

FRIEND TO OLIVE SCHREINER: THE STORY OF RUTH SCHECHTER

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The Intellectual as Socialist

In tracing the history of socialism in South Africa historians have previously searched through the records of political groups, trade union organizations and the lives of leading left-wing politicians. The works based on these researches (or reminiscences) provide the bare bones of the history of the left in South Africa. What is missing is the study of the intellectual backing to this political current, both for their contributions and for the problems introduced by an intelligentsia who saw so clearly the evils of colour discrimination but conceived only dimly its relation to class exploitation.

It is not always obvious where this study should begin or which subjects this investigation should cover. There seems to be no obvious theoretician to whom the researcher can turn: few, if any, people equal in calibre to the leading thinkers in Europe or the USA in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. Yet such men and women must have been present for the movement to have come into existence, gained ground, and continued for almost a century. What appears in the histories, and this is at least partly correct, is that some of the ideas translated into socialist programmes came from immigrants, bringing their ideas from Europe. These were tested against local conditions and adjusted to meet perceived needs.

Other ideas, fed into the socialist movement by persons with no political affiliation, get bare mention or are overlooked. It is precisely to some such people, living in Cape Town in the 1920s and 1930s, that this paper is directed: to Olive Schreiner (who died in December 1920) and her closest disciple, Ruth Schechter Alexander; and to the Cape Town academics of the 1920s and 1930s. There is a continuum before the Second World War that links these people: their criticism of racism, opposition to imperialism and war, defence of minority rights, and their rationalism and socialism. Then the thread was broken and new ideas were fed into the socialist movement by a new generation.

The early luminaries and their traditions were forgotten in the events that followed the war. Their names were expunged from memory, their achievements, both academic and social, seemingly ignored by a new generation of political activists. And for those who still remember names like Benjamin Farrington, classicist and writer on science in antiquity, Lancelot Hogben, zoologist and popularizer of scientific advancement, Frederick Bodmer, linguist and lecturer in German, it is not generally known that they lived in South Africa, lectured in Cape Town, and participated actively in the cultural and literary life of the town. In writing about them I am aware of the difficulties involved in determining the influence they exercised, both on the general public and on socialist organizations. Many of the people involved stayed for a short period in that intellectual milieu and then went their separate ways. They tended to be isolated in academic circles and had only peripheral contact with political bodies. Their ideas, even when heard at learned societies, did not always appear relevant to the struggles being conducted in the country and, even when they impinged directly on political groups, the extent of their influence defies measurement. None the less the potential impact of such people requires serious research. Of these, none is more important than Ruth Schechter Alexander, whose name cannot be found in any of the annals of socialist history, whose essays are long forgotten and whose organization of a literary salon seems to be unrecorded.

Ruth Schechter: a Family Background

When Ruth Schechter consented to marry Morris Alexander in 1907 at the age of 19, and go with him to South Africa, it is said that friends asked in sympathy "What will she do in that

outlandish place?" To this her father replied: "Perhaps she will see Olive Schreiner." Solomon Schechter had read Olive's novel *The Story of an African Farm* (published in 1883), and, according to a lecture given by Ruth in 1929, had been deeply impressed by the thoughts expressed by the author. It is not known whether he had also heard of Olive's defence of the Jews in a letter to the Social Democratic Federation of Cape Town in February 1905, in which she attacked the Russian state for encouraging the pogroms in which hundreds of Jews were injured or killed, and thousands of lives disrupted. Nor is it known if he heard of Olive's defence of the right of Jews to be in South Africa when she referred with approbation to the recognition of Yiddish as a European language, in an address in 1906. Without this, Jews would have been denied entry to South Africa. Yet this might have been a vital bridge to her meeting with Ruth, because it was largely because of Morris Alexander's intervention that this legislation was passed in the Cape and Olive would have known of the centrality of his actions.

Ruth left the family home (then in New York), went to Cape Town and did meet Olive Schreiner. Indeed, she became a close friend and admirer of Olive's. As a bonus, Ruth's father, mother and sister, who visited South Africa in 1910, also met with and enjoyed the friendship of this great writer.

Ruth Alexander was a person of decided opinion and was not easily persuaded by others. However, there is no doubt that Olive Schreiner was her guiding light throughout her adult life. Ruth's course was set by what she learned from her friend, and some of the apparent contradictions in her life can only be understood through an unravelling of the relationship between these two women. Only some, because Ruth came with a heritage from her family that had helped to form her, and which remained with her throughout her life. Subsequently Ruth met with the Cape Town intelligentsia and this, too, determined the path she would take.

Born on 1 May 1888 in London, Ruth was the daughter of one of the most famous Jewish scholars of his time, Solomon Schechter. Educated at school in Cambridge and New York, Ruth did not go to university, but acquired a more intensive and deeply rooted education in her father's study, as his unofficial secretary, and at the family table, where "she acquired the delight in impersonal conversation about things of the mind, in the absence of which she found all society insipid and dull". [1]

Dr Schechter was Reader in Talmudic Studies at Cambridge University and then President of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. In Cambridge his circle of acquaintances and friends were drawn from the intelligentsia, whether Jewish or English, religious or agnostic. [2] In 1896 he was informed by two Presbyterian women that they had acquired fragments of old documents in Cairo. He found one of them to be from long lost Hebrew versions of the Apocryphal Book of Ben Sira. Funded by the Master of St John's College, Charles Taylor, he travelled to Cairo. There he entered the depository of sacred texts (the *genizah*) of the Ben Ezra Synagogue at Fostat (Old Cairo). Almost completely sealed off from the outside, there lay a mass of fragments of books and documents dating from the tenth century. Schechter's request to remove the documents was allowed, and they were transported to Cambridge.

Writing about the treasure, Schechter said in his *Studies in Judaism*:

One can hardly realise the confusion in a genuine, old genizah until one has seen it. It is a battlefield of books, and the literary production of many centuries had their share in the battle, and their *disjecta membra* are now strewn over an area. Some of the belligerents have perished outright and are literally ground to dust in the terrible struggle for space, while others, as if overtaken by a general crush, are squeezed into big, unshapely lumps, which even with the aid of chemical appliances [in the 1890s] can no longer be separated without serious damage to their constituents ...

In their present condition these lumps sometimes afford curiously suggestive combinations; as, for instance, when you find a piece of some rationalistic work, in which the very existence of either angels or devils is denied, clinging

for its very life to an amulet in which these same beings (mainly the latter) are bound over to be on their good behaviour and not to interfere with Miss Jair's love for somebody. The development of the romance is obscured by the fact that the last lines of the amulet are mounted on some IOU or lease, and this in turn is squeezed between the sheets of an old moralist, who treats all attention to money affairs with scorn and indignation. Again, all these contradictory matters cleave tightly to some sheets from a very old Bible.

The genizah depository was accepted by the Senate of Cambridge University and housed at the library as the Taylor-Schechter collection. Schechter and his associates separated, cleaned and pressed over 34,000 fragments of Hebrew and Arabic literature, letters, catalogues, relations with Muslims and Christians, plagues, police and prisons, warfare and welfare. [3]

Ruth was reared in an atmosphere in which these fragments lay at the centre of her father's work. She absorbed the climate generated by the interest in these ancient documents and was deeply devoted to her father. He undoubtedly shaped her values and attitudes, her religious fervour and interest in Zionism, and the intellectual background that carried her through life. It could not have been otherwise for father and daughter, both with the sensibility and culture of nineteenth-century Europe and a keen awareness of world events.

When Ruth was 12 years old she met Morris Alexander, then 23 years old. He had won a scholarship to Cambridge in 1899 to read law [4] and became a close friend of the family. There was a romantic, if precocious, attachment and after Alexander's return to South Africa they corresponded. Alexander's ardour grew and Ruth had adolescent fantasies about this scholar from Cape Town who, after his return, fought in the local council for the right of entry of Jewish immigrants. Intended immigrants were required by Cape legislation to be proficient in a European language, but Yiddish, written in Hebrew characters, was designated as Semitic. In 1906 Alexander succeeded in having the language recognized as "European". In June 1907, with the top Jewish dignitaries of New York in attendance, he claimed his bride, now aged 18. On their honeymoon the couple stopped in at the Zionist Congress in Europe, and after five month's absence Alexander and his bride returned to Cape Town.

By all accounts, including the letters that Ruth wrote, the marriage was a happy one - at least during the first period. [5] Ruth was the devout and orthodox wife of a man who had a career open to him as an advocate, and in 1908 he started his long parliamentary career as a member of the Cape Legislative Assembly. He was the President of the Jewish Board of Deputies in Cape Town and that placed Ruth in the forefront of the Jewish community and also (if she desired it) part of a social set that rotated around the legal fraternity, the ruling parliamentary party and government officials.

Morris Alexander was an early liberal in the South African parliament and gave his personal support to Gandhi and other Indian leaders who organized the early opposition to discrimination, and also to the cause of women's suffrage, although he did not extend this, as did Ruth, to the demand that an women be enfranchised.

He always sat on the back benches and championed the rights of ethnic minorities. His house was also open to visiting Indians, commencing with Gandhi and a succession of Indian dignitaries thereafter. In 1937 he renewed his fight to have Yiddish recognised as a European language for immigrants to South Africa. He also opposed discrimination on grounds of race, creed or colour, although he was never in the forefront of those that took such a stand. But he was one of the few in Parliament who opposed the removal of the Cape African vote in 1935-36.

His one major act of rebellion came in 1920 when he stood for Parliament as an independent, demonstrating a dislike of the party of General Smuts. In 1929, when he lost he seat, he went back to Smuts's party and, returned to Parliament in 1931, he stayed there until his death in 1947. Without wishing to belittle Alexander, evidence suggests that he stood as an independent

at the insistence of his wife. Ruth was impatient with General Smuts and his ruling South African Party. On 27 May 1917 she had received a letter from John X Merriman, a leading parliamentarian. There he spoke of "despair" at Smuts's recent speech in Britain, to persuade a "gullible public" that coming legislation "whose effect - I will not say whose intention - is to reduce the native to the status of a barbarian serf", was founded on the "Bed rock of Xtian principles". This, said Merriman, "is indeed an evil omen". [6]

This letter undoubtedly affected Ruth because, except for letters she received from Olive Schreiner, this was one of the few she kept. After this she would have little cause to believe that General Smuts would allow any betterment in the conditions of the black population. Three years later, Alexander balked at the absorption of the Unionist Party (to which he had belonged) by the South African Party (led by Smuts). At the next parliamentary elections, in early 1921, Alexander stood as an independent. While he made an urgent visit to his sick brother in London, Ruth managed his constituency business with the assistance of Olive Schreiner.

Alexander was returned unopposed, and on his return he received a letter on board ship from Ruth. In it she said that many people had congratulated him on his stand against the two major parties, but she warned that he would have requests from both Smuts and Nationalist candidates for assistance in the election. He "had to decide before the boat docked where he stood". She continued:

My dear, my dear, my big man you stand at the parting of the ways. Within the next two weeks you must become either in very truth the leader of a new Party with malice towards none, with charity towards all, with courage ever to fight for right as God gives us to see the right, or to sink to an unrecognized appendage of this group or that. Little fear enough for you of that. But if it is to be the other way for you, the way that I swear is yours if you choose to tread its lofty, difficult path, my darling, it is you who may yet bring peace to this torn country. Then you must be very careful, very certain in these first steps along the road.

It seems superfluous to comment now on the illusory base of Ruth's political aspirations in 1921, particularly as women were marginal to parliamentary politics at the time. It was even more fanciful for Ruth to see in Morris the saviour of South Africa. Yet Olive Schreiner's involvement in this parliamentary campaign is not surprising. The close bond between the two women would account for Olive's participation in the constituency rooms, and her recognition of Morris's fight for the right of the Jews to enter South Africa would have clinched the matter.

This seems to have been the last occasion in which Ruth participated actively in her husband's political activities. There is no indication that she willingly took any further part in the public activities of her husband, even when propriety indicated that she should be present at an official function. It is not known when and on what issue the break came, but, taking into account new friendships and new ideas that were forming, it is possible that she was alienated by Morris Alexander's speech in Parliament in April 1923, after the brutal suppression of the general strike on the Rand, in which he declared that "Judaism was the very antithesis of Bolshevism". But this is to jump ahead of the story and there are some crucial facts to recount.

Ruth was a young woman of just over 30 years of age, with three growing children. Alongside her interests in politics and cultural affairs, she also had to manage the home and see to the rearing of three children. They obviously brought happiness - but also much grief. Solly, the youngest, brought most joy. He read science at Cape Town and medicine in Britain. Then, married and divorced in London, he was close to his mother. He married again in Britain and migrated to Australia where he had three sons and appears to have severed relations with his parents. However, the two girls were the cause of great anxiety and, seemingly left to the care of Ruth, absorbed a large part of her time and energies. The eldest, Esther, was put into a mental home when still young and remained under care throughout her life; she is said to be

there still. The younger daughter, Muriel, was also unstable and spent many years in mental homes or under psychiatric treatment. But I know little of the family life. There is a paucity of information about them, punctuated by flashes of information in letters, but not enough to flesh out their lives. Enid Alexander, second wife of Morris, barely mentions the children in her biography of her husband, and does not allude to the difficulties faced by the family in the treatment of the two girls.

There were also wider family involvements. Ruth's relationship with the Alexander family does not appear to have been close, but her relationship with her cousin, Tzipporah Schechter (daughter of Israel, twin brother of Solomon) who came to South Africa in 1913, appears to have been warm. Tzipporah and Menachem Genussow, a friend of Morris Alexander, met when Genussow took greetings from Solomon Schechter to his brother in Palestine. The Genussows were prominent Zionists (although they get bare mention in the histories of South African Zionism) but left for Palestine between 1925 and 1931.[8] Ruth moved away from Jewish and Zionist circles in the early 1920s and contact between the two sections of the family fell away, as did so much else in Ruth's life.[9]

Ruth's politics grew apart from that of her husband, and this was one of the factors that led to tension in the family. Whether this led to Ruth's departure from South Africa in 1933 and their divorce in August 1935 is not clear. Other factors and persons had entered her life long before the final split and these all contributed to the path she chose. What is of note here, before exploring these other people, is the fact that whatever she did would have been noted by members of her community. Ruth could not hide behind anonymity, nor would she have wanted to, however discretely she acted. In this respect the Jewish community had the final word. Ruth, once so prominent in the Cape, so celebrated as the daughter of the great Solomon Schechter and starring in her own right in literary circles, does not appear (as far as I can discover) in any of the annals of Jewish society outside the biography of Morris Alexander. She became a non-person by virtue of what she did, and, in the time-honoured tradition of the Jewish community, she was cast out when she left South Africa to marry an Irish communist and become a propagandist for the British-Soviet Unity Committee. The metamorphosis of this remarkable person, and the reason for her ostracism, for such it was, needs explanation.

The Meeting with Olive Schreiner

To the refrain that perhaps she would meet Olive Schreiner, Ruth Alexander sailed for the Cape in 1907. I have not yet found accounts of the welcome that must have greeted her arrival in Cape Town but it is hard to believe that the event was not celebrated. Morris Alexander was a prominent citizen and the stories of her father's work alone would have drawn attention to Ruth.

Solomon Schechter's prescience proved correct. Ruth met Olive Schreiner shortly after she arrived at the Cape and a strong bond bound them. [10] The meetings and correspondence that followed their introduction to each other were a dominant factor in Ruth's life through to Schreiner's death in December 1920. This was a meeting of like minds in which the warmth and wisdom of the older woman met with the spontaneity and growing understanding of the younger. Ruth visited Olive, confided in her, and in those days conveyed the happiness that she had found in her domestic affairs. They were friends socially and in their strong convictions. The letters that were exchanged indicate the empathy between the two women. Ruth responded warmly to the growing friendship. Verse that Ruth wrote was sent to Olive for her pleasure and, hopefully, for approval. [11] Furthermore, Ruth introduced interesting persons to Olive - one of whom was undoubtedly Benjamin Farrington, a young lecturer in Latin, who arrived at the University of Cape Town in March 1920. [12]

In June 1914, writing from Nauheim in Germany, Olive alluded to anti-semitic remarks in the hotel in which she was staying. In response, wrote Olive, Will [probably W P Schreiner, her brother] said that the most gifted person they had met in Cape Town was a Jewess. And, in a

marginal note, Olive added, "meaning you". Olive added that she was delighted; and that Ruth's mother and sister could not have rejoiced as much as she had at seeing other people appreciating her. If that was not sufficient praise, Olive added that Ruth was still going to develop, intellectually and in other ways. Olive continued by praising Jews in general: that was only part of her writing about and defending Jews - something she had done over the past fifteen years.

In the course of a correspondence which lasted over a decade, and undoubtedly when they met, the discourse covered a wide range of common interests, with Olive Schreiner guiding her young disciple. They discussed their families (including Ruth's growing family), touched on the problems faced by the Indians in South Africa, and were in contact with Hermann Kallenbach and other Tolstoyans who had supported Gandhi in his South African campaigns against discrimination. They discussed (and condemned) the ubiquitous anti-semitism and the scourge of racism; and took similar positions on the women's suffrage movement. They also shared their concern on the move towards war before 1914, and then the war itself.

But it was usually Schreiner who took the lead in defining attitudes. They held in common an ideal of individual human rights. They condemned notions of racial or ethnic superiority and they opposed the use of force in national conflicts. They upheld the rights of individuals to impartial justice, and in their attitudes they felt no need to appeal to the sanctions of church or a god; and it was undoubtedly Olive who first introduced Ruth to agnosticism. Ruth's ultimate rejection of religion could only have led to further strains in her relations with her husband and the local Jewish community.

The values shaped in the thirteen years of their acquaintance became the touchstone of everything Ruth did after Olive's death - although it led to an adulation on Ruth's part that seems excessive and *gauche*. None the less, the essays she wrote on Olive must be understood in the context of the close relationship that existed between the two women. Writing in November 1959, Farrington said:

In the twenty-two years I knew Ruth she lived in the continual awareness of Olive Schreiner's personality. This awareness lay at the deepest levels of her thought and feeling, and above all, was present when hard decisions had to be made. Nor was it dependent on Olive's books, but on their friendship. This needs to be remembered in estimating the importance of anything Ruth has said about Olive. [13]

Partly out of devotion but also from conviction, Ruth lectured and wrote on Olive Schreiner, her writings and her ideals. The principles that they had agreed determined Ruth's path. One course of action, in particular, can be traced in part to Olive's strong conviction that the overthrow of the Russian Tsar was a great liberating event and that the new republic that took its place had to be supported. For Schreiner, this position was taken after the terrible pogroms at the turn of the century and she made clear her sympathy with the Jews. Her attitude was strengthened by her friends in Europe who denounced Russia as the font of reaction in Europe. Writing to Ruth on 22 August 1915, Olive said: "I am so glad Russia is being beaten. It may mean freedom for Russia but I fear England and France will come to the autocracy's help again as they did after the Japanese war and crush down the movement for freedom. If only Finland would rise and just proclaim herself freed." And on 12 May 1920: "I am so glad that the working men here refused to load the ship with guns to fight the Russian republic ... Through all the dark and agony of this time I see far, far off a better and brighter day dawning." But the remark that Ruth remembered and quoted, first in her talk on "Olive Schreiner" in 1929, and then in her last published article, harked back on a visit to Olive in 1920.

Answering an urgent message for her to come unusually early that day, Ruth says that Schreiner said on the phone that "something beautiful has happened that has made me very happy". When they met, Olive exclaimed: "Haven't you seen the papers! Didn't you see that Denikin [the 'White Russian' General] is out of Russia. Don't you see what it means!" Then,

said Ruth, "for an hour, with flashing eyes and in firm tones she told me what it did mean - the lifting of the blockade, the ability of the Russians to get hold again of food and medicine and machinery, and to begin to get their house in order". [14]

Olive was desperately ill and did not have long to live. She thought, as did many others at the time, that in the events in Russia she had caught a glimpse of the future. This she communicated to Ruth in that impressionable meeting in late 1920. That is only part of what she transmitted to her young friend. Ruth referred to aspects of their conversations in some of her lectures and reviews, but much that was not recorded can only be surmised. After Olive's death Ruth protested in print against publications of her friend's work by Cronwright, Olive's husband. Relatives and intimates of Olive wrote to congratulate Ruth at the time. They are testimony to the high regard in which Ruth was held by Olive's friends. The letters are deposited in the South African Library.

Enter Benjamin Farrington

Ruth's formal scholastic career had ended in secondary school but her work for her father had given her an appetite for learning that she never lost. Some time in 1918 (if not earlier) [15] she made contact with the University of Cape Town - but the nature of this contact remains obscure. On 14 December 1918, Olive commented in a letter: "I am so glad you are working at the University. I'm sure it's so wise." Then in a letter of 1 April 1919 she wrote: "I hope it goes well with your studies." Whether Ruth started on a degree, or on some research project is unknown - but she had obviously made friends among members of the staff. According to Benjamin Farrington, one of her first friends was J S Marais, then in the classics department, before moving to history. Marais introduced Ruth to Gerard Paul Lestrade who had just completed an MA in classics, and then studied ethnology abroad. [16] Ruth was to say later that he was more than a little bit in love with her.

In March 1920 Benjamin Farrington arrived from Ireland with an impressive reputation as a student and lecturer in Greek and Latin. He held an appointment as lecturer in Latin and was to become Senior Lecturer in 1922 and then Professor of Latin. Soon after he arrived he was introduced by Lestrade to Ruth and was, thereafter, a constant visitor at the Alexander home. Farrington had been an assistant, teaching classics at Queen's University, Belfast, over the past four years and had been witness to the repression of the Irish uprising. Although he did not come from the Catholic community, he had joined Sinn Fein. The letters he received in Cape Town from friends and relatives through 1920 were filled with stories of the Black and Tans, of shootings, imprisonments, and political turmoil. It seemed almost inevitable that he should start and publish *The Republic* for South African Irish readers for two years. But, radical as he was in Irish affairs, he knew little about South Africa. After visiting Johannesburg in the summer vacation, he wrote home in the usual colonial style, justifying segregation, the pass laws, and so on. [17] Contact with Ruth was to change all that.

The romance between Ben and Ruth started within a few months of their meeting. Letters from Ireland indicated that he had written about Ruth often and warmly. On several occasions he was asked how his "Jewess" was, and one letter from a widow about to marry his uncle asked whether his relationship was Platonic (which the good lady did not hold by), or whether his relationship went further. Ben undoubtedly ignored the question. Whatever occurred was discreet and might even have been innocent over many years. Ben was 29 years old and Ruth was 32, a married woman with three children and, initially, a religious Jewess. She was, furthermore, the wife of a man who was prominent in Parliament, and, even more important, at the head of the Cape Town Jewish Board of Deputies. Indiscretion would have placed great stress on family ties and on propriety.

There were also internal tensions in Ruth's life, only some of which can be surmised - and this partly from her unpublished novel, *The Exiles*, which has autobiographical overtones. Whatever her problems at home in New York, they were as nothing compared with her

reactions against her husband's family, with whom she had little sympathy. The portrait of the family with whom her heroine stayed in Cape Town, allowing for dramatic licence, is that of the middle-class society into which Ruth was cast when she arrived in Cape Town, and her caustic descriptions reflect some of her attitude to the family circle.

The contact with Olive Schreiner took her further from the small, closed community of Cape Town and her discontents were fuelled through friendship with the young lecturers at the university. It is clear from her novel that Ruth, without ever denying her Jewishness, discarded her religion. In this there can be little doubt that she was following in the footsteps of Olive. But she would also have been supported in this decision by her contact with Farrington and people like Clare Goodlatte (the former nun, turned Trotskyist), with whom she was in contact. In her new persona Ruth also became critical of at least some of the Indian representatives in South Africa - while continuing to defend the right of local Indians to citizenship - and was a fervent champion of the African and Coloured people. It is significant that her novel took as its theme a love affair between two new immigrants to South Africa. The woman is a Jewess (presumably Ruth herself), come to stay with guardians, with all the faults of the Jewish middle class immersed in the world of money and marriage brokering. The man is a young, and obviously brilliant, lecturer who discovers after he starts teaching at the University that his mother, who had died at childbirth, was Coloured. The scenes in the novel are set in the home of the heroine's guardians and in District Six, which Ruth knew well. [18]

Ruth included a description of District Six in 1933 in the book she started on the Coloured people. This region, situated adjacent to Cape Town's main shopping precinct, was home to a large proportion of Cape Town's Coloured people. It was a mixed area with a warren of overcrowded houses that had decayed into one large slum. This was the home of Cape Town's Coloured workers, its gangsters and, at its periphery, some of the more affluent Coloured citizens. Many years after Ruth left South Africa the district was cleared of its coloured population in the name of apartheid and its houses bulldozed. White families were supposed to move into this "reclaimed" suburb but popular protest prevented that happening. District Six was reduced to a derelict field in one of the prime sections of the town.

In Ruth's novel the hero and heroine visit District Six and confront the awful reality of the colour bar. Accompanied by his companion, the hero enters its portals as a person reclaiming his Coloured family. There he experiences all the tension that accompanies this crossing of the colour line. The awkwardness that comes with ignorance, class difference and living style is caught by Ruth in a set of cameos which demonstrates her knowledge of the situation.

The story in the novel revolves around, and is resolved by, the hero's forced resignation as a lecturer. This is the consequence of an invitation from the hero to two relatives, who are among the earliest Coloured students admitted to the university, to a dance on the campus. The race issue leads to a fight at the dance, and the hero's defiant disclosure of his origin. His lectures are subsequently boycotted, and his room apple-carted, by intolerant students. The heroine is also disowned by her guardians and this completes her freedom from the Jewish community.

Unable to persuade the local magistrate to marry them, they leave the country together, and long since lovers - although the novel has a time span of only five months - claim married status to get a joint berth on the ship they board. In the introduction to the book Ruth states that all the characters are imaginary, but that some of the events are not. The university dance, which provided the story's catharsis, was indeed real and the events were predictable. Professor Lancelot Hogben, head of the Zoology department at the University, provides an account of what happened, in his unpublished autobiography. A young Canadian lecturer in Hogben's department fell in love with a well known Coloured woman and invited her and her cousin to the University's annual dance. Informed of this intended contravention of campus custom, and aware of the possible reactions, Hogben and his wife, Enid, took the group to the dance under their wing. Hogben says that the two were Coloured doctors, both Glasgow graduates, but it is more likely to have been Dr Aswardah Abdurahman and Cissie Gool (much

renowned for her beauty), scions of the most prominent Coloured family of the time.

The reaction was as expected, although Hogben saw to it that nothing happened at the dance. At a meeting on the campus summoned to protest against this "outrage", one rabble-rousing student accused Hogben of having brought an African prostitute to the dance and departing in a state of intoxication. Hogben consulted "the husband of Ruth Alexander" (as he put it) and, on Alexander's advice, threatened an action for slander against the Student Representative Council. The students capitulated and, at a specially convened meeting, read a public apology, written by Hogben. This, said Hogben with obvious relish, laid stress on the need for racial co-existence. [19]

In Benjamin Farrington Ruth found more than a friend. He provided the intellectual stimulus that she had enjoyed with her father and then with Olive Schreiner. He fired all who heard him with his enthusiasm for the Greek and Latin classics and for English literature, as also with his passionate concern for Irish freedom. He had acquired from Sinn Fein a left-wing radicalism and this developed over the years into an internationalism that moved him towards the left. But it was not a one-sided affair. Ruth also had much to contribute. She had a deep feel for the people of South Africa, a knowledge of the problems faced by black communities inside a repressive society and a passionate love of freedom and justice. She was also deeply involved in the literary circles in Cape Town and, being proficient in six languages (German, French, Hebrew, Greek, Latin and English), was widely read. She was in demand as a lecturer on contemporary writings, and started a salon at her home for artists, poets and novelists. This brought Ruth and Ben into contact with the Cape Town artists, the budding writers, and those interested in literature. It also provided Ruth with a platform, because she was much in demand as a lecturer on contemporary writers in Europe in literary circles.

Working separately, but undoubtedly discussing their ideas, Ben and Ruth enjoyed over a decade of fruitful writing and lecturing. Ben published a number of texts for his courses at the University and prepared the work which he began to publish towards the end of the 1920s. Ruth embarked on book reviews for the local press, for the *New York Nation* and for the *South African Nation*. There is no catalogue of the pieces she published, sometimes weekly, and no notes on the many seminar and lecture courses she prepared. However, among the papers and cuttings I found in the Lewin papers, and elsewhere, are many of her reviews of the works, published posthumously, of Olive Schreiner. Starting in December 1922, on the second anniversary of Olive's death, there is a handwritten lament at the death of "so rich a personality, so inexhaustible a courage, so beautiful an honesty, so noble a scorn of baseness, so all compassionate a love ...". This was to be the base-line for Ruth's subsequent reviews.

In February 1923 she wrote a critical review of *Stories, Dreams, and Allegories*, for the *Cape Times*. Although Ruth welcomed the production of a book of Olive's writings, she expressed her disapproval at the publication, for public circulation, of pieces of immature writing that could not "add lustre to the fame of its author". Ruth was also less than happy in her review on 23 July, in the *Cape Times*, of the publication of *Thoughts on South Africa*. Most of the chapters had been written and published between 1890 and 1892 and then revised by Olive for separate publication in Cape or English papers in 1902. Also, chapter 8, which was reproduced from an incomplete typescript, contained material which contradicted many of the contentions in the rest of the book. None the less, once again, Ruth greeted the appearance of a book which made the thoughts of Olive Schreiner available to the general public.

Ruth was already suspicious of, and more than a little angry at, S C Cronwright-Schreiner. She believed that he erred in what he published and was dishonest in his choice of material written by Olive. She was outraged in 1924 when she read his *Life of Olive Schreiner*, and then his edited collection of her letters. In two devastating articles, first in *The South African Nation* of 9 August 1924 on the *Life*, and then in the *Cape Times* on the letters, she contrasted her appraisal of Olive (repeating the phrases used in her essay of 1922) with the meanness and dishonesty she detected in Cronwright's writings and selections. Ruth answered and dismissed enough of Cronwright's assertions to show him as, at best, an ill informed writer and, at worst,

as having provided a "caricature of a great personality": a violater "of the privacy of the dead".

These reviews drew a warm response from members of the Schreiner family and several of Olive's friends. They wrote complimenting Ruth for having the courage to rebuke Cronwright publicly, and urged her to assist in the publication of essays on Olive and to publish a more representative collection of her letters. This was Ruth's intention and she started collecting material for such a book. But Ruth had underestimated Cronwright's determination to stop any other publication of Olive's works and, despite legal opinion from Morris Alexander that he had no legal right to prevent Ruth proceeding, the opposition acted as a deterrent. In like fashion Cronwright insisted on reading the script of her lecture on Olive Schreiner in 1929 before it was delivered, and it was this that probably delayed (and finally inhibited) Ruth in her desire to write a book on her friend.

Whether Ruth would have written a book on Olive remains uncertain but the talk she gave was expanded and printed in five instalments in the *Cape Times* in 1930. She had hoped to have it printed as a monograph but that, too, was put aside. Ultimately, in 1942, just before her death, Ruth wrote one last article on Olive entitled "A Very Great Woman". It was printed in the journal *University Forward*, in March 1942, alongside other articles written by members or sympathizers of the Communist Party of Great Britain.

A survey of the articles she wrote, including her article comparing Olive to the Brontes, her review of *From Man to Man*, and her major essay on Olive Schreiner in 1929, requires more space than I am allowed. There is also one important issue that needs examination. Partly under Olive's influence, she was devoted to the demand for women's suffrage and the breaking of racial barriers. It was this that led her to follow Olive's example and break with the existing suffragette movement because their demands were restricted to gaining the vote for whites only.

At some time, presumably before Union in 1910, Olive sent Ruth a leaflet setting out the aims of the Women's Enfranchisement League of the Cape Colony. Across it was scrawled, in Olive's writing, statements saying that she had not left the League for personal reasons but because her objective had been to campaign for the vote, not for white women only but for all women in the Cape. Ruth did join the League but adopted Olive's policy. When, in early 1930, an Act was tabled granting white women the vote Ruth rallied support within the League to oppose the new colour bar. The outcome was a letter to the *Cape Times* on 5 March 1930, in which Ruth, together with Caroline Murray, Anna Purcell, F H Schreiner, Lyndall Gregg and Rose Movsovic, all former members of the committee of the League, registered their protest against the form of the proposed Women's Enfranchisement Bill. Giving the vote to white women, they said with foresight, would alter the whole franchise basis of the Cape. [20]

It was over this issue that the tensions between Ruth and Morris Alexander became uncontainable. After the Bill was passed all white women had to register on the electoral roll. Ruth protested but was told by her husband that she was required by law to do so. She registered under protest, having informed Morris that if made to do so she would leave the country. But that was only a small, if precipitating, factor. The marriage had broken down irretrievably and this was a convenient time to leave a country in which she felt so alienated.

In telling the story of Ruth, I have had little time to dwell on the growing relationship with Ben Farrington. Perhaps that is as it should be. The affair was discrete - although Morris undoubtedly knew what was happening - and many tongues were wagging. Ben and Ruth avoided activities that would have offended sectors of the Jewish or university circles. They also had to protect the children, or at least Solly, and Ruth maintained that she would not leave the home until he had completed his university education.

The tensions inside the family were only part of the story. There was also much extra-mural discussion of racism in campus circles and presumably either Ben or both Ben and Ruth

became involved. The persons concerned and even the nature of their politics are not always clear. Among the names that stand out are those of Farrington, Lancelot Hogben and Frederick Bodmer. Associated with them at some time were J G Taylor (psychology department) and Dora Taylor (who wrote a four-part article on Olive Schreiner in *Trek*, in 1942, and *The Role of the Missionaries in Conquest*, in the 1950s), and also at various times, Jean van der Poel (history), Helene and Jacques Malan (editor of *Trek*), David Schreer (lawyer and businessman), George Sachs (co-founder of the pro-Moscow *Guardian*), Paul Kosten (owner of Modern Books and on the editorial board of *Spark*), and others. Some of them contributed articles to the *Critic*, the University journal, and some (like Bodmer and Schreer) belonged to the Lenin or, later, the Spartacus Club. Schreer suggested that the *Communist Manifesto* be translated into Afrikaans in 1937-38. It is not certain who did the bulk of the translation but it was with the assistance of the Malans and Jean van der Poel. The *Manifesto* appeared in 1938 with an introduction by Trotsky, celebrating the 90th anniversary of its first publication.

Hogben's three years at the university from 1927 to 1930, as Professor of Zoology, had a galvanic effect on the radical members of the university staff. Soon after their arrival he and his wife, Enid, were visitors at Ruth's salon, and, following their practice in Britain, kept open house on Saturday nights. Senior students, junior staff members, and "many of the Cape Town intelligentsia" outside the University" were invited. The conversation, when political, was openly anti-segregationist. The Hogbens were outspoken on the race issue and friendly with Eddie Roux, who appealed to them to rescue two African leaders hiding from a lynch gang in Worcester. Enid, together with Roux and Johnny Gomaz, both of the SACP, brought them back to Cape Town. [21]

The Hogbens did not stay. They felt that the country was becoming increasingly oppressive and left, Lancelot Hogben taking a position at the London School of Economics. In 1937 his "Preface on Prejudice" fronted Cedric Dover's book, *Half Caste*. In this he condemned the South African *Pigmentocracy*, and complained of the inability to conduct a consequential conversation (his "favourite sport") because all attempted dialogues with South African graduates ended within a short space of time with the question: "What would you do if a black man raped your sister?"

Hogben was not involved in any active political movement, nor were Ben and Ruth, although Farrington did deliver at least one lecture to the Lenin Club. Bodmer was, for a short period, chairperson of the Spartacus Club, but most academics in this circle stayed away from formal political groups. But they met with people in the Communist or the Workers Party personally. In one letter to Farrington in 1932 Ruth mentioned that she was going to see Clare Goodlatte, the former nun who was to become a leading member of the Workers Party and editor of the *Spark*. [22]

Academics are not rooted in one country. Hogben and Farrington, and others left South Africa to take up posts elsewhere. Bodmer applied for the chair of German in Cape Town but, when it was given to a "truculent nazi" (to quote Hogben), he left the country and under Hogben's editorship wrote *Loom of Language*. When Farrington returned to Britain there was nothing to keep Ruth in South Africa. She went first to New York, then she departed for Britain, and after her divorce she married Farrington, who had a lectureship in Bristol and then the chair in Classics at the University of Wales in Swansea.

By the time she arrived in Britain, she said in a letter to her cousin, she was already half a communist. The only surprise in this statement was her failure to take account of the growing criticisms, coming from the left opposition, of which she was aware. But her move to the left was the logical outcome of her growing despair of anything ever happening through parliamentary processes in South Africa. She had moved away from the parochial environment in which Morris Alexander thrived. What concerned her thereafter was the increasingly difficult situation in South Africa - extending from the oppressive colour bar and the whittling away of any protection from those laws, to the growth of open anti-semitism: the fears expressed in the early 1930s as fascism grew as a world-wide phenomenon. There was also a

family factor which undoubtedly affected Ruth. Although contact was tenuous, her younger sister Amy had joined the Communist Party in the US, wrote in its journal *New Masses*, and was a prominent party activist. But, according to Farrington, Ruth was finally persuaded when she read the "Stalin constitution" of 1936 (Farrington's phrase). This document, which persuaded (or fooled) so many people outside the USSR, proclaimed the full equality of women and men, of races and nationalities, "in all spheres of economic, state, cultural social and political life ..". Ben, who also believed in the truth of the document, and also joined the Communist Party, quoted Articles 122 and 123 in full in the Commemoration Service. This, he said, was taken by Ruth "to be an epoch-making event". [23]

In Swansea Ruth worked in the Workers Educational Association, the National Council of Labour Colleges, in the Left Book Club, in the National Council of Civil Liberties, in the Women's Co-operative Guilds, in the British-Soviet Unity Committee. Above all Ruth believed that the struggle in Spain led by the communists, as party propagandists claimed, would start the transformation of all Europe. Inspired by this, Ruth turned to the literature that was available. In her interpretation of, and lectures on, English literature to WEA and similar groups she seems to have turned to the ideas of David Guest, Ralph Fox and other proponents of proletarian literature. In all this she participated in the glorification of the USSR and the Third International which was so much the fashion of the intellectuals who had seen the light. That people like Ruth adopted such an uncritical adulation of Stalinism is explicable only in terms of the crisis of the 1930s, superimposed on the social problems they were unable to address in their own societies. There seemed to be no hope outside the sphere of the Soviet Union, and, in witnessing the morass offered elsewhere, this represented for them the one gleam of sanity. They had wandered into a wasteland but thought they had found salvation for society. In that lies a tragedy that affected tens of thousands of people. But that was not perceived by these intellectuals at the time. Their aim was noble, their activities were devoted, the effect was disastrous and we have yet to recover from that loss of perspective. Ben left the Communist Party after the Hungarian uprising was suppressed in 1956.

In her role as propagandist Ruth turned the truth upside down. In her last article on her friend and mentor she once again quoted the passage on Denikin, but this time added an addendum. Schreiner, she said, had been a fighting socialist all her life. She had admired Lenin "as incomparably the only great man the situation has produced, and as a man of outstanding genius", but she had not understood the "full implications of Marxism"; consequently, "ever and again she comes to vague or unclear conclusions, lessening the force and appeal of her writings for this generation". In these few words Ruth devalued both her own work and that of Olive Schreiner. That great novelist might not have read much (if any) of Marx, she might not have understood any of his implications, but she never, never indulged in such absurd preaching.

Ruth Schechter Farrington (as she was in the last years of her life) erred grievously. Throughout her life she had despised injustice and oppression and sought a way to oppose those who inflicted misery on others. The tragedy of the time lies in the way she, and so many like her, gave their support to the greatest tyranny of the twentieth century: the regime in Moscow. In reading the Soviet constitution uncritically, she accepted the worst confidence trick ever played on persons of good faith. In this Ruth exemplified the surrender of the western intellectuals of the 1930s to a tyranny that surpassed all others in the twentieth century. She had turned the teachings of Olive Schreiner upside-down and also lost sight of the words of Abraham Lincoln, so proudly proclaimed in her letter to Morris Alexander in 1920 (as quoted above). The new system she had come to admire had malice towards all, with charity for none.

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Notes

- 1 Memorial service, probably written by Benjamin Farrington.
- 2 According to Farrington's note, these included the novelist Israel Zangwill and J G Frazer, author of *The Golden Bough*, Farrington papers.
- 3 Quotations and descriptions from Meir Persoff, "Hidden Treasures of Cairo", *Jewish Chronicle* Magazine, London, 25 November 1977.
- 4 See *Morris Alexander: a biography*, by Enid Alexander (his second wife), and Gus Saron, *Morris Alexander*.
- 5 The letters written when she was returning from a visit abroad in 1913 are those of a devoted wife. Alexander papers, UCT.
- 6 Smuts was reported as saying: "in all our dealings with the natives we must build on ... the granite bedrock of the Christian moral code. Honesty, fair-play, justice, and the ordinary Christian virtues must be the basis of all our relations with the natives."
- 7 Quoted by Enid Alexander. I did not find the letters from which she quotes in the Alexander papers. I am indebted to Raphael Levy for pointing out that Ruth was quoting from Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address as President on 4 March 1865. With the end of the American Civil War in sight, he said: "With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and his orphan - to do which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."
- 8 Ruth mentioned the marriage in a letter to Morris Alexander in 1913 and said that she hoped they would live nearby so that they could meet. Mr Genussow delayed his emigration to tide over his business interests during the depression.
- 9 Nechama Genussow, "The Genussow Family Achievement", an extract from a longer essay, printed in *Telfed*, 1990.
- 10 The date is not certain. Farrington states that Schreiner heard Ruth speak at a meeting and was immediately attracted to her, probably in 1907. Ruth in her lecture in 1929 says that Olive came to see her in 1910 for the first time but does not explain the circumstances.
- 11 One poem, shown to Sonia [Havelock] Ellis, was highly praised by her for its Yeatsian flavour.
- 12 In September 1920, Schreiner wrote to Ruth: "What was the name of the young man I met at your house. He seemed such a delightful person. A young person was talking about him here. Says he is so remarkable. The students seemed impressed by him yesterday."
- 13 Farrington to Lily Guinsberg in Muizenberg. Letter in South African Library.
- 14 The *Cape Times*, 10 August 1929, commented on the lecture given to the Cape Town branch of the English Association. It printed a version in five instalments on 26 April-2 May 1930 which was considerably longer than the typescript for the lecture. The passage on Denikin was repeated by Ruth in "A Very Great Woman", *University Forward*, March 1942.

- 15 It was only in 1918 that the University of Cape Town became an independent body and teaching commenced on the new campus at Rondebosch.
- 16 Lestrade achieved prominence in his field as an ethnologist. He is said to have mastered 34 languages and Farrington referred to his skill in mastering the African languages and recording their sounds phonetically.
- 17 Very few of the letters to Farrington discuss the contents of his letters home. However, one correspondent who signed herself "Q", writing on 16 August 1920, took Ben to task for having come to these conclusions.
- 18 Ruth started and ran the Castle Coloured Play Centre in District Six, financed, according to Enid Alexander, by her husband. See her typescript "Cape Coloured: a By-Product of Empire".
- 19 "An Unauthorized Autobiography of Lancelot Hogben", pp 189-90.
- 20 The correspondence, and the legal opinion she sought, is in the Ruth Alexander file (Olive Schreiner collection) at the South African Library.
- 21 The letter is reprinted in Enid Alexander, p 146.
- 22 Biographical details are from "An Unauthorized Autobiography of Lancelot Hogben".
- 23 See my article on Clare Goodlatte in *Searchlight South Africa*, No 2.

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Source Material

Julius Lewin papers:

Obituary to Ruth (memorial service, 5 March 1942); Articles on Cairo genizah (*Jewish Chronicle* and others); Book reviews in *Cape Times*; Book review in *South African Nation*; Obituary to Farrington; Printed lecture on Olive Schreiner, *Cape Times*, 1930; two letters from Farrington.

South African Library:

Letters from Olive to Ruth and other letters relating to possible publication of letters; Correspondence with Cronwright; Lecture on Olive (typescript and *Cape Times*); Several articles on Olive Schreiner; Letters from Farrington to Lily Guinsberg.

University of Cape Town:

Letters from Ruth to Morris Alexander, 1913; Extracts from H M Robertson, "The University of Cape Town, 1918-68", typescript.

Farrington's Papers in the possession of Jane Straker:

Photographs of Ruth and of Farrington; Unpublished novel "The Exiles"; typescript (21 pages) on the History of the Coloured People; Letters to Ben from friends and relatives, mainly 1920/21, and from Ruth in 1932; Typescript (3 pages) by Farrington meant to introduce the publication of three essays by Ruth.

Hogben's Papers:

"An Unauthorized Autobiography of Lancelot Hogben", edited by Adrian and Anne Hogben, Typescript, 1989; *Lancelot Thomas Hogben 1895-1975*, by G P Wells (Bibliographical Memoirs of Fellows of the Royal Society, Vol 24, November 1978); Preface on Prejudice in Cedric Dover, *Half Caste* (1937).

Other Papers/Books:

Extracts from lecture by Stefan Reif on Solomon Schechter. Two letters by Ruth to Raphael Levy. Enid Alexander, *Morris Alexander: A Biography* (Juta, 1953). Gus Saron, *Morris Alexander: Parliamentarian and Jewish Leader* (South African Jewish Board of Deputies, 1966). Eddie and Win Roux, *Rebel Pity* (Penguin, 1972).