry, names easier to pronounce than their Jewish ones. Their mother, Beila Malka and her brother, Sleima Bensa, my father's siblings, were for some reason spared new identities. Once the greetings were over, they were all taken to a newly rented house near the synagogue in Orphirton, close to the goldmines, and a stone's throw from the mine dumps that abut the main road that leads directly to the centre of the city.

My last two years at primary school were dominated by the war. In 1941 at the height of hostilities our classroom teacher, a highly patriotic scion of empire, encouraged us to support the war effort. And so it was that we learned to knit “for the men and women in the armed forces”. Between lessons, Miss Beaucan would forego her usual instruction to us to fold our arms and sit still, and instead command us to take out our knitting! All 30 of us would then obediently turn our ink-stained hands to creating a multiplicity of coloured woollen squares for a quilt “for the armed forces”. It never occurred to me to query the true destination of the final product when all the squares were sewn together, but I somehow doubt that this would have been a commodity of use to the regular army. At this juncture there is little sense in speculating where it could have gone. It must, however, have adorned someone's bed for a number of years and I hope it gave its occupant as much pleasure as we had in creating it. I do occasionally smile though at the memory of the imperious command: “Boys, take out your knitting!”

The rest of my schooling was relatively unmemorable. At Athlone High School, where I remained until 1946, education was secondary to the YCL and the emotional and financial crises at home. I have no doubt that other boys in the “white” suburbs in the vicinity of my school experienced economic hardship, but adolescents are relatively unaware that their peers too have tensions, however different these may be from their own. It would be crass to contrast my situation with the poverty of black children, many of them dependent for their sustenance on the miniscule earnings of ageing grandparents or the meagre remittances of migrant fathers. However, I did not have that depth of insight then, and there were times when circumstances were too badly stretched for me to ignore the parched quality of our lives. Perhaps it was this that influenced my joining the Young Communist League when I accidentally discovered it. But while the circumstances of that discovery were serendipitous, I like to believe that our paths would sooner or later have crossed. This was especially apparent as my awareness of the country’s inequalities became greater during the contentious debates among the Left on the nature of the war.

Chapter 1

- 1 Eric Foner, *Who Owns History? Rethinking the Past in a Changing World* (Hill & Wang, NY, 2002), p. 109.
- 2 I hope to do justice to our mutual discussions in a collaborative memoir entitled “Twin Conversations”.