

Tribute

Tribute – Ray Alexander 31.12.1913 – 12.09.2004

Helen Scanlon

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 (Suttner, 1997: 43).

By the time of her death on 12 September 2004, Ray Alexander was known around the world as a prominent agitator for political and human rights in apartheid South Africa. Her name had become synonymous with the Food and Canning Workers Union and the Federation of South African Women. In spite of 25 years of exile from South Africa (between 1965 and 1990), Alexander remained a consistent force in radical politics, eventually becoming the longest serving Communist Party functionary in South Africa. There were many facets to Ray's life: the young Zionist, the revolutionary, the trade unionist, the Communist Party activist, and the exile. In all these roles, she displayed a unique and progressive approach to the status of women in South Africa.

Rachel Alexandrowich was born on 31 December 1913 in Varaklan, a *shtetl* (Jewish village) in Latvia established, according to her, by her great-great-grandfather in what was then part of the Jewish Pale of Settlement within the Russian Empire. [1] According to Alexander, her father was “an intellectual and a reader” who encouraged the education of his daughters in spite of traditional attitudes to women in the *shtetl*. A “progressive man” who “read socialist books”, Ray recalls him as an “armchair socialist” who nurtured her growing social awareness. His extensive library helped her to develop a love of reading, and he encouraged her to read “Yiddish booklets on leaders of the Bund, and on socialist and communist leaders”. [2]

By the late 1920s, Ray's own move into left-wing politics had crystallised, apparently through a study group that roused her interest in the plight of the working class. It was at this time that she was recruited into the underground Communist Party. This was perhaps not surprising, since her two step-sisters, Anna and Tanya, already belonged to a revolutionary group in Riga, and her sisters Mary and Dora were members of Arbeiter Heim (The Workers' Home), a communist group that had been banned by the Latvian government.

Late in 1929, the fifteen-year-old Ray left Latvia and joined her brother Isher in South Africa. The Alexandrowich's family migration was part of the general emigration of Jews from the Baltic region to South Africa and elsewhere in the years before World War II. More than 2 000 Jewish immigrants a year came to South Africa between 1924 and 1930; James Campbell suggests that this was largely the result of the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act, which prohibited Jewish immigration to the United States during this period (2001: 5). The Alexandrowich family thus became part of a then impoverished Jewish minority seeking to establish itself in South Africa.

The young Ray arrived in Cape Town believing that “in view of the approaching capitalist crisis – unemployment and economic depression ... conditions would be ripe for a revolution” (Parker, 1992). Instead, her first impressions were unpropitious. She found Cape Town's political organisations weak and lacking in spirit. In particular, the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) [3] was split into factions, and membership was low. Ray was so dismayed, she wanted to return to Latvia. Within a week, however, she found new inspiration in the plight of local factory workers. Having discovered that local laundry-workers had no trade union, she decided that “this was virgin soil and that I should remain in South Africa and help organise the unorganised” – which she proceeded to do for the next forty years. Within only five days of her arrival, on 11 November 1929, she had joined the CPSA, an organisation on

which she was destined to leave an indelible mark.

Ray's early life story illustrates many of the continuities between Eastern European radicalism and South African communism. As with many white activists who originated in Eastern Europe, there are subtle links between the Jewish intellectual tradition and its socialist heritage, and their political activities in South Africa. Ray claimed that her own shift from Zionism to socialism stemmed from her encounters in Latvia, where she grew to believe "that socialism is the [correct response] to anti-Semitism" (Suttner, 1997: 27). The social dislocation of many Jewish immigrants first arriving in South Africa may also have played a role in attracting Ray and others to leftist politics. As family bonds and organised religion dwindled, radical politics and the Communist Party offered more than just political affiliation. They "offered community, human contact, the warmth and solidarity otherwise absent from their daily lives" (Suttner, 1997: 60). When asked to explain the significance of politics in her life, Ray herself stated: "The party was to me everything. Because it's from the party that I began to organise and develop myself to a full human being" (Parker, 1992).

From the time of her arrival in South Africa, Ray also concentrated her energies on organising women, in spite of (or perhaps because of) the patriarchal society in which she had grown up. Although she had not been directly concerned with women's issues in Latvia, Ray actively sought out women's organisations in South Africa. On making contact with the Women's Enfranchisement League, for example, she was shocked to discover that women in South Africa did not have the vote. [4] It appears that in line with CPSA policy, but perhaps also in tune with her own predilections, Ray consorted with women from very different political backgrounds, often with a great deal of success. In 1933, for example, she involved the National Council of Women in a campaign for shorter hours for shop assistants. Perhaps her most extraordinary alliance was with National Party women in the 1930s, whom she managed to convince to give funds to left-wing revolutionaries fighting in the Spanish Civil War (Parker, 1992).

Ray soon gained prominence as a staunch and active member of the CPSA, despite its difficulties at that stage of its history. The Party was in such a state of disarray in 1930 that the sixteen-year-old Ray was offered the position of Party Secretary only months after arriving in South Africa. According to Moses Kotane, then the General Secretary of the CPSA, he had intended to leave the Party in the 1930s, but "I failed because I did not reckon with John Gomas and Ray Alexander. They stopped the rot and I eventually found myself in the centre of things in the Party" (Bunting, 1998: 91). In 1938, at Kotane's request, the CPSA moved its headquarters to Cape Town, where Ray Alexander was elected to the Politburo with, among others, Bill Andrews, Cissie Gool, Sam Kahn and Jack Simons (Muthien, 1989: 112). She remained active in building up its membership and forging alliances with other organisations until the Party's dissolution in 1950. In 1953, she was elected to parliament, thus becoming the first communist to be elected as a "Native Representative" for the Western Cape Division. She was, however, never able to take her seat. The Nationalist government passed a law to prevent any known communist from sitting in parliament, a law that became popularly known as the Suppression of Ray Alexander Act.

The link between radical politics and the labour movement was clearly central to the approach of activists like Ray, and her most well-known contributions to politics came in the role she played in the formation of the Food and Canning Workers Union (F&CWU) and the Federation of South African Women (FSAW). Her part in the establishment of a progressive trade-union movement in Cape Town in the 1930s was vital, particularly for the increasing numbers of women factory workers. Set up in 1941 to support the rights of workers in the fruit-canning industry and the West Coast fishing communities, the F&CWU became one of the most effective unions of the era. Within it, women held a significant number of leadership positions, and were often far more involved than men in strikes and political action (Berger,

1992: 189-203). Between 1941 and 1964, all of the union's General Secretaries and over half the management committee were women, the only union of that time to achieve this level of gender equity in representation. This was a direct result of the emphasis Ray placed on the organisation of female workers.

Through the F&CWU, Ray was to become “a legend in trade union circles” according to Helen Joseph (Joseph, 1986: 3). Ray herself fostered this “legendary” position, as she maintained tight control over the union's development. According to Rebecca Lan, when Ray was banned in 1954, she asked Rebecca to work as acting-General Secretary despite her lack of experience because “I was someone whom Ray could trust to be able to carry through whatever she wanted done – her ideas and all that”. [5]

She sustained contact with the union throughout her years of exile and played a vital role in guiding the industrial action at the Fattis & Monis factory in 1979, the first major strike in the Western Cape since the 1950s (Alexander Simons, 2004).

Her ability to transcend racial and class boundaries was seen in her contribution to the establishment of FSAW, in the face of considerable opposition from her Communist Party comrades, including Moses Kotane and Yusuf Dadoo. FSAW went on to become perhaps the most successful multiracial women's organisation in South African history. It proved pivotal in the anti-pass campaign of the 1950s, famously organising 20 000 women to march on Pretoria, an event that remains a benchmark and beacon in the struggle of women against apartheid. FSAW challenged many traditional assumptions on the organisation of women by questioning their position in public life. In some ways, it contested the male monopoly of political power. Ray meanwhile remained devoted to women's issues during all the years of her exile, and collated a vast amount of information on women in South Africa.

On a personal level, Ray's first marriage to fellow CPSA member Eli Weinberg proved unhappy and ended in divorce. In 1941, she married another Party member, Jack Simons. A lecturer at the University of Cape Town in comparative African government and law, he was considered one of the great political thinkers in Cape Town at that time. The ceremony was fitted in during a lunch break, but the marriage itself proved a lasting union. Considered by Ray to be a “liberated man”, Jack not only shared her political dedication but also gave her “complete freedom to do what I wanted” (Parker, 1992).

After her banning, Ray's political work continued at the same pace underground, as she had “prepared several friends who were giving me offices” (Parker, 1992). In 1961, she became one of the first women to be recruited into Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the armed wing of the ANC. Ray claimed that “in view of my age – because in [19]60 I was already fifty years old ... I said I will do anything you want me to” (Parker, 1992). Her role was mostly administrative, and pursued with typical energy; she once learnt the size of every impoverished ANC student at a conference in order to supply them with clothes (Anderson: 5). Later, in 1978, at the age of 65, she undertook military training in Zambia and pledged her oath of allegiance to MK in a symbolic gesture.

Significant numbers of activists left South Africa in the 1960s, seeking to avoid imprisonment or to enlist for training in the guerrilla movement. Like many of their peers, Jack and Ray had no choice but to leave. At the time, they were both banned from political activity, restricted by house arrest, continuously harassed and without any source of income. They went into exile in May 1965, leaving their three children behind in the care of relatives. After a spell in Manchester, they settled in Zambia in 1967, where they continued to work for the ANC and MK, as well as the SACP. They became the first whites to be allowed to join the ANC in 1968.

It has been shown that women activists usually had to balance their political activities with their responsibilities as wives and mothers, and that often those women “who transgress social norms find their womanhood called into question” (Mindry, 1998: 339). Alexander clearly suffered from the social contradictions between her roles as activist and as mother. Indeed, a number of women activists were as critical of her high political profile as they were of her fellow Communist Party activist Ruth First. Her attitude to work and family almost defeminised her in the eyes of some of her peers. According to Sarah Carneson, a local member of the CPSA:

I never thought of her in particular as a woman. Maybe it was because of the way she dressed, the way she reacted to her work.... I always got the impression that Ray's work was the most important part of her life. It's strange that you have this business of her being involved in women not as a mother and a woman, but politically, not in a feminine personal sense (Anderson, 4).

Ray's pragmatism and devotion to politics often permeates her depiction of the personal realm. The order in which she described herself to the academic Charles Villa-Vicencio is revealing: “I am a socialist, a communist, a member of the ANC, a fighter for justice, a woman, a mother, a wife” (Villa-Vicencio, 1994: 22). In one account she even implied that she had had children in order to understand the position of working mothers:

I was determined to have a child because talking to the women workers about the hardships and the struggles that women have, I felt at times that I am a fraud. I'm talking from what I read and what I see, but not what I myself have experienced. The difficulties of pregnancy, the difficulties of having a baby and nursing a baby. So I was determined to have – and I have three – we have three children, two daughters and a son (Parker, 1992).

Although Ray refers to her decision to have children in a somewhat dispassionate manner, she was in fact highly self-deprecating about her role as a mother. “In fighting against public events, I must admit to having neglected my marital and maternal responsibilities,” she wrote to Shelagh Gastrow in 1985. [6] In interviews, Ray's troubled relationship with her children is a recurrent theme, and she openly identifies her children as the one “sacrifice” of her political career, the “victims to my obsession [with] the struggle against injustice and inequality”. [7]

According to Sadie Forman, a friend and fellow activist, while Ray was consistently confrontational in her political life, this never manifested itself in her personal relations. Thus, when Jack wrote on her behalf to the F&CWU tendering her resignation on two occasions because he felt she was neglecting the children, she duly signed the letters. Only after the union protested did he agree that she could carry on with her work (Anderson, 42).

In the public arena, however, it is very difficult to find descriptions that do not emphasise Ray's inspirational presence in the politics of the era. By the 1940s, she had become a national figure in union and radical circles, and her popularity was attested to by her status among workers. When she was banned in 1953, union organiser Oscar Mpetha described her in highly emotional terms at a special meeting of the F&CWU: “Until Ray came we were slaves. If Ray dies we must die. Hand in hand and with all our hearts we must try to get Ray back” (Berger, 1992: 199). Women in Langa and Nyanga honoured her with the names Nozizwe (lady of the world) and Nothemba (trustworthy) (Berger, 1992: 199). Bibi Dawood of Worcester, one of the 1956 treason trialists, claims “she was like a mother and we were her children who grew up and learnt from her”. According to Albie Sachs:

We would go to these worker's homes. You would go to these little pondokkies in the Cape Flats and out in the countryside and there were pictures of Ray all over the place. Often on one wall there would be a picture of Jesus and then in another part of the room would be a cutting from a newspaper and a picture of Ray (Anderson, 16).

In her analysis of FSAW, Cheryl Walker goes so far as to say that “it would be difficult to overestimate the extremely large part” played by Ray (1991: 50). The astonishing level of participation and political engagement within FEDSAW can in large measure be credited to her determination. There is no doubt that Ray made an extraordinary contribution to the struggle for worker's rights in South Africa and, more importantly, to altering perceptions within the CPSA and ANC towards the organisation of women. Her tireless commitment has ensured her place as a resolute anti-apartheid activist in South Africa's history books.

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Footnotes

[1] From 1835 onwards, Jews were restricted to the Western part of the Russian empire known as the Pale of Settlement.

[2] The Yiddisher Arbeiter Bund (General Workers Jewish Union), established in 1897 in Latvia, was a socialist organisation. It embraced Yiddish and called for the integration of Jews as opposed to the separate state called for by Zionists.

[3] The South African Communist Party (SACP) was relaunched as an underground party in 1953 after its predecessor, the Communist Party of South Africa, was banned in 1950.

[4] The Women's Enfranchisement League, called for "the vote on the same terms as men", i.e., for white women only. This they achieved under the Women's Enfranchisement Act of 1930.

[5] Personal interview with Rebecca Lan, London, 28 October 1999.

[6] Letter from Ray Alexander to Shelagh Gastrow (n.d), Simon's papers, UCT Manuscripts and Archives, BC.1081.

[7] Letter from Ray Alexander to Shelagh Gastrow, Simon's papers.

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