



BOOK REVIEWS

Mensches in the trenches: Jewish foot soldiers in the anti-apartheid struggle

Author: Jonathan Ancer

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Reviewed by

Paballo Moerane

moeranep@ukzn.ac.za

University of KwaZulu-Natal

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The book details the specifics of apartheid and the triumph of democracy in South Africa. It is a collective effort of the oppressed masses. However, not all the people who played a pivotal role in the liberation struggle feature prominently in the mainstream accounts of Apartheid and its policies. These people are no more than forgotten icons of the liberation struggle, unlike the ones whose political activism stood out. The names of the latter have enriched the pages of history, achieving enduring fame and recognition. There are, however, liberation fighters who operated outside of the country. There is little information on their roles and responsibilities. One therefore expects this book to tap into the uncovered stories of South Africa's struggle for liberation. *Mensches in the Trenches* seeks to tap into and cover stories of the Jewish activists who contributed to South Africa's struggle for justice and liberation.

Title

The title of the book is quite intriguing and has the potential to lead the readers on. The mention of Jewish soldiers would attract readership, as most people do not associate Jews with South Africa's struggle for liberation. It would be interesting to learn about the Jewish

involvement in our struggle. The choice of the title is brilliant in this regard. As the title *Mensches in the Trenches* suggests, the book tells the stories of those “mensches”: a Yiddish-derived expression indicating someone who is decent, principled, and strives to do the right thing, who were at the coalface of South Africa’s transition from racist minority rule to multiracial democracy.

Preface

The preface is unique. It details the lived experiences of Mohale Trevor Selebi under the apartheid regime. The physical and emotional strain he suffered, motivated him to become politically involved. He was part of the civic activities that took place in most townships from the late 1970s onwards. He was in and out of prison a few times for his involvement in political activities. The support he received from the South African Council of Churches enabled him to access higher education. He enrolled at the University of the Witwatersrand where he collaborated with White, Indian, and Coloured political activists. They all sought to orchestrate the demise of the Apartheid regime and usher in democracy. However, there was a polarization of student organizations amid a shared dream of a united, non-racial South Africa. Resistance to the apartheid regime gained momentum during the second half of the 1980s. The ban on the African National Congress, Pan Africanist Congress, South African Communist Party, and others compelled the activists to operate underground. It is interesting to note that white comrades supported the course of the liberation struggle. Black political activists would be on the run from the police, evade arrest, and go into exile. In such instances, with rare exceptions, activists would receive the support of some White and Jewish families. Selebi’s activism went beyond the liberation struggle. He worked within the Jewish community through the social outreach organization called Tikkun (now Afrika Tikkun). He spent some time participating in the Heatid Training Programme. The idea of writing a book about the Jewish people who fought the system in practical ways outside the public eye, whose names and deeds were largely unrecorded, was born out of his constant interaction with Heatid’s founder and director Wendy Kahn. Selebi laid the groundwork for Jonathan Ancer to write this book.

Foreword

The choice of former President Thabo Mbeki as author of this section renders weight to the narrative. He contends that the struggle for liberation has produced many icons. However,

they are those whose names and deeds are known from the mainstream accounts. This book has done the South Africans a great favour, lest we forget. It is true that the majority of White people did not participate in the struggle to end Apartheid. The same goes for the Jewish component of our population. Those who contributed to the liberation of the country are highly commended. Part of the conundrum of the Jewish community is that they have been victims for so long in so many ways. They are afraid to stick their necks out. They believe that by putting up with injustice, one becomes a victim or a part of the problem. One needs to choose to be part of the solution. In the United States, the Jewish community played a pivotal role in support of the African Americans during the civil rights struggle.

Chapters

The chapters detail the personal accounts of the Jewish people. Their lived experiences in the struggle for liberation feature prominently in 31 chapters of the book. Chapter 1 (Two of a Kind) covers the lives of identical twins Norman and Leon Levy. They began their political activities during their school days and campaigned for freedom and equality all their lives. They stood in the dock with Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Helen Joseph, and 150 other leaders of the liberation movement in South Africa. They were all subjected to the Treason Trial (1956-1961). The Levy brothers endured a life of protest, picket lines, interrogation, torture, solitary confinement, jail exile, and eventually democracy. However, they are part of the unsung heroes of South Africa's liberation struggle.

Chapter 10 (Denis Kuny: An Advocate for Human Rights) details the role of advocate Denis Kuny who was involved in many momentous political trials. However, he also took on all sorts of cases that no one had heard of, such as defending untold ordinary people charged with a range of offences from pass-law breaches to high treason. He did these without any publicity, so modest was he. Denis Kuny was in the trenches from the beginning of the struggle up to the dawn of democracy. He had the support of other Jewish lawyers who were challenging the discriminatory laws, protecting the vulnerable, exposing human rights violations, attempting to hold the government to account; this was an impossible task. The Jewish lawyers received equal representation in South Africa's human rights cases. Courageous attorneys and advocates such as Sydney Kentridge and his wife Felicia, Joel Joffe, Jules Browde, Ruth Hayman, Geoff Budlender, Gilbert Marcus, Isie Maisels, Shulamith Muller, George Lowen, Harold Hanson, Nat Levy, Harry Schwarz, Raymond Tucker, and Arthur Chaskalson were involved in high-profile political trials. However, if

you asked any of these legal titans to single out one lawyer who personified the pursuit of justice, they would say Denis Kuny. 'He never got the credit for the contribution he made,' says Judge Dennis Davis.

Chapter 30 discusses the role of Arona Dison. She was born in Cape Town in 1966. Her father was an advocate and her mother a Hebrew teacher. Her father had done a lot of work on anti-apartheid cases such as the bus boycotts and the potato workers' strike. The sense of injustice and the need to overcome it were absorbed from him. He took on diverse cases. He worked for the government of Ciskei. The homelands' governments were extremely oppressive. He argued that as an advocate he was obliged to work for any client who appointed him. Arona experienced contradictions at home: on the one hand there was political consciousness about the evils of the government, but on the other hand they had a 'maid' who lived in a small outside room and worked from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. They had apartheid right in their home. In standard eight (grade ten) Arona got the opportunity to attend the Festival of Culture and Resistance in Gaborone, Botswana. It was organised by the ANC in exile to look at the role of 'cultural workers' in the struggle. The festival included musicals, drama performances, art exhibitions, talks, and discussions. She experienced the joy of musicians like Hugh Masekela, Jonas Gwangwa, and Abdullah Ibrahim jamming together. They spent hours meeting people and talking to teachers, activists, and artists.

Upon her return, it became clear that Arona had undergone some transformation. In August 1983, she attended the launch of the United Democratic Front (UDF) in a community hall in Mitchells Plain. She became involved in the UDF Claremont area committee. She also participated in the UDF's Million Signature Campaign. Activists from various area committees went door-to-door in suburbs and townships talking to people about the mission and vision of the UDF. They requested them to sign the Million Signature Campaign to show their opposition to the Tricameral Parliament which was being introduced by the government to give the various race groups representation in different parliaments, while keeping the power of the white Parliament intact. When she enrolled at the University of Cape Town, she joined the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS). She also joined the NUSAS subcommittee that dealt with labour issues. In 1986, she set out with John Zachariades, a lefty from the area, to hand out flyers against the state of emergency for which they faced imprisonment. She was detained in the white women's section of Pollsmoor prison, a space reserved for white political detainees. In 1987, when she came out of prison, she continued to work in the wages committee. She had a breakdown. She found factional politics difficult. It crushed her and affected her academic work. She became more depressed. Arona was unrelenting as an activist. She

got involved with the South African Domestic Workers' Union, playing a supportive role. Finally, Arona has always tried to see life through a critical lens and to be aware of many injustices that exist. She is grateful for the difference she has made to the environments in which she lived and worked. She aspires to contribute to enabling environments and to productive and joyful collective processes through which people can flourish.

Conclusion

This book is of great service to South African society. According to Mbeki, "apart from telling riveting stories, the book brings into sharp relief the critical importance of leading lives informed by a humanist value system. The Jewish people did not act as they did, both in South Africa and in the United States, out of a condescending sense of pity. They were moved by the understanding that as human beings, we must act together regardless of colour, race or gender, in order to shape a common destiny". The book has succeeded to illustrate the role of the Jewish community in South Africa's struggle for liberation.