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Response to Shirli Gilbert

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In 1921 a ten-year-old boy named Mendel Levin arrived in South Africa; eight years later, a fifteen-year-old girl named Rachel Esther Alexandrovich landed in Cape Town. Levin and Alexandrovich were both born in what became Latvia, he in 1911 in a small town named Ludza and she in 1913 in Varaklan, about 66 kilometres west of Levin's birthplace. There is no indication that the two knew each other, either in the old country or in their new homeland. But by the time they reached adulthood in South Africa, Levin and Alexandrovich (who later changed her name to Ray Alexander) had travelled such a vast cultural and political distance away from each other that he might as well have come from Mars and she from Venus. He was Orthodox, she was atheist; he supported apartheid, she opposed it; he became a leading National Party (NP) activist, and she a prominent trade unionist and Communist Party leader. Buried in the ideological and religious gulf between Levin and Alexander, I want to suggest, is an answer to one of the questions that Shirli Gilbert asks in her powerful and timely examination of the state of the field of Jewish studies in South Africa. To wit: how did Jewish South Africans construct and navigate their whiteness across time?

I begin with Levin and Alexander because, for all their differences, both grew up to be, lived, and died as white South Africans. Their story, in both its shared and divergent aspects, allows us to address one of the handicaps of South Africa's historiography, meaning our collective inability as scholars of South Africa to deal adequately with contingency and (individual) choice in the making of South Africa and its peoples. What if, instead of repeating Gilbert's query about how Jews in general built and steered a course through whiteness in South Africa, we asked a narrower question about how individuals (such as Levin and Alexander, in this case) became white in a country founded on hierarchies of race?

After all, it was not inevitable that, having left Latvia, Levin and Alexander would come to South Africa when they did; contingent circumstances (such as having relatives already in South Africa) made that (and not, say, Canada or the U.S.) their destination. Having arrived in South

Africa, they each chose (over time and not necessarily always consciously) what kind of South African to become. They did not automatically become South African. Levin and Alexander arrived in South Africa as Jews and not as whites; they became white in South Africa. But what did that mean in practice?

It is also worth pointing out, before we attempt to answer the first question, one contingent factor behind their becoming South African, namely the fortuitous timing of their arrival. Both arrived in the country before the passage of the Quota Act of 1930 and the Aliens Act of 1937 – two particularly notorious laws designed to stop Jewish migration to South Africa. They made it and, like the thousands of other European Jews who helped build South Africa, they experienced what Milton Shain and Richard Mendelsohn called an “ironic reversal of fortune” that saw them become beneficiaries of a system founded on white supremacy.¹

Having been subjected in Europe to discrimination on account of their Jewishness, they found themselves in a country where their skin colour as people of European descent mattered more than their Jewishness.² This is not to say, as Shain reminded us, that South Africa was immune to antisemitism or that official acceptance of Jews as whites in South Africa meant that they were not subjected to bigotry.³ In fact, it is this mix of acceptance and antisemitism that helps explain, as Gilbert shows, the anxiety and fear that define the place of Jews in South African society. It is this that explains what Gilbert calls “Jewish liminality and ambivalent ‘whiteness’” in South Africa.

So, how did Levin and Alexander negotiate this ironic reversal of fortune? Unlike Alexander, Levin did not produce a memoir from which to glean answers to our questions. But he was well-known and vocal enough for us to get some sense of his thinking. He joined the NP in 1951, the same year in which the party in the Transvaal rescinded its ban on Jewish membership.⁴ In the 1958 general elections, Levin and Charles Zeff, another prominent Jewish member of the NP, asked Jewish voters to support the party, saying it had “treated Jews with consistent fairness.”⁵

1 Milton Shain and Richard Mendelsohn, eds., *Memories, Realities and Dreams: Aspects of the South African Jewish Experience* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2000), “Introduction”, 13.

2 See *ibid.*

3 Milton Shain, *The Roots of Antisemitism in South Africa* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1994).

4 For Levin’s NP membership see “A New Broom”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 23 Feb. 1967.

5 See “Ten Jews named as Candidates for Parliament in South African Elections”, *Jewish*

In 1961, Levin boasted about being the only South African Jew appointed by the NP government to serve as a party agent in the referendum that saw South Africa become a republic.⁶ In addition to his activist work for the NP, Levin was also a leading member of the Zionist Revisionist Organization (ZRO) in South Africa. We might ask, without drawing any facile connections, if Levin's participation in the ZRO explains his enthusiasm for apartheid. As Jedidiah Blumenthal, one of the key Revisionist ideologues in South Africa and a Levin ally, put it in 1962, South African Jews had "no problem to surmount and no heart-searching to do" when it came to relations between South Africa and Israel: "The Jewish people have in the course of a long and chequered career developed a perfect *modus vivendi*. Politically, they owe allegiance to the country of their birth or the country of their adoption, and spiritually they turn their minds to the spiritual cradle and home of their dreams and ideals—Zion."⁷ But Levin did not simply pledge allegiance to apartheid South Africa, he supported it vocally and publicly. He chaired at least two NP branches and ran for election numerous times on NP tickets.

If Levin's pro-apartheid politics was bound up with his Revisionist commitments, Alexander's activism seemed tied to a studied downplaying of her Jewish heritage in favour of her class activism. Alexander joined the Communist Party of South Africa on 11 November 1929, exactly five days after disembarking in Cape Town. By 1951 she was "listed" in terms of the Suppression of Communism Act, making her politically a marked person. In 1952 the government banned her from participating in trade union and anti-apartheid activities. In 1965 she and her husband Jack Simons left South Africa for exile. Alexander would not see South Africa again until 1990. Remarkably, Alexander's 2004 memoirs are at best muted on the catastrophic destruction of European Jewry. She mentions her profound disappointment with the 1939 Nazi-Soviet Pact but devotes no more than two pages (out of 378) to the Holocaust.⁸ We cannot say if her reticence in talking about her Latvian past and about the fate of European Jewry was connected to her political activism. She chose not to link the two. We

Telegraphic Agency Daily News Bulletin 25, no. 69 (9 April 1958).

6 See Levin's biographical sketch in *South African Jewry 1967–68: A Survey of the Jewish Community*, ed. Leon Feldberg (Johannesburg: Fieldhill Publishing, 1968), 329.

7 Jedidiah Blumenthal, "The Friendship of South Africa and Israel: The Present Misunderstanding is but a Passing Phase", in *Jedidiah's Vision*, ed. Moshe Sharon and Cedric Ginsberg (Johannesburg: Maksim Publishers, 1992), 128.

8 Ray Alexander, *All my Life and All my Strength*, ed. Raymond Suttner (Johannesburg: STE Publishers, 2004), 99.

cannot make the connection for her and assume that her anti-apartheid politics came out of her Jewish background.

Gilbert points out that gender is woefully understudied as an analytical category in scholarship on South African Jews. She directs our attention to new research on the relationship between Jewish women and their domestic workers. This research “demonstrates how a focus on women’s lives brings fresh perspectives to a historiography that has hitherto focused almost exclusively on prominent men and (predominantly male) formal communal structures”. A revealing aspect of Alexander’s memoirs are her passing references to her family’s domestic servants. In 1951, she tells us, a woman named Beatrice, who had been the family’s domestic servant for three years, fell in love with a drunkard. Beatrice reported to work drunk one day and Alexander told her to go home and sleep it off. Beatrice went away but never came back. Jack Simons told Alexander to leave her trade union job to take care of the couple’s three children. Alexander asked her union colleagues for help and they introduced her to Sophie Wilson, a fellow trade unionist. “Sophie proved an extremely responsible substitute and our problem was solved,” Alexander wrote.⁹

This is, on the face of it, a banal incident involving a self-declared Marxist (Simons) whose first instinct when confronted with a household crisis involving childcare was to tell his wife to give up her union work to look after the kids. But the episode reveals more than that. Alexander never gives us Beatrice’s last name; she is just Beatrice the domestic worker. And the solution to the “crisis at home” is to recruit a union shop steward as the family’s maid. What could be more madam-like behaviour? What could be more (white) South African than Alexander’s conduct in this instance? This is not to take away from her commitment to the struggle against apartheid. Rather, it is to show the ordinary acts and assumptions through which even a Jew deeply opposed to apartheid came to embody the meaning of whiteness in South Africa. We must pay attention to such slippages (in memoirs, novels) by Jewish South Africans to get a sense of how Jews became white, and if we want to understand what it meant to be white in South Africa.

All in all, Gilbert has drafted an impressive survey of the field of Jewish studies in South Africa. As she shows, the field is rich and extensive. But it is also uneven. What might a study of Jews in the South African Defence Force tell us about the place of the military in the forging of white

9 Ibid., 213.

masculinities in South Africa? What about the Yiddish that lingers in *tsotsi taal*? As anyone fluent in *tsotsi taal* will tell you, *gatas* (spelled *ghattis* in some places) is a derogatory word for cops. But as anyone with a smattering of Yiddish will inform you, *gatas* also means boorish Afrikaner in Yiddish. Then there are the common ritual practices around death among Africans and Jews (identified as early as the turn of the twentieth century by James Stuart, a Natal colonial official turned Zulu ethnographer) that suggest more than a passing cultural resemblance.¹⁰ Such borrowings and exchanges have yet to be studied in any systematic way. Therein perhaps lies the future of Jewish studies in South Africa.

¹⁰ For accounts of these rituals see *The James Stuart Archive of Recorded Oral Evidence relating to the History of the Zulu and Neighbouring Peoples*, ed. and trans. Colin Webb and John Wright, 6 vols (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 1976–2014), esp. vol. 1, 98.