TAFFY ADLER

'My father could move from making fish and chips in a sweaty shop in Jeppe, to expounding on Marxist ideology, to taking me to symphony concerts at the Jo'burg City Hall . . . '

Taffy Adler grew up in a highly politicised socialist family in Bez Valley, Johannesburg, and imbibed a strong sense of cultural Jewishness in the Eastern European tradition. In the 1970s and '80s he was involved in the formation and consolidation of the black trade union movement, playing an important role in organising, negotiating, and policy-making. He was the CEO of the Land Investment Trust, an organisation involved in low-income housing, and is now CEO of the Johannesburg Housing Company, which provides rental housing for low-income people in the Johannesburg CBD. Before the April 1994 election he was convener of the National Housing Forum's Subsidy Task Team, and is presently a member of the National Housing Board.

Interviewed by Geoff Sifrin
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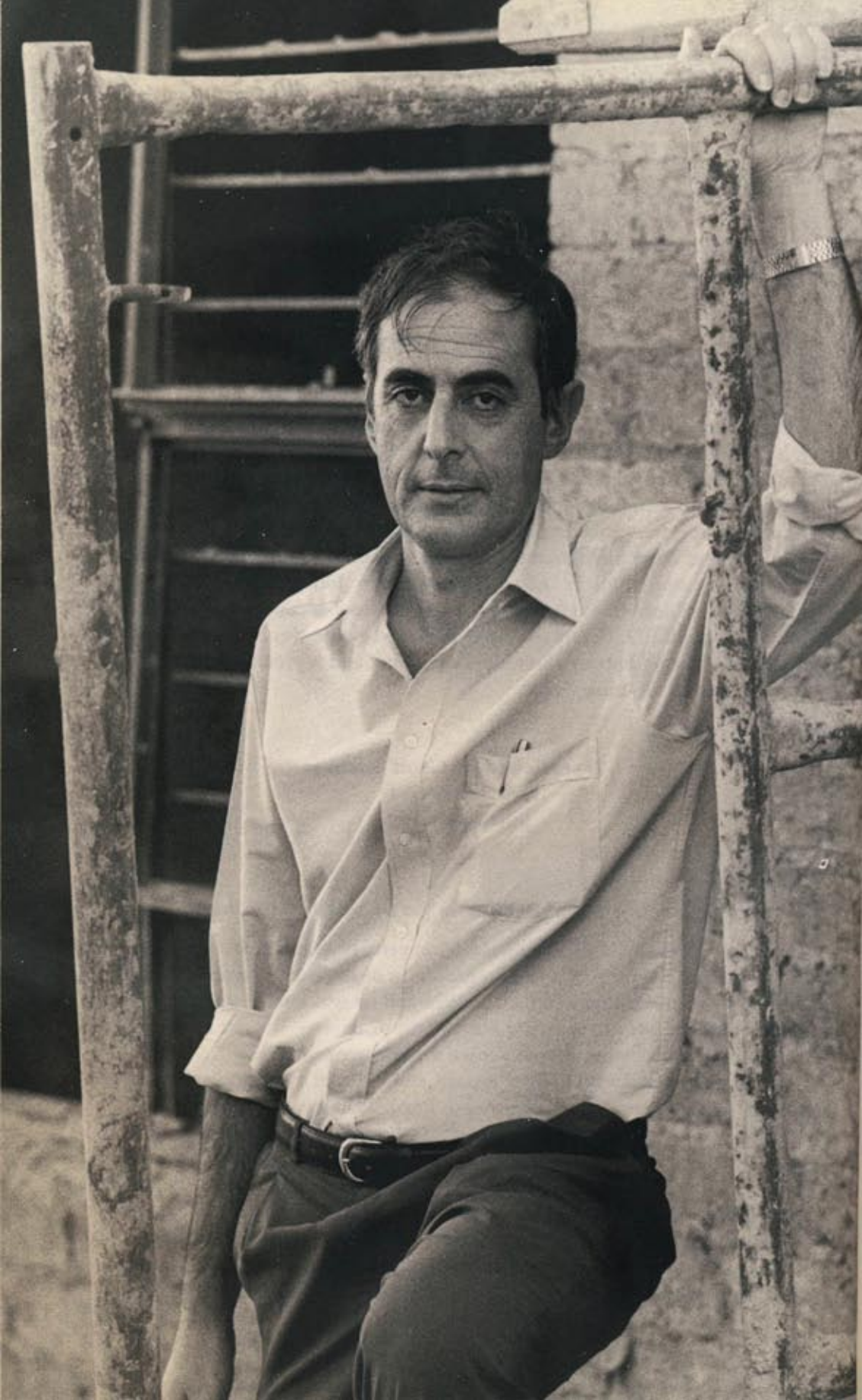
You grew up in a very political family. Can you tell me something about it?

I essentially grew up in a working class cum petty bourgeoisie environment. That was fairly typical of a certain grouping of Jews who came to South Africa. My father emigrated here in 1926 and he was one of two out of a family of eight who actually got out of Europe alive — the rest all died in the Holocaust. They came from a town somewhere near Vilna.

Our family was always short of money, and we lived in the poorer parts of eastern Johannesburg, Bez Valley-Judith Paarl. There was a whole range of families that my parents were friendly with who were part of a Jewish milieu. My father strayed from that milieu because of his intense political awareness — not so much his activity. My family, particularly on my father's side, has always been highly political, and it goes back to Europe, to the uncle that I was named after, Tevya, who at the time of the Tsarist rule in Russia and fascist rule in Lithuania . . . was involved in underground activity, and was in fact imprisoned for it. He spent ten years in prison and died there. What I



know about it is that the Lithuanian army was a hotbed of radicalism, and he was a soldier, and a member of the illegal Communist Party. Tevya was seriously involved in infiltration and politicisation in the army, around 1912. The rest of the family were involved in distributing information, which seems to be what a lot of the activity was at that time — organising, informing, and so on. Although many Jews from that context came out of the Bund tradition, my family did not. The Bund recognised a separate Jewish identity, whereas the communists didn't, even though Jewish communists, although they denied it, were very firmly Jewish. That is a theme that runs through even into South Africa.

My aunt Ray Adler (Harmel) had to flee Lithuania. She was part of a distribution network. She was sought by the secret police for distributing pamphlets, and there was stuff coming in from Germany and being distributed, mainly in Yiddish... the police came after her. She was allowed to go to a toilet, and she jumped out of the window, and then started a trek to Germany, and then via Hamburg to South Africa, where my dad was... He sent money for her... She came in about 1928-29, and they were both in their teens at that time... fairly young and hotheaded activity.

Did their activism follow through with them to the South African context?

Well, Ray's activism certainly did, whereas my father... well, his Jewish roots are really in an intellectual understanding of Marxism and ideology, and he became one of these guys who slips between working-class activity like painting houses, and petty bourgeoisie activity as he tries to escape it, like shopkeeping and tailoring and that kind of stuff. And his whole life was spent slipping between those two, never making much money, and going bankrupt a couple of times.

Where did he get his political knowledge and structure from?

He attended a yeshiva, but he became an atheist. I remember his comment when we went for my bar mitzvah, because the rabbi was not very respectful of my father... my father said that he could take him on any time in terms of his knowledge of the Torah, and he was probably right. But my dad turned against religion, and in South Africa he became very involved in the trade union movement — as a follower, not as a leader. And in the Jewish Workers Club, which was really this kind of *landslayt* place to be. It was a really fine example of all the best things about Jewish culture and tradition — it had chess clubs, theatre, choirs, its protests were often audacious and ludicrous — for example they were doing things like

Left:
Taffy Adler (Photograph: Gisèle Wulfsohn)

going to have picnics on Yom Kippur. And there would be intense debates about political events, particularly international political events. It was very much an international perspective, with a serious concern about what was happening in Eastern Europe. They were strongly anti-Zionist and fiercely Jewish in an anti-religious way. And that has been something that has grown with me, in the sense that I have always felt a Jewish identity. I'm sure that many of my personal philosophies stem from that... Well, for example, I think that our family had, in its different ways, a social commitment. Although my mother was not political, she was sensitive, she would always insist on giving beggars food, she would be fiercely protective of the family — those kind of things. She had a love of music and theatre. My father had political views which were about equality, and fiercely anti-racist, and he also had a profound understanding of the nature of people.

He always used to say that one of the problems with communism was that people weren't good enough for it. He had this sense of the pressures that people have in their daily lives, and how that often turned them into being petty or racist — he had a very clear sociological understanding of people.

You're suggesting a streak of humanism which lay outside his communist doctrine...?

No, it was very much part of it. He was a Marxist in the sense that he had an understanding of Marxist methodology, which understood the dialectic, which understood that people interact with their environment, and that that sometimes has very unsavoury results. And a lot of that was grounded in his own life. My father could move from making fish and chips in a sweaty shop in Jeppe, to expounding on Marxist ideology, to taking me to symphony concerts at the Jo'burg City Hall. So he had those sort of rooted experiences in what society was about, in a very wide sense.

What about your siblings?

Well, my brother is nine years older than I am, which meant that he was at university at a time when I was young. He often took me there. For example, I would go with him to the library to study. And he was quite involved in Nusas [National Union of South African Students] and student politics generally, and so from quite early on I was meeting radical political students from different race groups, going into the black townships like Alexandra, going with Ray's husband, Michael Harmel, the general secretary of the South African Communist Party... at that time, of course, Alexandra was a very different place to what it is now — less intense, a much easier environment. So, from a very early age I was getting exposure to a very different kind of South Africa compared to what my contemporaries were getting, and all of that stemmed very definitely from a

family influence which was intensely political. I also worked from an early age – I would help my parents in their shop on Friday afternoons and Saturdays – they had several shops, little cafés selling fish and chips, and so on. Cafés in industrial areas, in Jeppe and Selby, where you would make sandwiches for the workers, sell sweets, etc.

I also used to help my father paint when he was a house-painter. He had a job and he used to moonlight on the side, and I used to help him. Then later, when he was already much older, he got a job as the parking attendant at Wits University ... He took his job very seriously, as he did everything he worked on, and he became a real institution there. There is a story about Cora Bozzoli, wife of the vice-chancellor, who came one day without a parking sticker, and he wouldn't let her in. She said she was going to see Bozzoli, and he said Bozzoli usually let him know when women came to visit him. That story was told me by Cora Bozzoli herself. Also, Professor Mike Nupen came to park once without a sticker, and my father asked him for his name. When he said Professor Mike Nupen, my father said 'Oh, you are the other Marxist on campus.' He had a real sense of humour. He was also tremendously loyal to Stalin and Russian communism, and this fierce loyalty to leaders is also something that I have observed in my own work. In my days of trade union organising, you got a sense that once there was a leader, there was a very clear allegiance. My experience of black trade unionists, or perhaps working-class people in general, is that there emerges this very fierce loyalty to organisations and to people. For example, when I had been established as a regional secretary or a branch secretary, and had established certain levels of trust with the workers, the ability to give guidance and to direct was quite phenomenal, and at times quite unexpected. And this was familiar to me from that whole generation who were steeped in the traditions of the Russian Communist Party. I think the reason for this is that people instinctively understand that it is only through organisation and leadership that they have any chance of overcoming their difficult circumstances.

Did your father ever lose his loyalty to Stalin and the Russian Communist Party?

No, not until the USSR actually broke up.

What was your first contact with the organised Jewish community?

I joined Habonim and became quite involved in it for a time. We used to have the only group in Doornfontein. Because of the shrinking Jewish population in that part of town, it was an all-male group, called Trumpeldor.[1] We used to walk through Doornfontein to our meetings which were held in a shack near

1 Joseph Trumpeldor (1880-1920). The first Jew to be made an officer in the Tsar's Army, Trumpeldor settled in Israel in 1912. He was killed defending the Tel Chai settlement in Upper Galilee, his last words purportedly being, 'It is good to die for our land.'

Ellis Park. I was the last in the chain according to where we lived, and on Friday nights I would start to walk, and would pick up the others all along the way to the meeting-place.

I was involved for four years, and we prided ourselves in being an all-male group from the poorer side of town which could hold its own in activities ranging from the choir through scoutcraft (including cooking) to intellectual debate.

How did your father relate to your belonging to a Zionist youth group, since he was strongly anti-Zionist?

First of all, it was more of a social activity than an ideological one. But then his attitude was to discuss it rather than prevent me from going. We would also discuss the ideologies of Betar and Hashomeyr Hatzair.

Do you think that you carry within you any vestiges of the Eastern European culture, the shtetl culture of your parents?

That is a fascinating question, because there is definitely an essence of shtetl life that has carried through. Of course, I have no illusions about shtetl life, I wouldn't romanticise it. It was a grim, closed, poverty-stricken environment which bred pettiness and introversion. But at another level it bred a strong interdependence, where you have to give because it is an essential part of living, and it was warm, inclusive, supportive, intensely interactive with neighbours, with families and with friends — sharing of joy and sharing of problems. It has those two contradictory aspects.

I recognise that quality when I go into black townships here, or when friends from black townships spend the weekend at my house and say on a Sunday morning at 10 o'clock that they are bored because the neighbours haven't been in and out twenty times.

Our house when I was young had those elements. Sunday lunch was the high point of the week, where the whole family would gather and we would argue and debate the merits of socialism and other things in a highly argumentative way. And then the klabberyas game would start. Some people would go and sleep. But it would be a very intense interactive family situation. That atmosphere definitely carried through for me.

Another part of the Jewish shtetl for me, despite its introversion, was an internationalism which emerged from it. So I have that kind of consciousness as well, and I think it is that Jewish internationalism and intellectualism which I carry.

I see it sometimes when I look at components of South African Jewry. There are many South African Jews who I think are parochial, and who profess all the elements of traditional Judaism — they go to shul, they do the rituals, etc — and then sometimes you come across people at the same Paysach

seder table who are intellectuals with very fine minds, who will quote you poetry etc. That's the sort of mix that came through in my family. I feel a very strong link to that, and it is a link that I feel I can establish almost anywhere in the world, with that element of Jewry which is highly sensitive and highly political, intellectually and culturally alive.

Can you be a little more specific about the actual values that follow from that milieu?

My answer is instinctive, since I wouldn't be able to trace it back to any writings, biblical or other texts of great Jewish authors. I would say that the values relate to a premium on human life... I see myself as a humanist, as someone who values community, family... One of the things that comes through is that I have always been committed in my work to organisation and team-building. For example, in my time in Nusas, when I led the delegation from Wits to the national conference, our group of delegates always voted as a block, whereas the other delegations voted in all sorts of ways. That is because we spent a lot of time caucusing, trying to develop a group view, and would come to a consensus about the issues. Of course, I was accused by other groups of being highly dictatorial and brooking no dissent in the delegation, but that was not what it was about. And that team approach derived in part from my family's socialist atmosphere. My attitude has always been one of trying to work together as a group and to develop organisation. And that was a throwback to some earlier things that I had learned through my family background because, if nothing else, certainly socialism and socialist organisation is about creating organisations which are strong and successful.

That sort of organisation-building approach works whether you are a socialist or a Catholic. And that's been a theme throughout my political activity, to work within groups and build organisations. That was certainly true of the early trade union movement, where even though the organised groups were actually quite small, we were able through strong organising to have influence on a much wider scale.

There were quite a few Jews involved in the trade unions. Did you feel any particular link to them beyond a purely activity-related connection?

In the trade union movement, amongst the white activists, there were certainly a number of Jewish activists around, but there was no observable common view that arose out of them being Jewish. We were acting essentially as committed South Africans and not as Jews.

You became involved in the re-emerging black trade union movement at a time when it was in a very formative stage, a very important time, before blacks had

begun to wield their political power in a larger sense. Can you tell me what some of the highlights and crises were?

In general it was a very warm and constructive experience, and built the closest of all my friendships, both black and white. And it was a time when we thought that over time we would conquer the world. Because of the general oppression, there was very little else that was happening — the trade union movement was *the* movement. And it exposed me to a whole range of human activity, locally and internationally, which in general was about good, supportive solidarity...

The other highlight was just getting closer to ordinary people with all their warts. The important thing about the trade union movement at the time when we were leading it was that it was, again, at its best — there was no question of corruption, it followed all the best traditions of trade unionism, solidarity, internationalism, political altruism — all those things were there. And it was the interaction between intellectuals and workers that was unique in South Africa.

You talk about that time almost as a time of 'innocence' for the unions. Was it that?

Yes, probably. I think that many of the opposition institutions in South Africa have become more complex as they have come closer to power, and as society has become more normal. Certainly, the observable fact is that many of the trade union leaders have left the union movement and gone into politics and become distanced from the workers. And many trade unions are now struggling very hard at the level of organisation. Workers are not yet feeling betrayed, since they are still very happy that many of the people they fought to put into power are now there. We'll see how it develops from here.

The way I got involved in the trade union movement... I had been studying overseas at Sussex University, studying political economy, and then I came back to do my field work for the PhD which I had started. As a way of doing that, I got a job teaching history at UCT and then teaching political science at Wits. In fact, I had always considered myself a historian, and it is interesting that I have found myself in the housing field and in the trade union movement. I had been peripherally involved before, primarily in a fund-raising sense, which by the way is also a traditional role that the Jewish left has played in the opposition movement in South Africa... Then I got involved in a voluntary way in the Industrial Aid Society, working mainly on Saturday mornings, doing complaints and stuff like that — really terrible stuff that you hate to deal with. Like some poor bugger working for R20 per week who had been fired under the most terrible circumstances. And then the first set of bannings took place in 1976, and that included a whole range of people who were in the Jo'burg-based union movement, and others elsewhere,

people like Gavin Anderson, Judy Favish, Sipho Khubeka . . . And because of that gap that had been left by the bannings, I started to work full-time in the unions.

Until that time I had started getting involved and was playing a role in committees, but I wasn't there full-time. I was teaching, and I would come in and work at night and on weekends. Then in October of 1976 I came in full-time because of the removal of the other leaders. It also coincided with a major debate that had been going on around whether you conscientise the workers first, or organise them first.

That is, do you do things like literacy training through the Paolo Freire methods [Pedagogy of the Oppressed] and bring people to an awareness of what they should be doing, or do you just say let's join the union and let's go out on strike?

I, of course, came down on the organisational side. Which, again, is consistent with my approach over the years . . . And in a sense the bannings stopped one approach, the conscientisation one, and allowed the other to come in. Because the people who came in after the bannings were much more orientated towards organisational approaches . . . and from there we started to build the union organisations. The other major theme that was going on at that time was whether you should build general unions containing a range of workers and sectors, or sector-based unions — industrial unions. This of course is a general debate throughout union history — American unions went through the same things . . . And I was part of the group that was arguing quite strongly for industrial unions, with a federation, and that was actually the model which, after a lot of arguing, was adopted. Through varying stages, this led to the formation of Fosatu [Federation of South African Trade Unions]. I was wearing about fifty different hats at that time — secretary of the Industrial Aid Society, organiser for the Chemical Workers Industrial Union, etc. Part of the building-up of the organisation was making the link to the people in Durban, and then to the people in Port Elizabeth. That was an important influence on us, suddenly to find ourselves dealing with coloured workers who were supposed to be very conservative, involved in Tucsa [Trade Union Council of South Africa], the conservative white-controlled trade union whose language was Afrikaans. Until then Afrikaans had always been for us the language of the oppressor, and now suddenly it was also the language of the oppressed. These motor workers' unions in the Eastern and Western Cape taught us many lessons about organisation on behalf of the majority of workers. An important event was the Sigma strike in Pretoria. I had just started to work for the National Automobile and Allied Workers Union, and I came in and the strike was already in progress. I went straight into a negotiation role against the employers — we were all novices without much experience, and the employers with whom we were negotiating were also without experience in dealing with unions. So we all had to learn by trial and error.

A major part of my activist years was involved in negotiation and strike activity. The early eighties were spent establishing the Motor Workers Union in the Transvaal, and that involved large-scale strike action at almost every one of the plants, including Sigma, BMW and Toyota. In addition to achieving union recognition, the major issue was establishing a living wage.

An important area of activity, which has continued beyond my union activity, was the establishment of union organisation in Brits. Our first strike was in a paternalistic, family-owned company. Our success in the strike hinged on the information we got from the mother of one of our members, who was a maid in the boss's house. Strategy discussed at the boss's dinner table would come straight to us through her.

Were you ever harassed by the police?

Yes. I'll tell you about one incident in the mid-seventies. The Metal and Allied Workers Union had just opened up an office in Boksburg, servicing workers in the industrial Benoni-Boksburg complex. The cops were keeping a close watch on us because it was the first organisation in that area. We finished a meeting at eight in the evening, and generally we would transport people in a combi to the station where they would catch a train home... Well, we came out and one of the tyres was flat. It was clearly deliberate, and we asked an Indian man standing nearby. He said he hadn't seen anybody (it turned out that he was actually one of the cops). So we changed the tyre and off we went into Daveyton township. We were already well inside and suddenly the car started veering over — another tyre was flat. We found that matches had been inserted into the valves of the tyres, so that the air slowly escaped. Now we had two flat tyres, and no replacement. So there we were, one white and two black guys, stuck in the middle of Daveyton township at night. We knew the security cops were somewhere around. So we trekked around trying to find someone to help us pump the tyres. Eventually we found somebody who helped us, and off we went three hours later. And this is an example of the vindictiveness of the police, because it was pure harassment. It's also an example of the goodwill from the community.

You have come the whole route, from working in opposition under gruelling circumstances, with very low pay, under sometimes dangerous conditions, watched and harassed by the security police, until today where you are part of the power structure. How does it feel to be firmly in the power structure, and does it change your politics and philosophy in any way?

Yes. Being involved in the power structure certainly does change things... But ultimately I am still working for broadly the same social goals of tackling poverty. Whereas before I was working for the rights of workers, today I am involved in getting housing built for poor people.

Sometimes one is bemused at what one hears oneself saying — things that previously one would have despised and rejected. Again, it's a realisation of just how complex things are, how difficult it is to actually change things. You have to reconcile the legitimate demands of particular interest groups with the reality of how the world works, how deeply rooted people are in their organisations and institutions. You see that with workers — it's not easy to take workers and suddenly put them in the seat of management. One sees all the time the inability of people to understand the long time that implementation takes, and the policy and bureaucratic requirements.

I remember in the BMW strike I realised the only way this management was going to move was if the workers went on strike. It was a strike that maybe one could have stopped, but there was a deliberate decision that it was necessary as a process. And that is a view that allows me now to have an overview of what is happening.

How do you feel about the role of ethnic identity in South Africa?

In previous years I would have strongly rejected any specific ethnic basis for society. But I have come to realise just how deep this thing goes, and how important it is to people. I get a real high when I go to London and I walk around in the mixture of all the ethnic groups there.

But I have a problem with the ethnicity of the South African Jewish community, which is either inward-looking or just taking care of its own interests in an expedient way. Its sudden identification with the ANC, after all the years of silence about the apartheid system irritates me. And I don't accept their justification that they couldn't protest about apartheid all those years because of their fear of some mythical anti-Semitism. Also, when I look at the Jewish community here, I find that they have really lost the ethnic flavour and richness of the old Yiddish-based Eastern European Jewish culture. It hasn't followed through in any meaningful way. South African Jews are today mainly Western, urban, rather wealthy, and basically indistinguishable from the broad mass of whites.

In recent years my wife and I have started to introduce some Jewish content into our home, because we want our children to have the benefit of the richness which is inherent in the Jewish tradition. For example, we have begun to do some of the rituals of the Jewish religion, such as Friday night *kiddush*, joining a shul, and so on, but for me these are actually cultural things rather than religious things. My son wanted a bar mitzvah so we gave him one, although we made it clear to the rabbi that we were not a religious family.

How do you relate to the significant revival of Orthodox Jewish religiosity which is occurring both here in Johannesburg and elsewhere in the world? Is this just another example of Marx's idea that religion is the 'opium of the masses'?

At a sociological and political level it distresses me, because I see it as part of

the growth of nationalism, fanaticism, as part of the same world revival which has allowed Hamas to develop. I also understand it to be part of the response to the increasing complexity of the world and the difficulty of understanding one's own place in it.

So you take a purely sociological view of it?

Yes. I see religion as a sociological response. At the same time, there is also a trend towards growing secularisation of Jews in more affluent societies. In the USA, for example, some people are incredibly worried about the assimilation of Jews. At some point those two trends may clash. It's even possible for fascism to raise its head in the States at some time, and Jews there might find themselves in the same situation as German Jews did in the 1930s.

How do you feel about this assimilation of Jews, their loss to the Jewish world?

You know, fifteen years ago I would have said that that's fine, because internationalism is what we want, and one of the roots of our problems is that people are separated into ethnic groups. I still think ethnicity is a major problem, but I now recognise the value of different cultural systems, and I have come to believe that diversity is an important element in human existence, as long as it doesn't degenerate into the kind of horrible ethnic violence that we see all around the world.

At a very personal level, I feel quite secure in my view of myself as a Jew. I don't feel any need to deny it. I am quite at ease in pointing to the things that I value in it, and I would be sad if that same sense of security was not passed on to my kids. It wasn't important to me in my younger, activist days, but now it is.

Are you saying that previously you wouldn't have minded being the last link in the chain of Jewish generations that passed the heritage on, but that now you are more determined to be a link which passes it on to another link, the next generation?

I would say 'conscious' rather than 'determined'. For example, I don't insist that my kids go to shul. However, I do now, by choice, go through the rituals on Friday evening.

I'll ask the obvious next question — do you believe in God?

No. I believe the concept of God is a sociological construct. I understand the need for it, and I wouldn't deny other people the belief. I see myself as an agnostic rather than an atheist. At the age of seventy-five my father, who was an avowed atheist all his life, was asked this question by one of my kids, and he replied, 'You know, at my age it becomes a real question . . . ' This to me says something about human experience and the way people's views change, and shows how it is a sociological and psychological construct.

Dostoevsky said 'If God is dead, then everything is permissible'. In such a world, Hitler is as valid as Mother Teresa.

No, because that assumes a particular definition of God as an extra-terrestrial force. However, if we define God with a small 'g' as a particular value system which is necessary for people to express themselves, then it is different. I understand that there is an inner motivation in people which means that despite all the problems, the majority of people actually want peace and security and so on.

I have noticed in my contact with many Jews involved in the trade union movement and the left in general, that they have often downplayed their Jewishness. Yet they seemed quite happy to welcome, and even celebrate, manifestations of other people's ethnic identity. How do you explain this?

My generation of activists were what my father called 'political orphans'. We came in at a time when Jewish left-wing political organisation had been smashed, certainly in South Africa. We didn't have the kind of organised Jewish political base that, two generations before, my father had come out of. And in fact, to the extent that there had been a battle between political left-wing and right-wing elements in Judaism, the left had lost. So organised Jewry was something then to be distanced from, to be avoided, because it was right-wing. One exception was perhaps Habonim where there was a lot of intense discussion at the higher echelons about what socialism meant, but very little of that followed through to directed political activity in South Africa.

So, from a Jewish point of view, our activity was individualised — it didn't come out of any organised background. Also, most of us were more interested in working on the trade union movement than anything else, and the group which came together as the focus for debate and discussion was a very eclectic group containing both blacks and whites. We were really consumed by the political issues.

I cannot remember ever feeling consciously that I had to downplay my Jewishness. However, what is true is that many left-wing Jewish parents, in the fifties and later, were not open about their leftist activities in front of their children, because they didn't want to upset the apple-cart.

The atmosphere was oppressive and organised Jewry was right-wing. People would burn leftist books, and stop telling their children where they came from politically.

Did you ever experience any anti-Semitism in the trade union movement?

Nothing significant. There were a few instances in the Western Cape, which has a strong Muslim component, where discussions about Israel would spill over into anti-Semitic remarks. I, of course, was anti-Zionist as well, so I did

not have major problems with the general line against Israel. The only other place where it sometimes became an issue was at the level of ordinary workers, where they would talk about the exploitation of the 'Jewish shopkeeper', 'Jewish madam', or 'Jewish boss', rather than simply referring to him as a shopkeeper or boss. It would come up in idle conversation.

You come from a strongly anti-Zionist background, yet I know that over the past several years you have had increasing contact with, and openness towards Israel and Israelis. Is this just a pragmatic response to the de facto situation of Israel's existence, or has your attitude actually changed philosophically towards Israel?

It's really an increased understanding of the complexity of the world. I would still philosophically be against the idea of creating an ethnic state in such a way that it would create conflict, and that's what happened with Israel. I think it was equally stupid for the Soviets to set up Birobidzhan as a Jewish homeland in the Soviet Union.

Having said that, I realise that that would have been a legitimate position in the 1930s and '40s. But in the 1990s context, one has to look at resolving a situation where you have an Israeli state with four million Jews — this is not a situation you can wish away. At the same time, I have an increasing interest in seeing how Israeli society works, primarily because of the interrelationship between First World and Third World, how those things operate there compared to here and in Latin America... and also to acknowledge the achievements of a small, embattled country with minimal resources which produces the kind of things that occur there.

You talk of Israel in a somewhat 'clinical' way, with no element of pride in your voice, as if it's like a laboratory experiment. Does Israel ever evoke within you any actual ethnic pride for its achievements under such difficult circumstances?

A sense of pride — no. But I certainly am more interested in going to look at it than I was previously. A sense of identification — at times. Also at times I have a sense of wishing not to identify with it, because it conflicts with my image of what Jewish values are. It's complex, because it seems to represent both the good and the bad. To the extent that I could identify with a Jewish community in Los Angeles or Budapest when I arrived there, that will obviously occur also when I visit Israel (which I have not yet done). But the presence of Israelis here in South Africa evokes for me an image of aggressive, self-interested people, and I ask myself, 'What went wrong, and why is it that we have to tolerate as part of a Jewish identity people like that?' Again, I look to sociology to explain it, and I think it's the impact on these people of a really harsh environment.

If you look back at your long experience in the union movement and political life in South Africa, how does it all add up in you, and shape your world view and your personal attitudes?

I have been exposed to an incredible richness of experience, ranging from going to the toilet in a poor squatter settlement, to using the toilet in a posh hotel in Stockholm, and there are few situations which would shock me or make me disgusted. And in all situations, I find that there are people who are worth engaging with, and many unexpected encounters have confirmed this view. For example, some other students and I once picked up a hitch-hiker who turned out to be a warder on Robben Island, and we got into conversation with him – he was really upset at working on Robben Island because in other jails the blacks called the white warders Baas and on Robben Island they called him 'Mister'. We could have stopped the car and put him out, but we didn't, we engaged with him. That was what my father used to do. I remember once going with him to a concert, and then afterwards walking to Joubert Park to wait for a bus at 10 o'clock at night. We were sitting there and a woman came up to us who was actually a member of the family who had strayed away and become a prostitute, and had no contact at all with the family. Well, my father talked to her, and engaged with her, and that attitude influenced me a lot.

What do you think about South Africa's prospects, now that these major changes have occurred?

What has happened is incredible. But South Africa may still lose it. I would be sad if that happened, but not surprised, because there are so many problems that could potentially turn things bad here. It is Mandela and others like him who are holding the whole thing together. There is a really amazing group of top leaders at the moment, who are generous in spirit and very competent, and we are fortunate to have them.

RAY ALEXANDER SIMONS

'I didn't think of myself as Jewish. Because I just felt that I belong to the world. I'm internationalist . . .'

Rachel Alexandrowich was born in 1913 in Latvia and while still a teenager became active in the underground Latvian Communist Party. She arrived in South Africa on 6 November 1929, and joined the Communist Party of South Africa on 11 November, five days afterwards. She was involved with all facets of the Party's work, and after being dismissed from a job for attending the founding conference of the Anti-Fascist League, became increasingly involved with trade union activity. She helped organise workers in many different trades, but the union which became synonymous with her name was the Food and Canning Workers Union (FCWU). Founded in 1941, the FCWU spread through the fruit canning industry of the Boland and up the west coast among fishing communities. It recruited black and white workers, men and women, and earned the reputation of being both effective and militant. In the 1950s it played a leading role in the South African Congress of Trade Unions. Ray wrote a regular column on trade union matters in *The Guardian*, a newspaper affiliated to the Communist Party of South Africa. In 1953 she was served with the first of a series of banning orders.

In April 1954, together with Helen Joseph, Lilian Ngoyi and Florence Mkhize, she helped found the Federation of South African Women, which fought for women's rights and pioneered a Women's Charter. In September of that year a banning order issued by Justice Minister Swart forced her to resign as general secretary of the FCWU. Another banning order, in April 1954, forced her to resign from the Federation of SA Women.

Ray married Jack Simons in 1941, the day after she formed the Food and Canning Workers Union. Simons, a devoted communist, was also a powerful imparter of ideas. As a lecturer in African Studies at the University of Cape Town, he introduced generations of students to the rich textures of African

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Left:
2 March 1990: Ray Alexander with June Mlangeni at Johannesburg International Airport after twenty-five years in exile. (Photograph: Anna Zieminski)

law, culture and society. Simons was also banned, first in 1961, and then again in December 1964, when he was barred from lecturing.

In May 1965 Ray and Jack left South Africa and went straight to Zambia. They were to remain in exile for twenty-five years. From Zambia they went to England, where Jack got a position at the Manchester University. Together they wrote *Class and Colour* in South Africa, a pioneering analysis of the relationship between class and race, and how they have shaped the South African political and social landscape. They returned to Lusaka in 1967. They were the first whites to be accepted into the ANC. Jack Simons lectured in the bush camps in Angola. Ray continued doing underground work with the Movement, and lectured on the position in South Africa. They were amongst the first exiles to return in 1990. Ray and Jack had two daughters and a son, all living in South Africa. Jack passed away in August 1995.

Since her return, Ray has advised various trade unions, as well as the ANC and SACP. She is currently completing a book on her involvement in the FCWU.

When, in 1953, she was forced to resign from the FCWU, the president of that union issued a statement:

> We and our members fully understand that Ray Alexander has been expelled for . . . lifelong devotion to the cause of the oppressed. The men who have done this are the representatives of the rich and employing class . . . Nothing that they do — the Swarts, the Schoemans and other enemies of the workers — will destroy what Ray Alexander has built up, or uproot her from our hearts.

Interviewed by Steven Robins and Immanuel Suttner
20 July 1993 and January 1996
Cape Town

I was born on 31 December 1913 and brought up in School Street, Varklian, which was a small town in Latvia, then part of the Russian Tsarist Empire. Varklian is in Latgale Province, regarded as the 'little Switzerland' of Latvia because of its forests, rivers and lakes. My great, great, great, great grandfather Michael founded Varklian about 350 years ago. Jews from all the villages in the area would get together to make a *minyan* for the holy days, and he was anxious because they had no synagogue. He organised a deputation to the governor of their district and appealed for land on which to build a Jewish settlement and synagogue. Those days Jews had no surnames, only their first names like his, Michael. When the governor asked him for his name, he said 'Michail Aleksandiowitch'. The governor said, 'How come you, a Jew, have the same name as the Tsar?' Michael replied: 'Are we not all children of the Tsar?' The governor was impressed

and granted the deputation's request. So Jews from neighbouring settlements came to live on the land and built a synagogue. Michael built two houses, a summer house, stables, buildings for hay and wood and a big yard opposite the synagogue on the left side of the street which later became the place where the first Jewish primary school was built.

My grandfather sent my father Simon, his only son, to a Russian gymnasium. This was an exception, as Jewish children were not accepted in Russian schools. Grandfather may have bribed somebody for my father to be accepted. My father told me that the school was ten miles from Varklian, and grandfather would drive him early Monday morning in a horse cart to get him there before 8 am. Grandmother would prepare the food for five days: chicken, hard boiled eggs, dried cottage cheese, bread rusks, butter and jam (the jam to drink with cold water), to ensure her son had kosher food. He learned maths, Russian, German and geography. He told me how his teacher dished out physical punishment if the replies to his questions were wrong. In summer when other scholars went swimming in the nearby river, he would go earlier so they could not see he was a Jewish boy.

Father married my mother, Dobe, after her return from Leeds (England) where she spent five years with her sisters. I grew up in a cultured home with book shelves with the Talmud, Yiddish books... I was brought up with 'Tevya de Milcheka' [Shalom Aleichem's famous character on which *Fiddler on the Roof* is based] and all Peretz's books. But I also read Russian books. I read Nadson. I remember books by Leo Tolstoy as well.

Before father died, he passed on to me booklets published by Jewish publishing houses in Vilna and Warsaw... There were Yiddish booklets on health, on leaders of the Bund, on socialist and communist leaders, you know, biographies. For example, this is the way I got the story of Vera Figner and Rosa Luxemburg. In this way father introduced me to the Jewish [socialist] thinkers... I was a Zionist when father died, but already I was moving away. Father wasn't a Zionist, he was more inclined to socialist ideas.

My father was a close friend to Leibe Yoffe,[1] leading communist and founder of a Jewish Defence League. Leibe Yoffe and my father would go together at night to guard the Jewish homes. Father was a progressive man, religious, went to synagogue not only on the Jewish holy days, also on Friday evenings and Saturdays. He could read German and Russian, which was quite exceptional for those days. He was an intelligent man. I remember how neighbours would come to our home to discuss with him the 1905 Russian Revolution, the 1905 Russo-Japanese War and the 1917 Revolution.

He became a teacher to help young people with Russian, German and maths and also had a *cheyder* where Jewish boys studied the Talmud,

1 Yoffe was the communist mayor and Varklian school principal who became Ray Alexander's mentor after her father's death. He was arrested on numerous occasions because of his political activities. He clearly had a great influence on Ray's early political development.

prepared them for bar mitzvah etc. Mother and father had five daughters and one son, as well as two daughters from his first wife who died in childbirth. These were Anna and Tanya, both killed by Nazis and thrown into a mass grave — I went to Riga to see it.

He asked my sister Dora and me to attend his *cheyder* after school to study the Talmud, which we did.

After the First World War, which was followed in Latvia by a civil war, the Jewish school, primary and secondary, was reopened, with Leibe Yoffe as the principal. On 1 September 1920, when I went out to play with the other children, I found nearly all had gone to school. I returned to mother and told her I too wanted to go to school.

Mother said: 'You are too young — only children of seven years are accepted. You are not even six.' I went out and followed the children. The teachers were busy in a big classroom with a black board and chalk, examining children to establish in which standard to place them. I stood in the queue, was examined in writing and sums, and placed in standard one. This was due to the fact that an aunt and uncle came to stay with us during the civil war — they were war refugees — and the aunt was a teacher. In our big yard which had sand for the children to play, she taught me with a stick to write the alphabet. I was placed above some of the children with whom I played . . .

Mother complained to father that I disobeyed her and went to school. She didn't want me to go to school yet. A family discussion ensued. I demanded to be allowed to return to school — father and my sister Mary, who was in standard four, supported me. I was so happy. It gave me a sense of confidence.

My father died of a heart attack when I was twelve years old. Leibe Yoffe came to our house to give his condolences, and said to me: 'Rochella, I know that you have an inquisitive mind and that you were always asking your father questions. Please remember to be free to come to me and ask me questions. I'll be only too happy to reply to you.' This was a very great thing to me.

Leibe Yoffe, with other teachers who had valued my father, came the week after to discuss with my mother how she would bring up four young daughters, Mary, Dora, Rachel and Minnie who was only seven years old.

They suggested to mother that they would every month donate from their salaries to help her. Mother said thank you, I do not want any charity. I have my own two hands. I propose to make a bakery. I ask you just to help me by buying my bread. They offered her money to start the bakery. She told them, thank you I have saved up money. Mother started the bakery. Mary and Dora helped mother to knead the bread and I was assigned to do the books — write the cost of the flour, salt, yeast and wood and keep the book of income from customers. The bakery flourished.

What was your position on Zionism?

I believed then that socialism is the [correct response] to anti-Semitism. Earlier, at school, I had been a Zionist with my older sister Getty and brother Isher. I often helped the Zionist organisation with office work. When the Jerusalem University was opened – it was in 1926 – the Zionist organisation made a big celebration of it. They invited our school to send a speaker. I was chosen. I prepared my talk on higher education. I made an observation that we are celebrating the opening of the university in Jerusalem, but if there would be a university opened in Timbuktu we should celebrate it as much. Because wherever a university is opened, it is a big candle to lead to a better understanding between human beings. My teacher in algebra was a very strong Zionist, she did not approve. She came over to me after I finished speaking and she said: 'How dare you compare Timbuktu to Jerusalem. Do you know where Timbuktu is?' I said: 'Yes, it's in Africa, central Africa.' I said to her: 'What's your objection to Timbuktu? People are living there too.' And she walked away from me in great disgust. Leibe Yoffe, who was also there, expressed his approval of my speech. The school approved of my talk. When I came back after the lecture I gave them a copy. It was put up on the wall. So it was displayed for everybody to read.

Later, the Zionist organisation organised a debate and asked me to support the Balfour Declaration. I asked them for material on the Declaration before I would speak. After reading, I came to the conclusion that the Balfour Declaration would not solve the Jewish problem, that the Jews are all over the world, and Israel, which was then Palestina, cannot absorb all the Jews and what would happen to the Palestinians? I said to my mother, 'I am not going to support the Balfour Declaration.' I explained why. She said: 'You better go tell them.' On Sunday I went to the Zionist organisation office and told them that I am not prepared to support the Balfour Declaration . . . And they said: 'You must speak.' And I said: 'If I must, I'll speak against it. You want me to speak against, because that's what I am prepared to do.'

'No no no, you can't do it. You are advertised.' I said: 'Look, I cannot help, this is my point of view now.' There was great upset about it. After a lengthy discussion we compromised that I would attend the debate but not speak. I reported this to Leibe Yoffe. He attended the debate. That very evening after the debate I was recruited to an underground group to study Marx and Lenin's writings. But they didn't tell us it was Marx. We were each given two pages of a book, we were four in a group, so we were dished out eight pages. Everyone had to come to the next meeting and give an understanding of his two pages, and that was how we got the eight pages of understanding. I also studied photography and kept a diary.

When I was at school I wanted to do medicine. The Latvian University was opened in Varklian in the late 1920s. It was a Latvian language university. There was the Catholic Father at our school, and I told him that I wanted to

study medicine. There was another girl, by the name of Mary Yawitch, and a boy, Sholem Fried, who also wanted to do medicine. The Father said we can't join the university to do medicine unless we have Latin. He said he's prepared to teach us Latin privately, during the vacation. So the three of us went to learn Latin at his place... The second day I noticed that he wore a cross. I said to him, 'We are objecting to curtsy to your cross [the curtsy was the standard form of greeting]. You know that we Jewish children don't curtsy to the cross.'

So he said: 'What, do you expect me not to wear it?' And I said: 'Definitely...' Well, he eventually took it off or put it on underneath.

About two weeks later we picked up a conversation that Latvian students are preparing to attack Varklian, on Saturday, the Shabat, and that they'll attack Jewish children bathing in the river... So we decided to go and tell Leibe Yoffe, and members of the Jewish Defence League came to defend the Jewish children. Later the students decided that they would recruit peasant youths to attack Jews at a dance. We overheard this, and told the Jewish Defence League. They decided that Mary and I, the two girls, should go to the dance to identify those fellows for the Jewish Defence League members... The Jewish Defence League was very well prepared for them and gave them a good hiding. There was afterwards a court case about it, and Mary and I and Sholem Fried were called to give evidence (in camera, because we were too young and it would have been dangerous). So we told the court everything. Our parents decided that there was too much anti-Semitism at the Latvian University, which is why in September 1928, I went to Riga. Mother and Leibe Yoffe decided that I should attend the technical college ORT. On 1 September 1928 mother accompanied me to Riga. She provided me with rusks, cheese, eggs and jam. I breakfasted on a soft boiled egg with rusks. Supper was cheese, rusks and hot water with jam. Tanya, my stepsister, expected me to have supper with her but I was frequently too busy. Friday evening, Saturday and Sunday I did have meals at her house. She was married with a son and daughter, and a governess for them. Getty was working in Tanya's butchery and lived with the family. Dora, my other sister, had a room not far from Tanya's house.

The teaching in ORT was in German. I went to ORT because it had a mission against Jewish people being *luftmentshn*. Have you heard that expression?

Yes, thinking too much in the clouds...

Yes, but mainly concentrating on business, and not doing things with your hands. I chose to go to the technical college of ORT. We learned art, and dressmaking, and embroidery. ORT gave a stipendium of 15 roubles a month and I together with my cousin Rose Shochat obtained a big room

to share, each paying 10 roubles a month, in Aspaseas Avenue opposite the Opera House.

It was in walking distance to ORT, which was in the Morris Feitelberg Building. We were given a cup of hot cocoa with a buttered bun at 10 am, for lunch we were given tickets for a restaurant, and at 3 pm again milk and a bun.

Leibe Yoffe gave me the address of a college which I joined. It was also in walking distance from my room. The hours were 5 pm to 8 pm. I studied pedagogy, history and geography. My school friend Leah Stekol attended the Yiddishe University in Riga, and during the summer vacation we studied Marxist books together, read and discussed novels by Emile Zola and Anatole France.

On the second day in Riga I was approached by a young woman to join an underground group which had heard about me from the Varklian group. Years later Leah told me that she gave my name to them. In the underground group I was given political education and assigned to select scholars from ORT to give them Marxist orientation. With the five roubles left from my stipendium I bought newspapers, paid subs to the People's University, a small fee for college and MOPR — an organisation to help imprisoned revolutionaries and their families. The People's University was near to the college that I attended. After college hours I would go there. I was young, energetic and particularly thirsty for knowledge. There were very interesting lectures. I became friendly with a woman who worked in the Russian Trade Mission. She might have been Jewish but she spoke only Russian. I attended her lectures on historical and dialectical materialism. I was also given an assignment by her to give a lecture on the problems in Persia and the British government's desire to capture the oil companies in Persia. That involved research, which I enjoyed.

At a subsequent meeting at the People's University the committee decided that speakers should go to secondary schools, speak to them about 7 November (the day of the Russian Revolution), and appeal to scholars to attend a demonstration for unemployment insurance organised by the Workers and Peasant Faction in parliament. I went to the demonstration, the police came and were brutal, hitting the demonstrators, including me. After the demonstration there was a meeting to report back. Morris Kagan,[2] from a secondary school in Riga, told me: 'In your school you were the only one absent, so you must prepare yourself to be dismissed from school tomorrow.' The next morning I went to school as usual, passed the principal, Maria von Maritza's, office, curtsied and greeted her: 'Gutten morgen.' She called me into the office and asked me where I was the previous day. I replied: 'Yesterday I was in a demonstration to celebrate the Russian Revolution.' She told me that Russian communism was no good, that she was in her

2 Morris Kagan later came to South Africa and was involved in the Tram and Bus Workers Union in Cape Town.

young days a social democrat, but that Russia is not good. I said: 'Well, I am young, I don't know what I will find out later, but at present I think it is a great historical event that the workers and peasants took power and removed the oppressors and exploiters of Tsarist Russia.' She asked me to accompany her to the classroom and told the class: 'Alexandra was honest and because she told me the truth, I forgive her what she did and I therefore ask that you take no action against her.' There was great applause and her speech strengthened my position of leadership in the ORT school.

Were other members of your family involved in radical politics?

Yes, my stepsisters Anna and Tanya belonged to a revolutionary group with Leibe Yoffe in Riga in 1917. My sisters Mary and Dora were members of Arbeiter Heim [The Workers' Home, a communist-aligned grouping left of the Bund, which was banned by the Latvian government]. We had plenty of political debates at home. Some of my cousins left Varklian, went to Russia and were active members of the Bolsheviks. When in 1967 I visited the Soviet Union for its 50th anniversary, I was taken to Leningrad.

There, in Smolny Institute, in a room displaying photos of men and women leaders, I recognised my cousin Rose's elder sister.

The first strike in which I was involved was in ORT. We scholars felt exploited because Maria von Maritza, the principal, was a well-known designer of suits, evening and day frocks. Wealthy women came to her and she designed clothes for them. We would cut and sew and actually make the clothes. I wrote an article in the youth paper about the conditions in ORT. We held meetings and worked out demands to have 20 roubles a month as a stipendium, free medical service and during the school holidays we should also be given the stipendium. A delegation selected by the scholars, with me as the spokesperson, met Maria von Maritza and Mr Shtikan, the ORT secretary, who was a law lecturer of the university. They refused to consider our demands and dismissed us. A week later we went on strike.

The following week a young communist member, Berkowitz, suggested that I should meet Lazar Bach,[3] who knew Shtikan, thinking Bach may be helpful to bring about a settlement of the strike. Right away we arranged for an appointment with Bach, but he never turned up. The next week the strike was in full force and we decided to ask Shtikan to meet us. He agreed and we started negotiations. For a whole week we argued our case. Shtikan, Maria von Maritza, and the chairman of ORT, Mr Levin, finally agreed to organise

3 Lazar Bach was a member of the Communist Party of South Africa Central Committee during the controversy over the 'Native Republic' question. Bach took the position of the Comintern in favour of a 'Native Republic' and was on the Central Committee when Percy Bunting and numerous other white communists were expelled from the Party. Bach is believed to have been executed in the Soviet Union, along with the Richter brothers. The actual reason for Bach's fall-out with Stalin and the Comintern remains unclear.

free medical service, to increase the stipendium to 17 roubles and to pay it out for one month of the two-month summer vacation. We reported their offer to a meeting of scholars who accepted it and the strike was settled.

At a meeting of young activists in the forest in 1929, we were told that in view of the approaching capitalist crisis – unemployment and economic depression – we should emigrate to any capitalist country (because conditions would be ripe for a revolution) but not to the Soviet Union.

The following week my friend Leah and I attended a mass meeting. The police came in, arrested the speakers on the platform and started to arrest other people. Leah and I together with others left the hall, but unknown to me Leah was arrested. When her mother was given the news of her arrest, she told my mother who became anxious that I too would be arrested. My brother Isher had gone to South Africa in 1927. (It was he who changed our name from Alexandrowich to Alexander.) She contacted him in Cape Town to arrange papers for me to go to South Africa. Then she phoned me and asked me to come to Varklian, which was a four-hour train journey. I came to Varklian and mother told me her plan. I told her that I must go back to Riga to discuss it with my teachers and also with my boyfriend, Edgar. My real reason was to discuss it with my underground group. Mother told me that before I leave Varklian for Riga I must obtain a certificate of 'good behaviour' which had to accompany my application for a passport. We went to her cousin, Yankele Swartz, who was the mayor of Varklian. He gave a note to the chief of police to whom we went and got the paper, with which I got the passport to emigrate. I returned to Riga, had a meeting with my group, and they agreed that I could go to South Africa, it being a capitalist country.

They gave me journals in Russian of the Communist International paper, which had articles by Eddie Roux on the South African Communist Party, the ANC and the ICU. They also gave me training in underground work and addresses in Berlin where I could meet comrades from the International Red Aid. I discussed my decision with Edgar, and we agreed he would make an effort to come to South Africa too. He was at that time studying radio engineering. I spent the summer vacation doing underground work and returned to Varklian to say goodbye to family and friends.

On 1 October, mother, Minnie and I returned to Riga. Edgar, his family, my family and friends were at the station to bid me farewell. My sister Getty introduced me to Julius Berman, Isher's friend, who was to travel with me to South Africa.

We went via Lithuania and Poland to Berlin. We stayed in Berlin for two days, and I met comrades from the International Red Aid. In Hamburg we stayed in a hostel for ten days. There too I met comrades of the International Red Aid, who took me to trade union and Communist Party meetings. They told me that on *Ubena*, the boat on which I was to travel, there was a young communist group and they would contact me so that I could attend their meetings.

The very first day on the *Ubena*, a young comrade came to me, introduced himself and invited me to a meeting the next afternoon. I was not seasick, attended all meals and had meetings with the comrades who often served good food at the meetings. We stopped at Rotterdam, Amsterdam, Southampton, Las Palmas, and Walvis Bay.

Early on Wednesday 6 November, *Ubena* docked in Cape Town. Isher and Dora [Ray's sister] had sent us photos of Table Mountain, but to see this majestic mountain and white-painted houses was breathtaking. By 10 am we were united. We went to 74 Roeland Street, an upstairs flat which Isher and Dora had found for us. The flat consisted of a big room and bedroom for Isher and Julius. Behind the divider were Dora's and my beds. The flat was well furnished. On the landing was an improvised kitchen with a little blue flame [paraffin stove] and table. Further on, on the steps, was a wash-basin. On Thursday 7 November I asked Isher and Dora how we are celebrating the Russian Revolution. They told me that there would be a meeting on Sunday night. I was disappointed and cried, longing for Riga and political activities. Friday at midday I went to the docks to say goodbye to my German comrades. I told them how unhappy I was. They told me the ports they were going to and said they would be back in about three weeks' time. If I was still unhappy they would collect money for a return ticket to go back to Europe. They made me feel better.

Dora had given me money and told me what to buy at the top of Canterbury and Roeland Streets. She said there will be a vegetable and fruit cart there. I went, found the cart, and workers who were coming out the factories. I asked them: 'Have you a trade union?' The Ospovat Furniture Factory workers said yes. I asked: 'Are you members?' They said no. I got the same reply from the leather workers' factory. The third factory was a laundry, where Malay and coloured women came out. They replied that they had no union. After doing my shopping I came home and came to the conclusion that this was virgin soil and that I should remain in South Africa and help organise the unorganised. After supper, Isher said to me that I looked happier. I told him of the assurance I had received from the *Ubena* comrades, and my experience at the top of Canterbury Street. I told them that I would look for a job the next week and settle down.

Were you initially mixing mainly with other Jewish immigrants?

No, I wasn't. But I met them through the family. My own family came out in April 1930, my mother and my two sisters . . . I didn't see myself as Jewish. One evening my family organised that I should go to have tea with some *landslayt*. You know that expression, meaning people who came from the same town. They had come from Latvia, but the younger people had little interest in socialist ideas. They came here because it was a place you could make money. And I had a very strong reaction to them. I said to my brother:

'Please don't take me again. I have nothing in common with them.' They were running down the blacks. My first reaction was that their remarks were the same as anti-Semites'.

We rented a flat upstairs from Mrs Hoffenberg, a German Jewish woman who owned the house. On Saturday morning, Isher and Dora went to work. I did the washing. I heard crying in the yard. The domestic worker employed by Mrs Hoffenberg was crying. Mrs Hoffenberg called her domestic worker 'nigger'. I went down, spoke to Mrs Hoffenberg in German and told her that she should be ashamed for insulting her domestic worker who was born here. I told her domestic servant not to cry because she hadn't committed any crime by being black. Mrs Hoffenberg told me to get out of the yard and late in the afternoon when Isher and Dora returned, she demanded that we should leave the flat... After a great deal of discussion without me, it was agreed that if I did washing, I must wait for Dora to hang it up and must not enter the yard or speak to her servant.

After that incident, comrades came to see me. They were all members of MOPR. They said that they were collecting money and sending it home to help their comrades and their families. I told them that it is wrong – we have to organise help for revolutionaries here. They argued with me that there are no revolutionaries here. I told them of the articles I'd read by Eddie Roux. We didn't resolve the discussion...

I was quick to warm to South Africa. I corresponded with Edgar, who was arrested in Riga at a demonstration on 7 November, the day after I arrived in South Africa. So I kept up correspondence, because political prisoners are very much in need of communication. He was a poet so he sent me a lot of poetry, and also articles he had written in the German, Russian or Latvian languages. Because the prison authorities had to be able to read the letters, I would write to him in Russian or German. I also corresponded with other comrades and sent articles to the *Illustrated Workers' Journal* in Berlin.

I didn't get involved with any boys here, because I made that agreement with Edgar before I left. We used to have the Soviet five-year plans, and so when I was leaving we made an agreement for five years. And then he was arrested for five years. My idea was that he should come to South Africa, but he didn't come. But that's a different story. Anyhow, it was a platonic love affair... My correspondence with him stabilised me, and I didn't look for any other friendships. My decision was to help the movement.

How did you meet other comrades?

I received a message that on Sunday morning at 11 am, I am to meet a delegation of the Communist Party at the corner of De Waal Drive and Roeland Street. Sunday morning I met Joe Pick, the chairman of the Cape Town Communist Party, Johnny Gomas and Abdurahmat Brown. They suggested that I should become secretary of the Cape Town Party branch. I

laughed at them and said: 'You don't know my age — I am not sixteen yet and the Party secretary should be one of the people and not a foreigner.' I went to the Sunday night meeting and I enjoyed very much the speeches by Johnny Gomas, Joe Pick and James Shuba. James Shuba was the secretary of the Cape Town Stevedore Workers' Union, the only remaining union of the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of South Africa (ICU). John Gomas, James La Guma and E J Khaile had all been expelled from the ICU by six votes to five because they were communists. [All three communists stood for militant and accountable leadership.] At that time [1929] there was a strike in America by textile workers, and Shuba spoke about that strike and called for working-class solidarity to collect money. And they asked me to go around, which I did. The collection was bigger than usual and people thought that was because I was so blonde and so new, that people gave more money. At the meeting I also helped to sell *The South African Worker* — the organ of the Communist Party.

I was invited to the district Party committee meeting on Monday night at Mr and Mrs Shlom's house at 44 Bloem Street. I went to the meeting and was signed up as a Party member. Comrade Shuba appealed to comrades to help him in his office. I agreed to help on Saturday afternoons. On Tuesday Isher took me to a meeting in a hall near the Great Synagogue, where a guest was speaking on Birobidzhan.[4] Ruth Alexander, wife of Morris Alexander[5] MP, was in the chair. After the meeting I introduced myself to her and asked her what organisations there are for women. She told me there was the Women's Enfranchisement League, which is planning next year to organise a campaign for votes for all women. I said: 'Don't you women have the vote?' She said 'No.' I was shocked because in Latvia, which had inherited the Soviet constitution, women had the vote. I told her I would like to read books, from which I can learn about women and conditions in South Africa. She told me to read *Women and Labour* by Olive Schreiner. I subsequently went to the Cape Town library and read the book.

Isher introduced me to other Jewish men, like Baskin and Fox, who were supporters of the Soviet Union. That week I obtained a job at Bragin, a dress shop in Adderley Street. I was paid one pound a week. At the next Party

4 Walter Laqueur, in *A History of Zionism* (Schocken Books, New York, 1989, pp 427–428), notes that in March 1928, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union 'decided to set aside a special area in the Far East, Biro Bidzhan, for Jewish settlement'. There was tremendous enthusiasm among Jewish communists abroad: '... The dream of a Siberian Palestine did not last. Only a few thousand Jews came, and most of them turned back within a few months. Forty years after its foundation Biro Bidzhan was a drab provincial region with about 25 000 Jewish inhabitants, a small percentage of the total population ... Partly it was the result of insufficient and incompetent planning, but basically it was not the fault of the authorities: Soviet Jews had no desire to build a second Zion on the shores of the Amov.'

5 Morris Alexander, no relative of Ray's, was a Jewish Member of Parliament in the Cape. He was also actively involved in Zionism, was an executive member of the Jewish Board of Deputies, and challenged anti-Semitism through the media and courts.

meeting, Eddie Roux came from Cambridge and announced that the ANC was organising a demonstration against passes on 16 December and asked comrades to attend. On Tuesday (the day of the demonstration) I asked for leave for a few hours which I would work off over the next few days. I joined Eddie Roux in the demonstration. We were the only two whites there. I returned to work after the demonstration and worked in Wednesday and Thursday lunchtime.

On Friday, when I was paid my wage, I was told that I cannot work there any more because of my attending the demonstration. I argued with them against it, but I was paid off.

On Saturday afternoon I helped Comrade Shuba, on Sunday morning I went selling *The South African Worker* with Johnny Gomas and discussed general Party work. He took me to James La Guma's house in Rutger Street in Cape Town and I was happily surprised to see a big photo of Lenin addressing a rally.

In January 1930, when Clements Kadalie[6] came to Cape Town with Ballinger they had a meeting in District Six and Johnny Gomas took me there and introduced me. Now I had read the article by Eddie Roux about the ICU, and it was a great event for me to meet the organiser, the general secretary of the ICU.

Did you meet any Jewish intellectuals here?

I met David Jagger, a Jewish poet, who was a friend of Cissie Gool.[7] We discussed the position of Jewish people who come here and cannot read or write English. He invited me to an evening at his place, where I met Julius Lewin and Hillel Schrire, both of whom studied at UCT. They agreed to speak to Rose van Geldern and Hilda Purvitsky, who were principal and vice-principal at Good Hope primary and secondary schools. This resulted in night classes for young Jewish people being organised. I obtained a job at True Bros in Long Street, with a higher wage than at Bragin's at 6 pounds per month. I kept up meetings with Julius Lewin and Eleanor Hawarden, also at UCT. Julius was a member of the Fabian Society.

What socialist organisations were there?

They started the Jewish Workers Club in Johannesburg. We started the Workers Club, which became the People's Club ... it was an important

6 Kadalie, a pioneer of the South African trade union movement, was born in Malawi and later settled in Cape Town. In 1919 he launched the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union of South Africa (ICU). In the 1920s he became its secretary-general and built it up into the first modern trade union in South Africa, but by 1929 it had largely disintegrated.

7 Zainunnissa (Cissie) Gool, wife of Dr A H Gool, was a key figure in left politics during the 1930s and 1940s. She was the daughter of the well-known coloured political activist, Dr A

venture in Cape Town. It organised various lectures by Bill Andrews, Advocate Harry Snitcher, Sam Kahn. Jack Simons[8] and I also gave lectures... There were other people at the University of Cape Town who joined the Party, like Professor Sandon and Professor Baldey. There was an intelligentsia developing and we had really good study classes. Oscar Mpetha is a product of that era, you see. Now, I got support from Johnny Gomas and others about forming the *Ikaka Laba Sebenzi* — Workers Shield — at the first Party conference that took place in December 1930. They actually established it in January 1931, to help political prisoners here and to fight against all forms of racial oppression and racial chauvinism. It affiliated with the International Red Aid in Berlin.

So these people who were at first sending money to their Eastern European homelands became contributors to the *Ikaka Laba Sebenzi*. And we also established contact with American socialists, with the International Labour Defence Organisation. In 1931, my sister Dora, Molly Wolton and others established Friends of the Soviet Union. And we got papers, *Russia Today* and *Russia in Construction* from England. So you see, we internationalised it all. And of course there was the Communist Party paper, *The South African Worker*, which we sold in the townships here. We were extremely busy. Things were happening. Remember, it's the year of the Depression, the hungry years of capitalist oppression. There were demonstrations for work and unemployment insurance by black and white people. Soon — in 1931/32 — you have huge demonstrations in Johannesburg. With black and white people marching. Black and white people, like Issy Diamond, being arrested. So the need to help political prisoners became very important.

We established our Party office at 22 Hanover Street where Johnny Gomas and Eddie Roux conducted study classes. They taught us to sing *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika*.

In December 1932, Douglas Wolton and I were arrested for inciting the tram and bus workers to strike for a rise from one shilling and sixpence to two shillings per hour. The strike brought Cape Town's public transport to a standstill for ten days and was broken by police and union officials. The strike and the trial encouraged the growth of militant trade unions in Cape Town. The Party decided that Julius Lewin should defend us legally while Wolton would do political defence. During his defence of me, Julius Lewin declared that I was very young and obviously misled by the older men, like

Abdurahman, the founder of the African People's Organisation (APO). Cissie Gool's sister-in-law, Minnie Gool, married a German Jewish refugee, Hans Friedrich. Ray introduced Friedrich to the Gool family (see p 40).

8 These were all members of the Central Committee of the Communist Party during the 1940s. Sam Kahn was a Member of Parliament in the 1940s, while Advocate Snitcher withdrew from politics in the early 1950s, following the Suppression of Communism Act. Jack Simons, Ray's husband, was involved in Communist Party and ANC politics throughout their twenty-five years of exile in Zambia.

Wolton. I strongly objected to his remark and demanded that he should withdraw it or not defend me any more. He corrected his statement. Douglas was sentenced to three months' hard labour and I to one month suspended for two years. The order they gave me was like a banning order.

Tell me about the 'Native Republic'[9] slogan which almost split the Communist Party in two.

I had a meeting with great ANC leaders, Elliot Tonjeni and Bransby Ndobe – Elliot Tonjeni came from the Eastern Province, Ndobe was a Basotho man. These two men were interested in the Communist Party slogan for an 'African Native Republic'. The slogan was debated soon after I came to South Africa. Back in January 1929, the Communist Party 7th annual conference adopted a policy for 'the complete equality of all races, the removal of all discriminatory laws and practices, and calling on workers and peasants of all races to combine in the struggle for the overthrow of capitalist and imperialist rule'.

To see African men and women not having the right to vote was to me atrocious. I was in wholehearted support for the idea of a Black Republic, a democratic Black Republic. It would be black because the majority of the people are black. The Independent Native Republic slogan inspired in Africans a determination to reject white domination. It was a ray of hope for freedom and equality with other peoples.

But there was opposition to that within the Party, and some people were expelled because of their opposition . . .

Yes. Some white members thought it was a tactical mistake, that it would alienate white workers who were regarded as the most militant and the most likely to lead a revolution. So there was opposition and a number of well-known trade union leaders like C B Tyler (a leader of the Building Workers Union), Percy Bunting (Brian Bunting's father) and Solly Sachs[10] were expelled from the party. There were also other reasons for the expulsions, which were instigated by Lazar Bach and Douglas Wolton. I was against the expulsions, but I was a small fish in comparison to the people who took the

9 This controversial strategy to promote the idea of a 'Native Republic' rather than a non-racial socialist republic was formulated by the Comintern in the Soviet Union. It became a source of tremendous division and bitterness within the Communist Party of South Africa. A number of members felt the strategy and slogan were not suited to a country where as yet there was no real black proletariat. These members, including S P Bunting, Bill Weinbren and Bill Andrews, were expelled.

10 Solly Sachs, the father of Constitutional Court judge Albie Sachs, was involved in organising the Garment Workers Union in the 1930s and 1940s. See Rowley Arenstein's interview (pp 371-402).

decisions. I was only here a year or two years when the expulsions took place. Bill Andrews, for whom I had great respect, was also expelled. I met him in 1930, when he was on holiday in Muizenberg, and he came into this Party meeting. I looked upon him as a social democrat. He looked sun-tanned from Muizenberg beach. He was in a nice white linen suit, and I always had a feeling that this is how the social democrats dress. This is not the way a communist lives, not in that style. But when the South African Trades and Labour Council was formed, and I heard him speak, I developed a great deal of sympathy with him. He introduced me to other trade union leaders. I came there as a delegate [and] I was the only white girl from the group of whites.

What happened when people found out that Bill Andrews had been expelled? Did more people then leave the Party?

They were disappointed. It wasn't an easy period. But we made up for the losses in membership by getting more coloureds and Africans in the Party.

So initially there were a lot of whites in the Party, and in the 1930s most of those whites were Jews . . .

No, this was not so. There were Jews and non-Jews. Because, after all, in Johannesburg you had English and American immigrants, and German immigrants, and immigrants from other parts of Europe, it wasn't just Jews. Eddie Roux's father came from Germany. There were some Jewish comrades, but they didn't make the same impact on me as Brown and Gomas and James La Guma.

I knew Moses Kotane[11] from the very day he left to study at the Moscow Lenin School in 1931. We had a strike at the African Clothing Factory. I was busy with the strike, and Johnny Gomas came to me and said, 'Look we've got a job to do. An African comrade from Johannesburg – Kotane wasn't yet general secretary – is coming to Cape Town to catch a boat to go to Moscow.' I was very excited about it. I recruited a [Latvian] comrade here, by the name of Reisman and he organised passports. He was an engraver. You take off the stamp and you put in another stamp. Moses Kotane, who was young, said to me, 'Nobody must see that you are seeing me off. I'll get on to the boat at twelve, and I'll lock myself in the cabin. You will look up the cabin number and make three knocks on the door. Then I will know that it is you and I will open the door, but I will pretend not to recognise you.'

I did this and then I sent off a telegram to Douglas Wolton, who was the

11 Moses Kotane, a leading member of the Communist Party, was later elected to the National Executive Committee of the ANC, as well as becoming the general secretary of the Communist Party. He was a defendant in the 1956 Treason Trial and subsequently, in exile, was the treasurer of the ANC.

general secretary of the Party in Johannesburg, to tell him a parcel of dried fruit had been dispatched.

I also met J B Marks[12] later when he came to Cape Town to help us organise the unemployed. I worked with him in what is now Parow, Goodwood and Athlone. It was all sand dunes and in winter months it was muddy. On those sand dunes coloured people lived in shacks and we went around to them. I'll never forget how JB was surprised the way I was walking, because I was keeping up with him. That was in 1933.

Was the co-operation between the ANC and SACP consistent . . . ?

For that I will ask you to read *Class and Colour*. There were times of differences. But we believed in a Black Republic. Look, the Communist Party was the first non-racialist party, where people of all races could join. The Communist Party was the first political party that demanded the vote for blacks. So therefore the ANC had reason to work with us.

In 1985 this was formalised . . .

No, it was not formalised. There is no formality about it. Joe Slovo got on to the National Executive Committee (NEC) of the ANC as a white member of the ANC, not as secretary-general of the SACP. And Maharaj came in, not as some representative of the Indian Congress, but as an Indian member of the ANC. That's how you have to look at it.

The thinking behind a united South Africa is in the Freedom Charter of '55. And if you look at our book *Class and Colour*, you will see how the Communist Party has constantly put forward the idea of one nation, one South African nation. Which is now what the ANC is doing, nation-building.

And did you have to fight to maintain the position on non-racialism?

No. We didn't have to fight. In South Africa we were always working with Black people. As far back as 1927, Josiah Gumede, president of the ANC, told the congress against colonial oppression and imperialism: 'I am happy to say that there are communists in South Africa. I am myself not one. But it is my experience that the Communist Party is the only party that stands behind us, and from which we can expect something.' Luthuli, in 1961, who wasn't a member of the Communist Party, who was an ANC member, put forward the idea of a common society. And he was working very closely with Moses Kotane.

In 1970 there was a conference organised by African women of the African Women's Congress on the African Continent. There were women from

12 J B Marks was another important black activist in the Communist Party and the ANC.

Algeria, Egypt etc. who were actually whiter than me, but they objected to me being there because I was white. I told them that there were many white comrades suffering in prison eg Denis Goldberg, Bram Fischer and others. I called Comrade Ruth Mompati and told her what they were saying. She and the other ANC women comrades told them that I am one of them and I remained to participate fully in the conference.

It seems it took a long time for a white person to get a senior position in the ANC on its National Executive Committee.

Yes, that's right. It was only in June 1985 that the ANC conference decided to open membership of the National Executive Committee to all races. Comrade Joe Slovo, Mac Maharaj and others got on to the committee by virtue of their dedication to the struggle for a free democratic, anti-racist and anti-sexist South Africa. Because there were people influenced by the PAC, you know, do-it-alone business.

1933 was a significant year because the Nazis came to power. Could you talk a little about your memories of this period, and how the growth of fascism in Europe affected you here?

The Nazis coming to power was very tormenting to us. We had no illusions about the Nazis' hatred towards the Jews and black people. I stayed up the whole night listening to the reports on the BBC about how the Nazis were winning. We knew that German Nazis will attack the Jews, which they did right away. The victory of the Nazis created many refugees, German Jews as well as socialists. One day I came home and three men were waiting for me. They were given my address by comrades in Hamburg or Berlin, and they told me they had managed to run away from Nazism. They told me they needed accommodation and they needed help to find jobs. Among them was one Jewish fellow, Hans Friedrich. I introduced him to Dr A H Gool's family. I helped the other two with accommodation and jobs.

In South Africa the fascists formed two kinds of organisation, the Greyshirts and the Blackshirts. The Blackshirts were an offshoot of Blackshirts in England, they didn't last long. But the Greyshirts were the real offshoot of the Nazis, the grey uniforms, and they were doing the same things the AWB does. The main thing was to break up communist meetings, workers' meetings, anywhere. And one day they organised a meeting in Paarl. And the Tram and Bus workers broke up their meeting. That was important because we got workers to fight the Greyshirts. And when Cissie Gool organised a meeting of the National Liberation League in Claremont Town Hall, the [Greyshirts] turned up to break up Cissie Gool's meeting and shout *kaffir* and other insulting words. But we defeated them and hit them back and they had to run out. And so this was also in Johannesburg, where

there were confrontations between the communists and the Anti-Fascist League and the Greyshirts.

We formed a strong Anti-Fascist League here. Comrade Bill Andrews had already organised a boycott of German goods in 1934. When the *Bremen*, a Nazi warship, came to South Africa in '35, the Communist Party [produced] a leaflet to explain to the German sailors.

In Europe there was developing a movement against fascism and Nazism. In France Leo Blum was elected leader of the People's Front and in Spain the poverty-stricken peasants also formed a popular front government. We organised a campaign to help the Spanish Republic.

Whilst I was going around collecting money and distributing leaflets about the Spanish Republic, I knocked at the door of Bishop Lavis on a Saturday afternoon. He gave me a donation of ten shillings, which was a lot of money, and we became great friends. I also got the support of Dr Petronella van Heerden. I met her one day while she was fixing her car. For the first time I saw a white woman on the ground, you know, and I leant down and said, 'Can I help you?', not that I know anything about cars, but I wanted to establish contact. And we became friends. I first involved her when I was secretary of the relief fund for poverty-stricken Namaqualand people. It wasn't only coloured people and Namaquas who were suffering, but Afrikaners, the *trekboers*, were also starving.

Petronella mobilised the National Party women and that is how the South African government under Hertzog voted 10 000 pounds to help the children of the Republic of Spain. Although she was a Nationalist member, she was a Republican in her ideas. Uys Krige,[13] who had come back from Spain where he saw the International Brigade in action,[14] also attended the meeting [to which] Petronella van Heerden invited me, with all the Nationalists. I was very impressed by him.

Petronella also organised a [fund-raising] function in 1936 or '37 at the Cathedral Hall, which South African musicians attended. And that day Paul Robeson's[15] wife came here on a trip to see a little bit of Cape Town, but mainly to go to Bloemfontein and Transkei. I took her to the Cathedral Hall that night. She thought it was wonderful that we should get so many black and white people together to help Spain. She said to me, 'That's going to be an inspiration when I write to Paul.' And in America they had the same types of organisation. So, the movement was growing.

In 1936 a few of us got together to establish a workers' paper that should [oppose] Nazism, pass laws, war, and support the Spanish Republic and the

13 Uys Krige was a distinguished Afrikaans writer, who also wrote in English. Born in 1910, Krige lived in France and Spain during the 1930s.

14 See the interview with Jack Flior (pp 289-305)

15 Paul Robeson was a black American communist, film actor and cultural critic who achieved world recognition for his political and cultural achievements.

people's forces. *The Guardian* actually started in February 1937. Although I was on the founding committee, it was decided that I should not be obvious, because I was a known communist. They didn't want it to be targeted as a communist paper. So Jimmy Emmerich, who was a Party member, came on to *The Guardian* management board along with other comrades who were not known as communists . . .

What was your reaction to the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact?

I was very disappointed. At the time I was secretary of the Party and the Party decided to organise a meeting to explain the pact. I was against it. I said it's going to lead to confusion because all the time we were denouncing the Nazis and now the Soviet Union made a pact with them. I asked the comrades not to expect me to speak. Harry Snitcher pressed that I should speak, but Moses Kotane and Bill Andrews said they must respect my integrity. I printed the leaflet drafted by the comrades and dished it out to our Party groups for distribution. I wasn't the only one who objected to the pact — there were many others.

How did the Jewish community respond to what you were doing to fight fascism?

The boycott of German goods was supported by many Jewish people, including businessmen who agreed to stop trading with Germany. In 1933 I became secretary of the Commercial Employees Union. They sent me to attend a conference of trade unionists and liberals in Johannesburg. This conference, held in December 1935, established the Anti-Fascist League. The idea of a united front against fascism had taken root.

But on my return from Johannesburg I was dismissed from my employment. The excuse was that when I was secretary [of the union] I said 'the last come the first to go'. And they dismissed three people who had been employed after me, so that I could be fitted in. The manager said: 'Our clients are not only Jews, and with your speech at the conference being reported in the *Cape Times*, it is not good for you to be working for us.' I strongly criticised him, that a Jewish firm should act like this.

Now when I started to help organise the workers, I went to the clothing factory of Mauberger, a Jewish person. They had a factory in Keerom Street and I was working at True Bros in Long Street. And I would go at lunch to this factory, and I got into the cloakroom to sit and talk to the workers. Some white girls were working there too, that is how I could get in. They had their sandwiches, I had my sandwiches. I used to take *The South African Worker* with me to sell. One day, a foreman realised that I was a stranger there. He came and just picked me up and took me out. But I didn't have any particular resentment because the company happened to be Jewish. This is the standard behaviour of all capitalists, of employers of labour. They don't want their

workers to be organised.

It was different, however, later on, when we had the anti-Semitism in Germany, during the Holocaust. Then I, for example, reacted strongly against Jacobs of Crosse & Blackwell when he said *voetsak* and kicked me out of the office. I thought, this fellow is behaving in the same way as the Nazis are behaving to Jews. But even then, I didn't know that he was a Jewish employer. Afterwards I learned that he was Jewish.

In 1944 the Food and Canning Workers Union had a meeting with the dried fruit companies in Worcester, chaired by the Mayor of Worcester. The spokesman for the dried fruit companies was George Brink, who had a factory in Montagu in partnership with Eric Louw,[16] the vicious anti-Semite. George Brink said that he refuses to sit at a meeting with *kaffirs*, *hotnots* and *Jode*. I immediately demanded that he withdraw his remarks. He would not, so I appealed to the chairman, saying we cannot sit with a man like him. George Brink left the meeting and we continued without him. In May 1945 we had a strike of the dried fruit workers. Employers refused to settle the strike. There was a stalemate and the bosses wanted to break our union so that it would never strike again. Our union decided that we should send a deputation to Wolf and Simon Heller, two brothers who owned Standard Canners in Worcester, and ask them whether they are prepared to allow Brink, this anti-Semite, to speak for them. We told them what had happened in October 1944. It worked. They agreed to make an agreement with us. And then there was another factory in Paarden Eiland whose owner also happened to be Jewish. We went to him and he also signed the same agreement. But I didn't have any illusions about Jewish employers. Jewish employers behaved like all other employers, the same way in America, and in England, and everywhere else.

What was it like being Jewish in the Party at different periods?

I had no problems. When the State of Israel was established we supported it. In fact, the Soviet Union had moved for the acceptance of Israel in the United Nations. In 1948, when the Nationalists came to power, our party exposed the anti-Semitism and racialism of the National Party.

But then later when the ANC began to support the PLO?

Well, ja. You're talking now of the eighties, you see. That's a different story. I had experiences at conferences, meeting PLO women who were very anti-Semitic. I remember going to a conference of trade unions and there were PLO members from Arab countries also in the food industry. And one

16 Louw was later a National Party cabinet minister who continually called for job reservation to be applied against Jews and warned that if nothing was done about 'die Joodse gevaar', they would push the Afrikaner completely out of both trade and professions.

fellow got up when I came to the table and moved away. And I demanded to know why. And then I was told by somebody 'Because he doesn't like to sit with Jews'. So I said 'Well, that's something we have to discuss. I'm not here representing Jews (I was representing the ANC or Sactu – South African Congress of Trade Unions) and I don't accept such treatment.' So they had a discussion with him, and that was the only time he moved away.

And in the movement did you ever encounter problems?

No, I didn't. I was always fully accepted. In fact, at a 1980 conference for women's rights in Copenhagen, organised by the United Nations, there were PLO women and there were also women from Israel, and we wanted the PLO women to meet the women from Israel. And the PLO women didn't want to meet them. Ruth Lubitz, who is a leading member of the Women's Communist Movement in Israel, said to me, 'Ray, I envy you that you are so close to the African delegation. They accept you as one of them and we can't get anywhere.' And I then went to the Soviet comrades to discuss this problem and they were trying to bring about a meeting between the Israeli women and the PLO. But I didn't have that problem.

Did workers know you were Jewish?

Oh yes. I didn't make an issue of it. But they knew that my English is not exactly the English of South Africans and that I was born elsewhere. And they also knew that there was an attempt to remove me from South Africa.

Do you think the fact that you were born Jewish helped you as a woman? Perhaps Jewish women have more possibilities for being assertive?

I didn't think of myself as Jewish. Because I just felt that I belong to the world. I'm internationalist, which is true. I remember reacting very strongly to the Jewish prayer [which Orthodox Jewish men say] in the morning, 'Thank you God, for making me a man and not a woman'. I don't know whether I was five years old or six . . . but I refused to accept this prayer. My grandfather, who was a very Orthodox Jew, demanded that if I don't accept some prayer or other, I must leave the table. Of course my mother didn't like the idea that I should be sent from the table, so she brought me food in my room. I had to leave the table but I made my point, you see. And my father was in agreement with me . . . No, I don't think the fact that I was a Jewish woman helped me. What did help me, when I went out to organise Langeberg Kooperasie Beperk (LKB) in Ashton, was the fact that I was a woman. They threatened to shoot me for organising the workers; I was told subsequently by some people that if I had been a man they would have shot me or beat me. But because I was a woman among Afrikaners they respected

women and I wasn't ill-treated as I could have been if I had been a man. So that's the only thing I can think of.

When you were bringing up your children, did you want to give them anything in terms of Jewish culture?

Well, when my children were old enough so I could read to them, I would read to them the books of the Holocaust. I got these books from the library which showed the struggles that the Jewish people had in Poland, and I read the children this.

And in terms of religion?

They knew my mother. My mother used to make a point of taking them to the synagogue on all the Jewish holidays. So we had no problems about it.

You were in exile for twenty-five years . . .

They introduced the Suppression of Communism Act in 1950. I was banned time and time again. The first banning order was two years, but they kept on renewing it. I was banned in 1953 from trade union and civic organisations. I remained active, working underground. In 1954 I stood for parliament and was elected as a Native Representative, but was not allowed to take my seat. The day I was elected, I was banned from parliament, and they pushed me off the steps of parliament. So I sued the policeman for assault, and they settled out of court. I used the money I got to pay off all my printing bills for my election campaign.

My husband Jack was detained in April 1960 and banned from teaching at the university in 1964. In May 1965 we decided to go into exile in Zambia, the nearest African state. Jack was given a fellowship at Manchester University. We went to Manchester and I studied at the university — Industrial Labour Relations and German and Russian.

We wrote *Class and Colour 1850-1950*, which was published by Penguin. In December 1967 we returned to Zambia. Jack was lecturing at the Zambian university and I worked for the International Labour Organisation (ILO) as administrative and finance secretary.

Those years in exile away from our children, friends and comrades were very anxious years. We brought Johan [their son] to Manchester in December 1965 to avoid his being called up to the South African army . . . In January 1968, the ANC accepted Jack and me as members. We were the first whites to be accepted.

After leaving the ILO in February on account of my health, I worked for the ANC Women's Section and the South African Congress of Trade Unions, addressing meetings and conferences in Europe and Africa to

How was it to return home?

Jack and I were the first ones to return from exile on the 2nd of March 1990. It was a wonderful experience for us. We were met by many comrades at the Johannesburg and Cape Town airports and decided to continue our struggle together with the rest of the comrades for a free and democratic South Africa for which we had devoted our lives.

In 1986 the Food and Canning Workers Union that I established in 1941 united with other food unions to form the Food and Allied Workers Union (Fawu) and they elected me as their life president. In 1991 I did not accept nomination to the central committee of the Communist Party, nor to the ANC Women's League. I did not accept nomination for ANC Member of Parliament in 1994 as I resolved that young comrades should move into positions of leadership. On the 2nd of December 1995 I was presented with Cosatu's Tenth Anniversary Award in recognition of decades of service to the trade union movement. On the 22nd of July 1995 my husband Professor Jack Simons died in our home after fifty-four and a half years of great companionship and joint dedication to the struggle for freedom in our country.

I always emphasised that I couldn't have done the work I did if not for Jack being the emancipated comrade he was. If I was in the kitchen and people came to consult with me about union activity he would take over . . .