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## The making of a South African Jewish activist: the Yiddish diary of Ray Alexander Simons, Latvia, 1927

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This article explores the contents of a Yiddish diary, written in 1927 in Latvia by Jewish Communist and trade unionist Ray Alexander Simons, which accompanied her on her immigration to South Africa in 1929, to avoid arrest on account of her activities in an underground Communist cell in Riga. In the context of her autobiography, ‘All My Life and All My Strength’, written when she was in her eighties, and completed by various hands, the examination will consider how the diary, written when she was 14 years old, supplements the more impersonal account of the autobiography, enhancing our understanding of Simons’ single-minded dedication to the workers’ struggle and to the liberation of the Black peoples in South Africa.

**Keywords:** Jews in Latvia; Jews in South Africa; Jewish communists; women political activists; women labour union members; biography; diaries

The Communist Party of South Africa, formed in 1920, enjoyed disproportionate Jewish patronage from its very beginnings, when the Party was imported by English-speaking British immigrants and by Yiddish-speaking Eastern European Jews. Before its establishment, former members of the Bund, the Jewish Workers’ Party in Eastern Europe, supported the International Socialist League (ISL), a forerunner of the Communist Party that had a ‘Yiddish Speaking Group’. The ISL was a major player in the founding of the united Communist Party of South Africa, which duly became an affiliated section of the Communist International.<sup>1</sup>

Of the many Jews who arrived in South Africa imbued with socialist ideologies of various stripes, Rochel Esther Alexandrovich, known in South Africa as Ray Alexander, stands out for arriving as a fully formed Communist at the tender age of 15. Born in 1913 in the town of Varaklan in Latvia, where during the interwar years the Social Democratic Party held sway,<sup>2</sup> Ray and her sisters were attracted to Marxism at an early age, a fact which she attributes to her home as much as her school. By the age of 14 Ray had joined a youth movement that was slightly left of the Bund. When Ray moved to Riga to study dressmaking, she was immediately recruited into a Communist cell. After a narrow escape from arrest after attending an illegal meeting, her mother arranged for her to immigrate to South Africa. Before her immigration to ‘a capitalist country’, where it was certain that the Communist Party would one day be banned, her unit saw to it that she should receive training in conducting activities underground. Thus by the time she left Latvia she was already a fully fledged agitator.<sup>3</sup>

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Ray left Varaklan on 17 October 1929 and arrived in Cape Town on 6 November, just a day before the anniversary of the Russian Revolution. Initially devastated that there was to be no form of celebration to mark the anniversary of the Russian Revolution, she realized that she had a mission to fulfil in Cape Town. This was to organize the workers because South Africa 'was virgin soil'. Within five days, on 11 November 1929, she had joined the Communist Party of South Africa. In January 1931, she was elected chair of the Cape Town District Committee of the Communist Party.<sup>4</sup>

Ray's main focus, however, was the trade union movement. She worked for the Commercial Workers' Union, followed by the Non-European Railway and Harbour Workers' Union. But it is with the Food and Canning Workers' Union (FCWU), a multi-racial union which she founded in 1941, and with the multi-racial Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW) which she co-founded in 1954, that her legacy lies. After the passage of the 1950 Suppression of Communism Act, in 1953, Ray was served with the first of a series of banning orders.<sup>5</sup> On the day in April 1954 that she was due to take up her seat as one of the three native representatives in South Africa's white parliament, she was issued with a banning order forbidding her to enter the premises.

Ray Alexander married Jack Simons (b. 1907) in 1941, a lecturer in Native Law and Administration at the University of Cape Town and a fellow Communist. He was detained in 1960 and some five years later when he was banned from teaching at the university the couple went into exile. They initially went briefly to Zambia and then to England, where Jack received a fellowship at Manchester University and Ray studied Labour Relations, Russian and German. They returned to Zambia at the end of 1967 where they set up a home for themselves, one where their three children could visit.

Ray and Jack Simons co-authored a number of booklets and pamphlets in addition to the pioneering work *Class and Colour in South Africa, 1850–1950*, an analysis of the effect of class and race on South Africa's socio-political landscape.

While in exile Ray worked for the International Labour Organization and the banned African National Congress (ANC) and continued her work in the trade union movement by serving on the Congress of South African Trade Unions (SACTU). Jack was appointed first Reader and later Professor of Sociology at the University of Zambia. With the unbanning of the ANC and other liberation organizations in 1990 the Simons were able to return to South Africa to rejoin their three children, Mary, Tanya and Johan, after an absence of 25 years.<sup>6</sup>

Today Ray remains honoured for her contributions to organizations such as the Communist Party, the ANC, the Unions, FEDSAW and the New Women's Movement. In 2004 the ANC's National Executive Committee bestowed upon her its greatest honour of Isithwalande (literally translated it means 'the one who wears the plumes of the rare bird'). She is only the third woman to receive this award, whose previous 18 recipients include Chief Albert Luthuli, Father Trevor Huddleston and Yusuf Dadoo in 1955; Lilian Negoyi in 1982; and Nelson Mandela and Helen Joseph in 1992.

Ray Simons died on 12 September 2004 at the age of 91. On 6 November 2010 the Ray Alexander Simons Memory Centre and Heritage Square in Gugulethu, an African township adjacent to Cape Town, was launched by Deputy President of South Africa, Kgalema Motlante.<sup>7</sup>

### Archival sources

Ray and Jack Simons amassed a mammoth collection of archival papers at their home in Lusaka in Zambia. In 1987, when approached to donate their papers to the

University of Cape Town Libraries, they agreed in principle, but only at such a time when South Africa was liberated. In the meantime, to save their vast collection from destruction by the encroachment of white ants and by damp, a section was sent to the Nordiska Afrikainstitut in Sweden for sorting and microfilming, on the understanding that the originals would be transferred to UCT Libraries with the dawn of democracy. Less than a year after South Africa's first democratic election in February 1995, the Simons collection was launched at a ceremony at the University's Centre for African Studies.<sup>8</sup> This initial handover was followed by the gradual transfer of those papers that had not been taken to Sweden and that had been brought from Lusaka with Jack and Ray on their return in 1990.

After the death of Jack Simons in 1995, Ray became increasingly occupied with the sorting of her papers for the purposes of writing her autobiography.<sup>9</sup> In October 1997, following a bad bout of sciatica, she appealed to the Manuscripts and Archives department for assistance with the sorting of the papers at her home. It was during this period that a small collection of papers in Yiddish, that Ray had brought along with her on her hurried emigration from Latvia to Cape Town and which she had lovingly preserved for all those years, found their way to UCT Libraries.<sup>10</sup> Among these papers were two diaries: the first being the subject of this article, and the second a poetry diary or commonplace book, dated 1928, in which the 15-year-old Ray had copied out her favourite Yiddish poems. These include leading Yiddish poets, such as Shimon Frug, Shin Anski, Mani Leib, Avraham Reizen, Leib Halper, Yehoash, David Einhorn, as well as the group known collectively as the Sweatshop or Proletarian poets: Morris Rosenfeld, Morris Winchevsky and Dovid Edelstadt, whose poem, *Mayn tsevo'e* (My Testament), captures Ray's lifelong commitment to the workers' struggle.

<i>O guter fraynt ven ikh vel shtorbn</i>	Oh good friend if I should die
<i>Trogt tsu mayn keyver unzer fon-</i>	Bring our flag to my graveside
<i>Di fraye fon mit royte farbn</i>	Freedom's flag all coloured red
<i>Beshprits mit blut fun arbetsman!</i>	Soaked in the blood the workers shed
<i>Un dort unter dem fon dem roytn</i>	And under the red flag over there
<i>Zingt mir mayn lid mayn fraye lid!</i>	My song of freedom I wish to hear
<i>Mayn lid in kamf vos klingt vi keytn</i>	My song of struggle ringing out like chains
<i>Fun dem farshklaftn Krist un Yid.</i> <sup>11</sup>	Of enslaved Jews and Christians

Other items include two autograph books belonging to Ray's oldest sister Gessy, and to her youngest sister Minnie, that are inscribed with verses in Yiddish, German and Russian, illustrating the sisters' budding socialist fervour. There is also a book of poems, *Kaylekhdikey vokhn* (*Week In, Week Out*), by the Soviet Yiddish poet, Izi Kharik (1898–1937) published in Minsk in 1933, that is inscribed by Ray to her mother, 31 October 1944. Kharik was one of the Soviet poets killed in Stalin's purges of Jewish intellectuals and writers in 1937.<sup>12</sup> These few Yiddish items occupy precisely one folder in this huge collection of 456 boxes, containing material relating to the African National Congress, the South African Communist Party and the trade unions.

### The diary

There is no consensus about the nature of the diary as a genre. It has been characterized as 'a capacious hold-all'<sup>13</sup> that falls somewhere between autobiography and letter writing. It is generally agreed that it is united by three elements: its commitment to the

day-to-day recording of events, to the first-person narrative, and by its special relationship to privacy, intimacy and secrecy.<sup>14</sup> According to Philippe Lejeune, the main distinguishing feature between a diary and an autobiography is the fact that the autobiography is retrospective.<sup>15</sup> It is precisely because of its retrospective character – because it is personally authored after the fact – that the Yiddish linguist and scholar Max Weinreich (1894–1969), citing the psychologist Charlotte Buhler, felt that the diary was a more reliable source than the autobiography.<sup>16</sup>

Ray's diary is contained in an exercise book consisting of 60 pages, written in a cramped and at times virtually illegible hand. As a day-to-day record of events it is extremely brief as it spans only nine days, from 22 to 31 December 1927. It is written in Yiddish, the language of the East European Jews and Ray's mother tongue that is written in Hebrew script. The pronunciation follows the Lithuanian dialect while the spelling of the Hebrew words adheres to the Soviet Yiddish orthography.<sup>17</sup>

At the time of writing, 14-year-old Ray, or Rokhl, as she was known then, and her nine-year-old sister Minnie (b. 1918), were the only siblings of the eight children who were still living at home with their mother. Their father had died four years before in 1923. Her half-sisters Anna and Tanya, and older sisters Gessie (b.1903) and Dora (b. 1909), were living in Riga and her sister Mary (1905–1926), had passed away from a botched appendectomy only a year before, while her brother Iser (b. 1904) had recently immigrated to South Africa. Ray had completed the schooling available to her in Varaklan, and was waiting to go to Riga, where she would be studying dressmaking at the vocational school of ORT, the Society for Handicraft and Agricultural Work among the Jews of Russia, established in 1905.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile she took sole responsibility for the housework and the cooking, while at the same time looking after her younger sister Minnie. In addition she was doing the books for the bakery that her mother operated from their home in order to support the family after her father died.

Although the period of time covered by the diary is extremely brief, its record of the events of the day is extremely detailed, providing an intimate glimpse into the nature and rhythm of day-to-day Jewish life in a small town in Eastern Europe. Ray records the events of the day from the minute that she wakes up in the morning to the moment that she falls asleep at night. The diary was written during December when the weather was very severe with wind and snow storms abounding. Ray bundles herself up in a large shawl, jacket and snow boots to protect herself against the cold outside in the street, and inside she and her mother sit next to, or climb on to the stove to keep warm. Her day is punctuated by attending to her own personal hygiene (no simple matter with no running water), tidying and cleaning the house, washing her clothes, cooking, washing up and feeding the animals. She constantly needs to go out to buy provisions or to make or collect payments for the bakery. Customers arrive to buy bread at all hours of the day; peasants arrive with wood for the oven or to clean the samovar. She meets her friends in the street, or pops into their homes, and they arrive unannounced to visit her at her home. Writing and receiving letters to and from family members living in another city or in South Africa is another regular feature of the daily routine that is very typical of the period that was characterized by large-scale Jewish emigration from Eastern Europe.<sup>19</sup>

### **Autobiographical section of the diary**

The diary is preceded by a summary of her life up to that point. This section has been consciously fashioned to reflect the most significant events that have shaped her world view. Written under the influence of leftist politics, much like the Soviet diaries

examined by Jochin Hellbeck, this brief autobiography served as a means ‘of self-construction and self-fashioning within an ideological mould’.<sup>20</sup> The contents closely resemble the autobiographies of Jewish youths in Poland, that were elicited by the YIVO, the Yidisher Visnshaftlekhe Institut – the Yiddish Scientific Institute, in Vilna in the 1930s, a selection of which were published in English translation in the collection *Awakening Lives* in 2002.<sup>21</sup>

It is significant that Ray starts the diary on her fourteenth birthday, 22 December 1927, clearly indicating it to be a milestone in her life, her political coming of age. As the YIVO autobiography contest was directed at youths between the ages of 16 and 22, based on the premise that they only became interested in political youth movements at the age of 17,<sup>22</sup> Ray was clearly politically precocious having joined the political youth movement, *Kultur-Lige* (Culture League), a socialist organization slightly to the left of the Bund,<sup>23</sup> at the age of just 14. Established in Riga in 1922 (as a branch of the original organization established in Kiev in 1918), branches of the *Kultur-Lige* operated in all of the Latvian towns that had sufficient Jewish numbers, sponsoring clubs, libraries, and drama and music circles. *Kultur-Lige* was the heir to the *Arbeiter Heim*, an organization that existed between 1920 and 1923, to which her older half-sisters Anna and Tanya had belonged.<sup>24</sup>

This section has to be read in the context of Ray’s published autobiography, *All My Life and All My Strength*, where 20 pages are devoted to this period of her life. While it is clear that Ray has utilized her diary in the writing of her autobiography, she has omitted the more painful and intimate aspects of her life. Thus, although the autobiography contains a more comprehensive overview of this period, it does not convey the wealth of personal details as well as the emotionalism of the teenage diary, elements that serve to deepen our insight into the underlying reasons why Ray followed the particular path that she did.

This illustrates how the transition from the diary, written in Yiddish in Varaklan at the age of 14, to the autobiography, written in English in Cape Town in her twilight years, archives Jewish migration, tracking Ray’s journey from the trials and tribulations of Jewish life in Latvia to her more comfortable life in Cape Town. Simultaneously it demonstrates how her Latvian Jewish socialist politics were transferred to the workers’ struggle and to the liberation of the oppressed Black peoples of South Africa.

### **Death of her father and sister**

Among the elements omitted from the autobiography, death and dying loom large. Whereas in the autobiography, the death of her father is mentioned only in passing, in the diary her father’s collapse in Ray’s presence and her reaction to his death and burial is dramatically depicted. Ray’s emotional reactions are emphasized by the use of repetition and exclamation marks – ‘Tate!!!!!!!!!!!!’ – ‘Father!!!!!!!!!!!!’. After his death she describes just how miserable she and her sister Dora felt when they used to come home after school to a silent house, instead of to the tumult of the boys studying at their father’s *kheyder*.<sup>25</sup>

Moreover, there is a discrepancy in the date of her father’s death between the diary and the autobiography, the result of Ray’s failing memory towards the end of her life. While in the autobiography it is recorded as 1925, when she was 13 years old, in the diary it is recorded as December 1923, when Ray was just 11.<sup>26</sup> The date in the diary is confirmed on her father’s tombstone in the cemetery in Latvia (3 Tevet 5684 – Tuesday, 11 December 1923), proving the accuracy of the diary.<sup>27</sup> This intimate encounter with death at the age of just 11, along with the customary visit to the cemetery on the

eve of the Day of Atonement, caused her to experience terrifying nightmares, followed by an extended period of feeling unwell that culminated in the onset of her menses.<sup>28</sup>

The death of her beloved older sister, Mary, in 1926 was not witnessed as intimately, as Mary was living in Riga when she died. Nonetheless Ray is bereft at the loss of her beloved confidante, eight years her senior, who features frequently in the diary.<sup>29</sup> Ray was shocked by her death at such a young age and at the illusory nature of life. She writes: '*Akh, mentsh du mentsh ot shteystu, geyst, ligst, un blaybst lign oyf eybik!!*' / 'O man, man, no sooner do you stand up, you walk, you lie down and remain lying down eternally!!'<sup>30</sup>

It is a pity that Ray decided to exclude these painful early impressions from the autobiography, which suffers from the general absence of reflection, feelings or emotion. However like the date of her father's death, her memory of these events, that were still very raw and fresh at the age of just 14, had faded. The death that is uppermost in her mind in the autobiography is that of Jack, her beloved husband of 54 years. In a rare and touching display of emotion in the autobiography, she describes how they renewed their marriage vows on his deathbed.<sup>31</sup>

### Poverty

Also omitted from the autobiography is any description of the poverty, deprivation and suffering of her early years, which are accentuated in the diary. Varaklan, the small town where the family was living, was situated in the Rezekne (Rezhitse) Province, part of the Latgale region, the largest and the poorest of the three provinces (that included Courland and Livonia), that constituted Latvia. According to the *YIVO Encyclopedia of the Jews of Eastern Europe*, 18.5% of the Jewish population of approximately 62,000 (12.8% of the total population) of Latgale required welfare in 1898.<sup>32</sup>

Ray attributes the struggles of the family during those years to her father's inability to earn a living, the result of the restrictive legislation placed on the Jews of Latvia. Their situation improved somewhat when her father opened a *kheyder* – a religious elementary school for boys in their home. She describes her mother as old beyond her years, the result of constant worry about their economic situation. As children they were dressed in second-hand clothes that were often threadbare, but spotlessly clean.<sup>33</sup> She also describes a time when she and her sister Dveyre (Dora) went to school hungry<sup>34</sup> – and another occasion when, as a result of having no shoes to wear, she became ill and when she and her sister were transferred to a school for poor children where they were provided with food and clothing. She writes:

*Gedenk ikh genoy nisht vi fun nisht hobn vos ontsuton oyf mayne fis. Farkil ikh zikh un ver krank. Di mame trogt mir arayn bay Iser Levin, a dokter, Avrams a brider un ikh ver gezunt. Do hot zikh geshafen a min shul far oreime kinder. Dortn vu ikh iz fri'er gegangen geyen di mer farmeglekhe iber hoyft balebatishe kinder un ikh mit di shvester Meri – Dveyre iz dan geven in Birzh – geyen far 3 vi'orst. Un shul lere bakumen mir dortn zeyer veynik. Nor esn git men undz un kleydung.*<sup>35</sup>

And I don't remember anything about not having what to wear on my feet. My mother took me to Iser Levin, a doctor, Avram's brother, and I recovered. There was a type of school for poor children. The school that I was attending before, was for the wealthier and mainly the *balebatishe* (householders') children, and I with my sister Mary – (my sister) Dveyre was in Birzh at the time – walked 3 verst (Russian miles). And we very seldom had lessons there. They only provided us with food and clothing.

It is possible that Ray was simply too proud to include these painful but revealing recollections in her autobiography. She might also have wished to avoid embarrassing her children by her family having been forced to accept charity. Whatever her reasons, there can be no doubt that these experiences would have sensitized Ray to the plight of those in straightened circumstances, and influenced her decision to dedicate her life to the cause of the oppressed and the downtrodden.<sup>36</sup>

### Jewish identity and politics

For the Jewish historian, however, the most significant aspect of the diary of this budding Communist and trade unionist is that it documents in a way not possible in the autobiography the transfer of her allegiance from Judaism to Bundism to Communism. Ray was not only politically but also academically precocious. She studied in the Yiddish medium, favoured by the Bund that held sway among the Jews of Varaklan. She was registered early for the Committee school,<sup>37</sup> at the age of five,<sup>38</sup> and was soon put up to the second class, where in addition to the Hebrew Pentateuch, that was taught in the first year, Russian was taught as well.<sup>39</sup>

In her autobiography, Ray relates that she learnt her human values from her home, where she was inspired by the Jewish biblical heroines, Rachel, Ruth and Esther, who were depicted in tapestries hanging in her parents' bedroom.<sup>40</sup> In the diary it is unnecessary for Ray to recount the sources of her Jewishness as it defines her life and her diary.

Her Judaism is clearly evident in the language that she uses – Yiddish – and in the dating of the diary entries that follow the Hebrew as well as the Christian calendar. The first entry is dated as *Di finfte likhtl* ('The fifth candle'), 1927, Ray's birthday.<sup>41</sup> The fifth candle refers to the fifth of the eight candles that are lit on the Jewish festival of Chanukah. Ray's Jewishness is also evident in the strict division of the plates that she is regularly washing up, into those of meat and milk respectively. When she is feeling unwell on the night of the Day of Atonement during the period after her father's death her mother suggests that she recite the 'Sh'ma' – 'Hear O Israel',<sup>42</sup> the Jewish affirmation of faith – in order to obtain some relief.<sup>43</sup>

However, the diary also demonstrates that Ray's faith was already being challenged. As illustrated in the verses inscribed in their autograph books, all the sisters were converted to the cause of the class struggle at an early age. They were influenced by Leib Yoffe, the principal of the school and a close family friend, a Communist, who was also the mayor of Varaklan, whose name is cited both in the diary and in the autobiography, as the main influence on the children of Varaklan.<sup>44</sup>

While in the autobiography the reader is acquainted with various elements in their background that predisposed the sisters to Marxist socialism, such as their father's attendance at a Russian school and their mother's sojourn in Leeds in England,<sup>45</sup> Ray's focus in the diary is on the Varaklan Workers' Society, the *Kultur-Lige*, that she joined against her mother's wishes, at the age of just 14.<sup>46</sup>

Ray participated in the social evenings organized by the club, reciting workers' poems (such as those that are contained in her poetry diary), and taking part in Yiddish plays. She also joined two study circles: one on political economy that she attended regularly and the other on religion and faith in which she participated less frequently.<sup>47</sup> However, its radical left-wing rhetoric caused the Latvian authorities to close down the *Kultur-Lige* in 1926.<sup>48</sup> Its closure is recorded in the diary, but not in the autobiography, as is the establishment in its stead of a society, known as 'Winchevsky',<sup>49</sup>



named after the Yiddish sweatshop poet Morris Winchevsky, two of whose poems, *Di Freyheytsgayst* ('The Spirit of Freedom') and *Mayn Eynstiger Farlang* ('My Only Desire') – are included in Ray's poetry diary.<sup>50</sup>

At the same time Ray was recruited into an underground Communist cell where she read works by Marx and Plekhanov as well as Bukharin's *Communist Alphabet*. She writes that she gave a lecture to the group on the class system that completely opened the eyes of her comrades to the exploitation of the workers.<sup>51</sup> It would seem that Ray was torn between the two groups and would have preferred to focus all her attention on the underground Communist cell, which was more serious and committed and attracted a more mature audience; however, she felt that it would be unwise to cut herself off from her peers in the more culturally orientated Varaklan Workers Society.<sup>52</sup>

Yet despite her involvement in the Workers' Society and the underground Communist cell, she and her sister Mary still fasted on the Day of Atonement. However she significantly qualifies this fact, saying that she did so '*nit vilndik*' (unwillingly) as she believed that it was '*umzist*' (all in vain). During the day the sisters went for a walk and sang workers' songs, and in the evening they read the *Yugnd Hamer* (Youth Hammer), a Communist sympathizing Yiddish newspaper for the youth.<sup>53</sup> There can be no doubt the sisters would have fasted out of respect for their mother, an observant Jewish woman, who many years later, on first hearing the news that her youngest daughter, Minnie, had married out of the faith, was so devastated that she threatened to 'drown herself in the De Waal reservoir' near their home in Oranjezicht in Cape Town.<sup>54</sup>

Two issues central to Ray's world view in her autobiography are absent from the diary. These are her awareness of racism that she later attributes to hearing the story of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, by Harriet Beecher Stowe, and her rejection of Zionism.<sup>55</sup> It is possible that this is because neither of these were burning issues to her at that time.

The struggle against the oppression of the Black people only became central to Ray's political agenda once she had taken the decision to immigrate to South Africa. Similarly in the overwhelmingly Zionistic South African Jewish community her own early rejection of Zionism would have taken on far greater significance. In her autobiography she recalls a speech that she made at her school in 1926 to celebrate the establishment of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. On that occasion she declared that one should celebrate the establishment of a university anywhere, not only in Jerusalem, but also in Timbuktu!<sup>56</sup> Nonetheless her universalistic views are already evident in the diary in an expression of good wishes, '*Le-khaim*' ('To life'), that she specifically extends to all of humanity – 'I made a *Le-khaim* and said: for the lives of all humankind!!'<sup>57</sup>

### Cultural allusions

In addition to her political activities, the diary opens a window into the cultural life of a young Jewish girl in Latvia at that time. The diary is embedded with allusions to the life and culture of the Eastern European Jews, many of which are quite obscure and long forgotten.

Reading is Ray's chief form of recreation and a large section of the diary is devoted to the discussion of the books, periodicals and newspapers that she is reading.<sup>58</sup> This conforms to the findings contained in the aforementioned YIVO autobiographies where the reading of secular literature was the most popular pastime among the youth and the library emerged as a cultural institution of central importance.<sup>59</sup>

Ray was brought up on the Yiddish classics of Peretz and Sholem Aleichem,<sup>60</sup> and in the diary she particularly recalls her enjoyment at reading a story by Mendele Moykher Sforim, the progenitor of modern Yiddish literature.<sup>61</sup> From the library of the *Kultur Lige* she borrowed Yiddish translations of European literature, the product of the post-revolutionary project in Russia to broaden the intellectual vistas of the Jewish population.<sup>62</sup> In this regard her tastes, as reflected in the diary, are extremely sophisticated compared to that of a 14-year-old girl today. She has just finished reading Dostoevsky's first novel, *The House of the Dead*, a harrowing account based on his experiences in a Siberian prison. She quotes the last line of the novel: 'Liberty! New life! Resurrection from the dead! Unspeakable moment!'<sup>63</sup> Later she begins to read the Nobel prize-winning novelist and philosopher Anatole France's *Thaïs*,<sup>64</sup> a novel about a fourth-century Egyptian monk, whose life symbolizes the struggle between the forces of stoicism and epicureanism. Anatole France was particularly popular in Jewish circles because of his support of Alfred Dreyfus, the French Jewish officer falsely condemned for treason in 1897.<sup>65</sup> Other famous European authors that she is reading are the Swedish dramatist Auguste Strindberg and the Russian novelist Maxim Gorky.<sup>66</sup> While she does not read them herself, Ray does on one occasion allude to the sentimental melodramatic Yiddish romances, by writers such as Isaac Meyer Dik and Shomer,<sup>67</sup> that were so popular with the women in Eastern Europe at that time.<sup>68</sup>

Ray was also very interested in medicine and health, and in the autobiography she relates that she had wanted to study medicine, but abandoned that idea because of problems with anti-Semitism in Varaklan where a university had recently been established.<sup>69</sup> She does not mention this ambition in the diary although she does mention going to study Latin with the local Greek Orthodox priest.<sup>70</sup> She discusses numerous articles from the periodical *Folks Gezunt* (The People's Health), published by TOZ, a Polish society established in 1921,<sup>71</sup> closely associated with the OZE, the Society for the Protection of the Health of the Jewish Population, established in 1912 in St Petersburg.<sup>72</sup> Published in Vilna from 1923 to 1937, the monthly and later bi-weekly *Folks Gezunt* was a popular scientific journal for the broad Jewish public.

Ray lauds Edward Jenner, who discovered the smallpox vaccine, and Nicholas Kopernik (Copernicus), the founder of modern medicine. Ray also believed in the importance of breast feeding and considers theories of nutrition and vegetarianism, that associate meat eating with alcoholism and character degeneration.<sup>73</sup> She supports the establishment of special schools for retarded children, so that all the members of society should be productive. These ideas echo the Soviet fear of becoming 'superfluous', not needed by society, in an age where both one's public worth and one's self-esteem were determined above all by the extent of one's usefulness to society.<sup>74</sup>

Her own personal hygiene occupies a central place in the diary, something which is apparently common to similar memoirs of the *shtetl* at that time, relating to the conditions of extreme poverty that existed among the Jewish population.<sup>75</sup> Ray cites 'Ten Commandments for school children!', that she most likely copied out from the journal *Folks Gezunt* that she was reading. But here again her interest coincides with the celebration of strength, health and beauty that was part of the Stalinist world view.<sup>76</sup>

- (1) Get up early, get out of bed immediately, wash your hands, face, neck, chest and feet with soap and water. Have your own hand towel, never use a strange one.
- (2) Every morning and evening, brush your teeth with a brush, or at least with your finger.

- (3) Every day comb your hair out with a thick comb. Boys should wear their hair short. Girls should comb their hair so that it does not fall into their eyes.
- (4) Every day clean your clothes and shoes with a brush. See that your clothes are washed. Open the window while you clean.
- (5) Wash your hands before you eat, don't eat too quickly and chew the food well. After eating, wash out your mouth with water.
- (6) Don't spit on the floor. Don't scratch in your nose or your ears.
- (7) Air out your room before you go to sleep and lie in bed.
- (8) Bathe yourself at least once a week. Wash your whole body and your hair with water and soap and cut the nails of your hands and feet.
- (9) Sit up straight, but not completely rigid, when writing and studying, hold your book or your notebook on the table, don't read when it is dark.
- (10) After studying, have a rest. Go for a walk or play in the fresh air. Cleanliness is health!<sup>77</sup>

Yiddish theatre and song also feature in her diary. Ray makes much of a performance of the play *Miriam*, the landmark play by the Yiddish playwright Peretz Hirschbein that many of her friends had attended. Ray preferred to save the 40 rubles for the ticket, but saves face by telling her friends that she did not attend because she was ill at the time. Instead she reads the play, which makes a very strong impression on her. The play, which was originally written in Hebrew in 1902, then translated by the author into Yiddish, deals with the fate of a poor Jewish girl, an orphan, who is forced into prostitution. Forced to leave home to find work in Warsaw, she is employed as a seamstress in the cellar of the home of a rich Jewish family. When the son of the family takes a fancy to her, she leaves her job and falls pregnant, hoping against all odds that he will marry her. Instead he tires of her, and, on the eve of giving birth, she goes to his house, only to be pushed down the steps. She has no option but to return to her friends in the cellar, who help her to deliver the baby. Now a fallen woman she is forced to take up a life of prostitution in order to feed herself and her baby.<sup>78</sup> Ray's heart goes out to girls in situations such as these and she weeps bitterly.<sup>79</sup>

One day when Ray is feeling particularly melancholy, she mentions singing various songs to perk up her spirits. One is from the Yiddish play *Ashmeday*. In Jewish legend Ashmeday is the name of the king of the devils, but it is not clear exactly to which play she is referring. Another song is about the Russian revolution of 1905, and a third is about Simon Petlyura, the leader of the Ukrainian government during the Civil War, 1919–1921, and the Zionist revisionist leader Vladimir Jabotinsky,<sup>80</sup> seemingly unlikely bedfellows. The song emanated from an agreement signed in 1921 between Slavinsky, Petlyura's representative in Prague, and Jabotinsky to form a Jewish militia that would accompany Petlyura's putative invasion of the Ukraine, in order to protect the Jewish population from pogroms. This agreement did not materialize and was heavily criticized by most Zionist groups.<sup>81</sup> Ray was reminded of the song by the recently concluded trial where Sholem Schwarzbard, who had assassinated Petlyura in Paris in 1926 in retaliation for his government's complicity in the pogroms against the Jews, had been acquitted, and Petlyura condemned instead.<sup>82</sup> One imagines that Ray would have rejoiced at the vindication of this fearless Jewish avenger of the blood of innocent men, women and children, who was being celebrated throughout the Jewish world, and whom some believed to have acted as an agent of the Bolsheviks.

## Conclusion

Whereas Ray's autobiography, *All My Life and All My Strength*, documents the events and personalities that made an impression on her during the course of her long life, the Yiddish diary, written when she was only 14 years old, captures Ray at her political coming of age as she stands on the threshold of her new life. At this point Ray depicts herself as a progressive, determined, confident and accomplished young woman, a budding feminist who plays a leading role in the leftist societies to which she belonged, giving lectures and reciting poems. At the age of just 14 she already knew that she had a mission in life: to liberate the workers!

Unlike the autobiography, which is largely impersonal and non-reflective, the diary recalls a time when, although she is clearly committed to Communism, nonetheless she is still observing her religion and fasting on the Day of Atonement, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar. The diary also reveals the struggles and trials of her childhood, including her shock and vulnerability on her father's death when she was only 11. All these experiences together lay bare the emotional roots that predisposed her to dedicate her life to the cause of the workers and the liberation of the Blacks in South Africa.

Her Jewish literacy, which is demonstrated in the multitude of cultural allusions in the diary, both religious and secular, demonstrate the distance that the 80-year-old Ray of the autobiography has travelled from her Jewish roots that permeate every aspect of her life in the diary. Thus, in contrast to the distant memories that are recorded in the autobiography, this small diary, written at the age of just 14, not only accompanied her physical migration from Latvia to Cape Town, but personifies her spiritual migration from her Jewish roots to internationalism.

## Notes on contributor

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## Notes

1. Allison Drew, *Discordant Comrades: Identities and Loyalties on the South African Left* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 1, 6–10, 36–7, 46–8 and 52–4; H.J. and R.E. Simons, *Class and Colour in South Africa, 1850–1950* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969), 184 and 257–261; Gideon Shimoni, *Community and Conscience: The Jews in Apartheid South Africa* (Hanover, NH and London: University Press of New England, 2003), 8–9.
2. Ezra Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe between the World Wars* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1983), 241–2.
3. Ray Alexander Simons, *All My Life and All My Strength*, ed. Raymond Suttner (Parktown, Johannesburg: STE Publishers, 2004), 42–6.
4. Simons, *All My Life and All My Strength*, 50, 55 and 62.
5. Under South Africa's Apartheid laws people, meetings, organizations and publications could be banned. A typical banning order would restrict a person to a particular magisterial district, require them to report regularly to the police, prevent them from associating with more than one person at a time and prevent them from visiting public places and institutions. Additionally nothing a banned person said or wrote could be published. There was no

- avenue of appeal against a banning order, About.com, African History, [http://africanhistory.about.com/od/glossaryb/g/def\\_banned.htm](http://africanhistory.about.com/od/glossaryb/g/def_banned.htm).
6. Milton Shain and Miriam Pimstone, "Ray Alexander (Simons), 1913–2004," <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/alexander-simons-ray>; Tanya Barben (Simons), e-mail, August 26, 2012. <http://raymemorycentre.org.za/?p=164>.
  7. Simons, *All My Life and All My Strength*, 351.
  8. See Patricia Van der Spuy, "'Our Book': A Personal Reflection on Ray Alexander Simons' *All My Life and All My Strength*," *Kronos* 72, no. 31 (Winter/Spring 2005): 223–7.
  9. Interview with Tanya Barben, August 2011.
  10. Yiddish poetry diary, Jack & Ray Simons collection, BC1080, 2.12. Special Collections Department, University of Cape Town Libraries, University of Cape Town. (Unpublished). English translation by Veronica Belling.
  11. See D. Shneer, "Izi Kharik," in the *Yivo Encyclopedia of the Jews of Eastern Europe*, editor-in-chief Gershon Hundert (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2008), 1: 885–6.
  12. Virginia Woolf's phrase, cited in I. Papirno, "What Can Be Done With Diaries," *Russian Review* 63 (October 2004): 562.
  13. *Ibid.*, 562–4.
  14. Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 4.
  15. Max Weinreich, *Der Veg Tsu Undzer Yugnt: Yesoydes, Metodn, Problemen, fun Yidisher Yugnt-Forschung* [The way to our youth: foundations, methods, problems, of the research of Jewish youth] [in Yiddish] (Vilna: Yidisher Vinsshaftlekher Insitut, Optsvayg Yugnt-Forschung, 1935), 349–50; Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Marcus Moseley, and Michael Stanislawski, "Introduction," in *Awakening Lives: Autobiographies of Jewish Youth in Poland before the Holocaust*, ed. Jeffrey Shandler (New Haven, CT and London: published in cooperation with the Yivo Institute for Jewish Research, Yale University Press, c.2002), xxiii.
  16. In the Soviet Yiddish orthography the Hebrew words that are traditionally written without vowels, are vocalized phonetically in the way of the words of Germanic and Slavic origin. See D. Katz, *Words on Fire: the Unfinished Story of Yiddish* (New York: Basic Books, 2004).
  17. ORT, *The Yivo Encyclopedia of the Jews of Eastern Europe*, <http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/ORT>.
  18. Yiddish diary, 32, Jack & Ray Simons collection (see note 11).
  19. Jochin Hellbeck, "Laboratories of the Soviet Self: Diaries from the Stalin Era" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1998), cited in Papirno, "What Can Be Done With Diaries," 567.
  20. Shandler, *Awakening Lives*.
  21. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Moseley, and Stanislawski, "Introduction," xviii.
  22. Ray Alexander Simons, interviewed by Steven Robins and Immanuel Suttner, July 20, 1993 and January 1996, Cape Town, in *Cutting Through the Mountain: Interviews with South African Jewish Activists*, ed. Immanuel Suttner (London: Viking, 1997), 30.
  23. Yiddish diary, 12.
  24. Simons, *All My Life and All My Strength*, 36; Yiddish diary, 7–9.
  25. Yiddish diary, 7–8.
  26. Photograph, Tanya Barben, private collection.
  27. Yiddish diary, 10.
  28. *Ibid.*, 10–11, 17, 32, 35, 61 and 63.
  29. *Ibid.*, 18.
  30. Simons, *All My Life and All My Strength*, 352.
  31. D. Levin, "Latvia," in the *Yivo Encyclopedia of the Jews of Eastern Europe*, 1: 997.
  32. Yiddish diary, 3.
  33. *Ibid.*, 7.
  34. *Ibid.*, 5. English translation by Veronica Belling.
  35. *Ibid.*, 4–5.
  36. It was not possible to establish for certain the nature of the school, but as the Hebrew network of schools in Eastern Europe was called 'Tarbut', one presumes that the Committee school that was conducted in Yiddish would have been affiliated to the Bund, especially as the principal is described as a Communist.

38. Simons, *All My Life and All My Strength*, 33.
39. Yiddish diary, 4–5.
40. Simons, *All My Life and All My Strength*, 31.
41. While in Latvia, Ray, like all Jews in Eastern Europe, observed their birthdays according to the Jewish calendar, a lunar calendar, so that their birthdays fell on a different date in the Christian calendar each year.
42. The *Shma* refers to the prayer, “Hear O Israel the Lord our God, the Lord is One” (Deuteronomy 6: 4–15).
43. Yiddish diary, 10.
44. Simons, *All My Life and All My Strength*, 30–31, 33 and 40; Yiddish diary, 6–7.
45. Simons, *All My Life and All My Strength*, 30.
46. Yiddish diary, 12.
47. *Ibid.*, 12.
48. See H. Kazovsky, “Kultur-Lige” [Culture League], in *Yivo Encyclopedia of the Jews in Eastern Europe*, 1: 953–6.
49. Yiddish diary, 15.
50. Poetry diary.
51. Yiddish diary, 11–12 and 15–16.
52. *Ibid.*, 16–17.
53. *Ibid.*, 13.
54. Simons, *All My Life and All My Strength*, 88.
55. *Ibid.*, 34 and 38.
56. *Ibid.*, 38.
57. Yiddish diary, 13.
58. Her love of reading also features in the autobiography. However, in the diary she also discusses the contents of the articles and books that she is reading.
59. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Moseley, and Stanislawski, “Introduction,” xxxi.
60. Simons, *All My Life and All My Strength*, 35.
61. She refers to the story, “Hershele der Doktor” (Hershele the Doctor), Yiddish diary, 5.
62. See K.B. Moss, “Not *The Dybbuk* but *Don Quixote*: Translation, Deparochialisation, and Nationalism in Jewish Culture, 1917–1919,” in *Jewish Culture Front: Representing Jews in Eastern Europe*, ed. B. Nathans and G. Safran (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, c.2008), 196–240.
63. Yiddish diary, 30; F. Dostoevsky, *The House of the Dead* (London: J.M. Dent, 1911, reprint 1939), 368.
64. Yiddish diary, 52.
65. See references to Anatole France in L. Begley, *Why the Dreyfus Affair Matters* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, c.2009).
66. Yiddish diary, 30 and 61.
67. Shomer was the pen name for N.M. Shaykevitch; for Yiddish romantic fiction, see D. Miron, *A Traveler Disguised: A Study in the Rise of Modern Yiddish Fiction in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Schocken, 1973), 28–9.
68. Yiddish diary, 13.
69. Simons, *All My Life and All My Strength*, 39, 41; Suttner, *Cutting Through the Mountain: Interviews with South African Activists*, 37–8.
70. Yiddish diary, 7.
71. M. Freilich, “TOZ,” in *Yivo Encyclopedia of the Jews in Eastern Europe* (see note 12), 1891–2.
72. OZE sought to create an all-Russian Jewish welfare system with the goal of promoting the study and knowledge of medical and sanitary practices, detecting and curing diseases among Jews, preventing epidemics and creating living conditions conducive to the normal physical and mental development of Jewish children, YIVO/OZE, <http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/OZE>.
73. Yiddish diary, 34–6 and 38.
74. Joachim Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary Under Stalin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 349.
75. See Alyssa Quint, “Personal Hygiene and Grooming,” in *Yivo Encyclopedia of the Jews of Eastern Europe*, 2: 1345–7.

76. Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind*, 358.
77. Yiddish diary, 39–40.
78. Joel Berkowitz and Jeremy Dauber, ed., trans. and intro., *Landmark Yiddish Plays: A Critical Anthology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, c.2006), 257–90.
79. Yiddish diary, 43, 45 and 59.
80. *Ibid.*, 43.
81. “Simon Petlyura” (1879–1926), *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1972), 13: 340–41.
82. See Kelly Scott Johnson, “Schwarzbard: Biography of a Jewish Assassin” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2012).