

# LIZ, RAY, FRANK AND OSCAR

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## HUMAN RIGHTS FOR WORKERS RIGHTS AS

~~FIGHTING FOR WORKERS RIGHTS~~

HUMAN RIGHTS

### INTRODUCTION

There were long tables spread from one end of the cement floor to the other. Rows and rows of them. The workers, most of whom were women, had to stand on slatted wooden platforms from the time they arrived until the end of the day. The only break was an hour for lunch at midday. There were no cloakrooms and no seating accommodation. The latrines were crude, filthy bucket affairs. Every now and again, throughout the day, the cement would be watered so to clear away the <sup>scattered</sup> juices and pips of the fruits scattered throughout the department's cement floors. JOIS

One day a young girl, barely 14-years old, joined the women at their work-bench. She waited as hundreds of boxes of fruit were brought in and placed in front of each worker. She cut each fruit in half and extracted the pips. The cut fruit had to be separated into three different sizes, small, medium and large, before being passed on to the canning section.

In that year at Langeberg Canning fruit factory, more than fifty years ago, she was paid ninepence for every box she completed.

When Elizabeth Abrahams left the factory alongside her mother, ~~that day~~, she knew that ~~her~~ the carefree days at the Bethanie Congregational School for "Coloureds only" had come to an end.

Little did she suspect that her work at Langeberg Canning would lead her to become intimately linked with some of the greatest South African trade unionists. Ray Alexander, Oscar Mpetha and Frank Marquard were already at work organising workers to fight for their rights that first day when Liz reported for work.

It was in this same year - 1939 - that Ray Alexander met Oscar Mpetha. He had acted as translator for a worker who had come to her with a problem of workmen's compensation. By then Oscar had already had his first experiences of worker organisation. As a school boy he had voluntarily worked in the offices of the ICU (the first trade union for blacks in this country). As a worker at Groote Schuur hospital, he joined a group called the October Club which encouraged him to find a job as a trade union organiser. But this was to come a few years later when he met Ray again. This time he was employed in a fish factory in Laaiplek near Saldanha on the West Coast. "Miss Ray" as she was affectionately known by the workers had come to introduce the Food and Canning Workers Union to the impoverished fish workers of the West Coast.

~~LIZ ABRAHAMS~~

The Langeberg Canning factory where Liz now worked was at least one hour's walk from the three-roomed house of the Abrahams family. The fourth-born in a family of eight children, she had led the normal life of a school child before becoming a worker. Liz

later

She had a <sup>many</sup> lot of friends and apart from being in time for classes, doing the homework ascribed to her and giving a hand in bundling the firewood which the family sold, she did not have a real care in the world, at that point in her life.

She was aware of the great difference in life style between her and the white children of her age who lived quite a distance away in another part of Paarl. She had however observed that these white children seemed to have a much greater variety of clothes and always seemed to be carrying off many parcels from the busy shopping area of the town, on week-ends. Apart from the over-crowding at home, it was a fairly tranquil and happy life.

but it did not bother her too much

They were a close-knit family and she particularly liked going out with her dad to buy the trees from the white farmers, help to chop them up and then tie them into bundles. Later when they built a little shed in the back yard, it was real fun to stack up all the bundles in neat rows and wait for the people to bring their sixpences and <sup>to give them</sup> one, two or more bundles according to their needs. She enjoyed this and now and then having to give change. She particularly liked riding on the horse-drawn cart when they had to deliver to various houses. She remembered the time when her dad told her that he had <sup>at his years</sup> previously worked on the brickfields where his services were always needed because he was an expert at assessing the correct quantities of the different ingredients for making bricks. Not everybody had this knowledge. He was therefore relatively well paid. He was strong then and loved playing rugby for the local team. But one day he was heavily tackled <sup>and his ribs were</sup> and cracked his ribs which penetrated his lungs. He was laid up for several weeks and although he recovered, it left him weakened and as a result, he had to resign from the brickfield. That is why they all became involved in the selling of the firewood which was not as strenuous a job as the one he had had. Nor did it bring in as much money.

travelling in the cart,

Young Liz felt a deep sympathy for her dad who she was <sup>realised</sup> aware was not in the best of health any more. But she was completely unaware of the toll which that injury was taking. He became infected with T.B. which in those days was an incurable disease. She was only 14 years of age when he succumbed to this dreaded illness. It had a shattering effect on the whole family. And was a real watershed in the life of Liz.

his death from this

The two eldest children had already left home. Now <sup>I</sup> it was decided that Hendrina, who was slightly younger than Liz, would stay at home and look after the youngest children while Liz would have to start working with her mother at the Langeberg factory at Daljosaphat. There was no alternative.

The pay packet brought home weekly by the mother was far too low to keep the family in food. Her wages had to be supplemented and the only possible alternative was that Liz would have to do so.

It was a very bitter decision for the mother to make. She was heartbroken but firm. She had to be, if the family was to survive. Nobody could help them. There was no dole to turn to for

Coloured people. The relatives were barely able to survive themselves. ~~So now with the breadwinner gone, the stark reality of life had to be faced.~~

It came as a shock to Liz when her mother explained the position to her. A whole new world now opened up before her and she was naturally nervous and afraid of what the future held although she was aware that many other kids of her age were also removed from school for the same reason. At least ~~one~~ consolation was that she would have her mother to guide and advise her at the factory where she had obtained work. The mother had seen to it that ~~her child would have at least this amount of parental care, and not be forced to work at any other factory or complex in this area.~~

The factory did not provide any bus service for their workers and there was no public transport either. ~~But even if there were such facilities, they could never afford such a luxury as fares.~~ That is why they had to wake up so early and return so late. And that is why there were always long streams of workers hurrying along pavements, through lanes and over the fields to get to and from work every day. Life was ~~very~~ hard and ~~dreary~~ for the hundreds of workers in these rural areas.

~~It was 1939. The war had broken out, and was soon to play an influence in the lives of millions of people throughout the world. But it had not the slightest effect on this child as she trudged to work every morning. She was too weighed down with the great responsibility thrust upon her, to make sure she retained her job. Otherwise the younger children would not be able to survive. She realised that the whole existence of the family depended on her meagre wages supplementing that of her widowed mother's. This responsibility occupied her mind most of the time. No more fun and companionship of all the kids at school and the joy of huddling in corners and gossiping or playing games during the frequent school breaks.~~

Child labour in the factories at the time was nothing unusual. Nor was it illegal as far as the factory owners were concerned. And even if it were, the authorities ~~turned a blind eye to such phenomena - as long as the children were not white. Why should the factory owners or labour officials be worried about such trivialities when the workers themselves never - or very seldom if ever - demanded a raise or anything else for that matter?~~

For four seasons, Liz worked in the cutting department. She and her fellow workers were regarded as 'temporary'. For them, there was no holiday pay or any other benefits accruing to permanent employees.

At the age of 18, Liz was transferred to the Canning Department. Now the process was different.

First of all, the men would bring the fruit from the Cutting Department and dump them in the wash-up basins. The women would ~~then~~ have to wash them, sort out the "greens" which were placed aside; ~~then~~ the different sizes ~~were~~ ready for placing in the

and

make

Without her wages

receptacles. There were <sup>twelve</sup> 12 tins on a tray and they had to be filled in such a way that each tin contained the same size fruit. When the twelve tins were filled, ~~the next tray followed~~ and so on for the rest of the day. and the next, and the next

Liz had now been separated ~~at work~~ from her mother who remained in the cutting department. But Liz was a strong person and a very hard worker so that after a year she was promoted to become a supervisor. From there she managed to earn extra money - ~~only~~ a few pence more - by learning to label, bottle and pack the jams in another department of the factory. This was an arduous job. The jams were brought into this department in huge iron pots. They had just been heated and had to be plunged into a big water cooler before being passed on to the sorters for canning. Lifting these cooled-off heavy pots was ~~a~~ back-breaking ~~job~~ but Liz endured this because it ensured that with all these skills she would be placed into the category of 'permanent' staff, and ~~not~~ <sup>she no</sup> suffer the dismissal of the seasonal workers, such as was the fate of her mother ~~in the cutting department~~. This meant she brought in a regular salary throughout the year. who had worked for years

Since she became a supervisor within five years, she was a permanent employee for the greater part of the 14 years she spent there. During this time, she became a shopsteward at the factory and later on the local treasurer of the Union. It was in 1943, as union shopsteward that she was to meet Ray Alexander.

RAY ALEXANDER

Liz Abrahams was four years old when Ray Alexandrovitch sailed into Table Bay harbour aboard the German East Africa Liner, "Ubena" on November 6, 1929.

Ray's widowed mother who owned and worked in the family bakery had shipped her off from Varklian, a small town in Latvia, to the safety of Cape Town where some of the older children awaited her arrival. But this young lady was not just an ordinary traveller. She was fifteen-years old and on the verge of being captured by the <sup>secret</sup> Tsarist police for her underground activities against the tyrannical, anti-semitic <sup>Latvian</sup> regime. She arrived penniless and uncertain of her reaction to the new country in which, in a month's time, she would be celebrating her sixteenth birthday.

She had expressed her fears to some members of the crew to whom she divulged the true reason for her journey. They were a sympathetic lot and made a collection for her to buy a return ticket if she needed to do so. They also promised that if she was unhappy ~~staying~~, they would pick her up on their return to Europe.

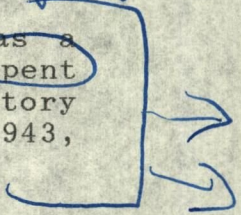
Ray Alexander had arrived and come to stay.

She joined the South African Communist Party because of her previous underground work in Latvia and because ~~she~~ ~~seen~~ ~~discovered~~ that it was the only non-racial organisation in South Africa. The well-known communists, Moses Kotane, Alex La Guma and

Jimmy

longer

the fourteen years that she worked



Johnny Gomas became great friends of hers and with their help, together with others, she began literacy and political night classes for the workers.

By 1939, Ray had become a full time trade union secretary of three different industries - ~~the Sweet workers~~, Tin and Milling. She also harnessed the abilities of many of the workers so that they became full-time officials or shop stewards in such industries as the National Union of Distributive Workers, the Railways and Harbours Non-European Union, the Stevedore and Harbour Workers, as well as helping the local branch of the ICU.

The creation of the Food and Canning Workers Union in the Western Cape best illustrates the enormous effort and sacrifice made by workers in this country to secure basic human rights.

It was after an abortive attempt in 1940 to have the demands for workers at Maytoms Ltd in Cape Town recognised, the collective who had planned it, acknowledged that not enough work and planning had gone into this effort. They set about painstakingly to rectify this by diligently contacting a great number of the workers in the trade and succeeded in 1941 in getting about fifty of them to attend a meeting in Bloem Street. This was the inaugural meeting of the F C W U. A whole new set of demands were drawn up for the industry. These were sent by post as well and distributed personally wherever the canning industry was situated.

Soon an invitation for a meeting to be held outside the gates of Associated Cannery in Daljosaphat came. Here a meeting was held after work, on the banks of the Berg River and a Union branch formed.

By this time the Bloem street meeting had elected office bearers, printed membership forms and informed the Divisional Inspector of Labour about the formation of the Union. They even drew up demands and a draft proposal for increased pay, hours of work, holiday pay, protective clothing and so on. So they were administratively well prepared and the workers at Associated Cannery were duly impressed. Many new members were signed up and filled in their forms as the darkness descended upon the meeting.

The factory belonging to H Jones and Co had requested the Union to come and address them as well. A great deal of talk had gone on in the shebeens and the narrow streets of the townships around Paarl about the possibility of extending the Union to all the factories in the area. In any case, many of them argued, what had they to lose? Here they were living on starvation wages. Many of the kids never attended school and if they did, were pulled out at an early age to go to work to supplement the family earnings.

Most of the workers, both Coloured and African, lived in squalid townships. In many cases, they shared communal taps and lavatories without sewerage.

Greatest  
attention  
was to  
FCWU.

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Bathing, for the whole family in basins serviced by hot water heated either by primus stoves or chopped wood, took an eternity.

The tot system was in place and generations of coloured rural fruit pickers went through life besotted by wine - a substitute for the wages farmers had to pay them.

African workers were constantly harassed both at home and in the streets by officials or police demanding rent or passes. Infective diseases ran through these slum towns like a swathe, killing off many babies and young children. The infant mortality rate was one of the highest in the world.

It was amongst these people - desperate to retain the few scraps they possessed - that the trade union organisers had to work. The thought of defying the authority, whether local or national, was absolutely unthinkable because they were committed to live separately and usually on the periphery of the towns and villages, had to be up by 5am in the morning to get to work on time and return not earlier than 6 pm unless they were on piece work.

Against this mood of hopelessness and doubt Frank Marquard who was later to become the President of the Food and Canning Workers Union, decided to go to the meeting which was to be addressed by a white woman trade unionist that someone had spoken to him about.

#### FRANK MARQUARD

Frank was a tall handsome, athletic young man who had at the age of four been given a fruit tin of wine by a farmer and became dangerously ill for weeks as a result of this "tot". He became addicted but slowly got rid of the habit and later even turned out to be an excellent and well known rugby player. But now, together with many others of his mates, he strolled along rather reluctantly to the hall. He had made a list of at least ten questions and was going to make it difficult for all these officials, especially that white woman, to convince him that a trade union could really work and really improve life for all the workers. After all, look at what had happened in the past. He, himself, had once remonstrated with a white official at a factory. He was set upon and beaten by three of them and kicked out of his job as a consequence. After weeks of walking the streets for a job, he obtained one in a shop which paid him such a low wage that he decided to swallow his pride and beg for re-employment at the factory.

Then on another occasion when things were bad, he got the job as a fruit picker on a farm but incensed the farmer by refusing to accept the tot as part payment for his labour. He was kept on only because of his physical capacity to do the work more efficiently than the poor wretches not so physically well endowed. As he reminisced about these events and all the other meaningless tasks he had to undertake to earn a few shillings, he remembered the desperation of the unemployed who had once resorted to the unheard of action of marching to the Mayor's

parlour in Paarl pleading for food. And here he was a man of 26 with children and nothing yet made of his life. He had visited libraries, sneaked into a school and generally attempted to improve his lot. But with very limited success.

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All this passed through his mind as he prepared himself for this momentous meeting. Only the enthusiasm of some of his acquaintances at Associate Cannery in Dalsophat had aroused his interest and enticed him against his better judgement to attend at all. But once his mind had been made up, he prepared himself well. He had jotted down those ten questions which he would put to this white official and upon her answers would rest his judgement of the benefit to him and his fellow workers of this union.

He found the hall packed. Not much standing room either. Somehow he got a seat right at the back and when he cast his eyes around, he noticed with some satisfaction that Cecil Capello, the painter, had been nominated as chairman. That was good. Now he wondered which of the two white women was the one he'd heard so much about because it was to her that he was going to address his questions. He was determined that nobody was going to pull the wool over his eyes and land them all out on the streets looking for non-existent work again.

As he sat there waiting for the meeting to begin, Frank wondered how it was possible for a white woman to be organising black people to gain advantage from the white bosses. The thought made him even more doubtful about this whole exercise. But on the other hand, he and his mates had sat up the previous night chewing over the fact that the folk who worked at Daljosaphat were so happy and confident about their newly formed branch of the union. He was sharply brought back to reality when he heard Capello calling upon Ray Alexander to address the meeting. Now was the hour. Now he would add even more questions to those he had come armed with to put this woman. He sat poised with his pencil at the ready.

Then came his first shock and surprise. The voice was firm and she spoke slowly and deliberately and very simply in a decidedly foreign accent. Nothing was high flown. She spoke about all the things which he had written down in his prepared notes and she seemed to be answering them all simultaneously. She was not a rabble-rousing orator ready to drown you in a welter of words. He would have been suspicious of such a speaker. Here she was addressing them so intimately and in such a way that the longer she spoke, the more he found himself nodding in agreement. She spoke like a worker who was convinced of the rectitude of what she was saying. The things she had said is what he was going to question her about.

She knew the answers and she knew how to implement them. In fact she had opened the door to all his problems and had the key, it seemed, to the future. This was what he wanted. Now he would learn what was to be done.

Workers crowded around her after the meeting. And there she was giving out application forms and accepting subscriptions. He had a few words with her before she was swallowed up by the enthusiastic crowd. He could hardly sleep that night thinking of all the things which had taken place at the meeting.

But the saga for Frank Marquard and his friends had really just begun. They were about to be thrown in at the deep end and would require all their faith and ingenuity to keep afloat of the depth of discrimination and hatred which was to be visited upon them.

On Monday morning when the workers, full of enthusiasm pitched up at the factory of H Jones and Co, there was a confident air about them which had never existed before. They were determined and happy about the prospect of starting a branch of the Union at their factory. They were jubilant at the thought as they went to their benches.

But the events which were to follow were both unexpected and explosive. The word soon got around to all sections in the factory that Capello, who had chaired the meeting and who had worked for H Jones and Co for 17 years, had been summarily dismissed for his participation and had been driven away like a dog.

Hundreds of workers stopped work, gathered up their jackets and other apparel and walked out of the factory. They gathered in the yard calling insistently and angrily for Capello's reinstatement. This was refused by the management, so the workers left the premises and gathered on an adjoining plot for a meeting. There it was decided to not only demand Capello's reinstatement but also to submit all demands agreed upon at the Saturday night meeting.

But how were they to organise this? What tactics would have the most impact and effectiveness? They had never before faced the reality of the whole work force out on the streets.

There was only one thing to do. Contact the office in Cape Town and let the union officials know what had happened and ask for their assistance. There was a public telephone on the corner. They had the office phone number. But who knew how to use these public phones for such a long distance call of forty miles to Plein Street? Not many had used a phone before for any sort of call. But a long-distance call. That was really asking much. A few women volunteered and tentatively moved off to undertake this difficult mission.

Ray had just arrived at their office and was opening the door when the phone rang. She excused herself from Moses Kotane who had arrived to speak to her and dashed across the office to take the call. She remembers that she had to instruct the caller on how to speak into the mouthpiece because the sound was at first garbled and unintelligible. She arranged for the workers to meet her at a certain section of the main road in Paarl at a given time and then rang off. She realised immediately that they were



faced with an all out strike. She quickly contacted a Mr Lee of the Department of Labour, met him and explained the situation. Lee phoned the factory and after his conversation with management suggested that this was an illegal strike and had been incited by the Saturday night meeting. Ray replied that she was well aware of the Industrial Conciliation Act and all its provisions but went on to convince him that this strike was a spontaneous one and therefore a legitimate dispute between the workers and management.

It was 1 September 1941 and the Second World War had spread rapidly to many parts of the world. In service of the war, orders for all types of tinned food and fruits had increased enormously. The owners were making huge profits while the workers' wages remained the same. This contributed even more to their anger. The highest paid were receiving £1 to £1.10/- per week; many more only £1 and less per week. The great majority earned the princely wage of 15/- per week. This was in Paarl. Other areas were much worse off.

So while the strike started because of Capello's dismissal, it now took on a different hue. Now they were going to demand better wages and conditions of work as well as the right to organise a branch of the Union in the factory. Now they would show that they were going to be a united force with which the management would have to contend.

They had a belly full of restrictions both at work and at home. Now they were prepared to face their oppressors with pride and stamp their influence upon this one-sided scenario.

They appointed Frank Marquard chairman of the strike committee. They knew that in him they had a fearless leader who would not wilt before the expected counter attack of the bigots who formed the management of the factory. He and the committee which was duly elected, would stand firmly together until all their demands had been met.

In the meantime, the union office was pulling out all stops. They were contacting many sympathetic individuals and unions to give their support. Ray was in touch both with Inspector Lee and the Minister of Labour, Walter Madeley, to convince them of the virtual slave wages and living conditions of the workers. Leaflets were handed out at factory gates and letters delivered to the homes of all other branch members and known sympathizers in the rural areas asking for their support and promising the establishment of similar union branches at their factories in due course. A fund, chaired by Bill Andrews, was established in a matter of a few days. This would fortify their unity and faith in the Union in spite of the meagre 12\6 per week which was doled out to each striker. All this was a revelation to these mainly illiterate, poverty-stricken folk. But the Union leaders even went further. They kept all the workers informed of every step they took on their behalf. They encouraged the workers, who never dreamed previously of taking responsibility for their own affairs, to now tackle the task of keeping the morale and unity at a high pitch. Their hopes were never allowed to flag. And for

the first time in their lives they acquired a self confidence as against the fears they previously harboured at the prospect of facing the bosses.

This strike revealed the iron fist of the system. It also revealed the strength of a people asking only for their very basic human needs such as a living wage, a decent roof over their heads and the right to organised in a democratic way to achieve these things. Other rights were for an annual holiday; maternity leave for pregnant mothers and protective clothing from the water and juices in these factories. Conditions adhered to in any civilised society.

For three weeks they stayed out on strike. But the management who had agreed to the demands of the workers immediately reneged on it agreement by dismissing several of the women who had been involved in the original walk out. Once more the workers marched out for three further long and weary weeks.

The factory owners called in scab labour. The Africans, when they learned the real reason for their employment, walked out. Coloured and white workers were in turn brought in by the owners who also sent their paid hirelings to the houses of the strikers to bribe, cajole, threaten and even beat up some of them in their homes. But to no avail.

By the time the bosses were forced to accept the new conditions because of the steadfastness of all their employees, the nature of life in this area had completely changed. Together with the important but really meagre rise in pay, practically every one of the demands had to be implemented. The galling acceptance that the workers could organise a branch at the factory and elect shop-stewards; protective clothing was granted; holiday pay; 45 hour a week and no more arbitrary dismissals.

This gave hope to thousands of people who had never before experienced normal human rights due to all honest hard working folk on earth. Even with this victory they were still living dangerously below the poverty datum line but now they had the pride which comes to those who honestly fight to live a decent and dignified life. And what they did to gain these improvements quickly spread throughout the whole of the rural Boland so that many more people whose lives for many generations had been warped by the dreaded tot system and completed docility and illiteracy, were now able to stand proud and united and much less fearful of the future.

The F C W U spread its influence to important rural areas such as Ceres, Worcester, Robertson, Ashton, Tulbagh, Villiersdorp and many other Boland towns.

There was no turning back now for Frank Marquard. This handsome giant of a man who first went to school at the age of 12 years now ran ahead eventually becoming president of the union.

shop steward.

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His victories at H Jones and Co took the union to the doors of the Langeberg Canning factory where Liz Abrahams worked. Together with other great unionists such as Oscar Mpetha, Becky Lan, Elizabeth Mafokeng, they were to build the union into a formidable force that was to secure workers basic rights that they never thought could be theirs.

While most of these outstanding unionists came from the heartland of the Boland, their efforts to unionise workers were to stretch to Namaqualand along the West Coast. And this came about almost by accident.

#### ORGANISING THE FISH WORKERS

Ray Alexander had noticed that a fish smokery in the worst tin shanty township of Windermere ought to be organised by the Union. This thought stuck in her mind. Shortly thereafter she sent leaflets to them calling for a meeting and telling them about the Union. They soon signed forms and elected their shop stewards. She repeated the exercise with the workers at Irving and Johnson who then had their main factory at the docks. Very soon, they too were well organised by the Union. But it was on a chance visit to see a Mr Williamson at the Food and Canners Council that she got the notion to go up to Port Nolloth to organise the workers in that part of Namaqualand. She had to wait for the interview and while she was sitting in the typists office, she noticed that one of the steel cabinets had the title "Fish Canning" slotted into the draw. Ray's curiosity got the better of her and she sidled up to it and asked the typist if she could look at their system. In strict alphabetical order the index cards of many of the little fishing villages were revealed to her. When she got home that night, she opened her map of South Africa and noted all the names at which the fishing companies were located. Names like Port Nolloth, Lamberts Bay, Paternoster, Saldanha Bay, Veldrift and so on.

Chance encounters in life can very often change the lives of one or two people. But looking into that cabinet was to lead to the lives of thousands of "the wretched of the earth" being completely transformed in a way that was of such humanitarian melodrama that Inspector Lee of the Labour Department who warned Ray that it was impossible to succeed was amazed when she did.

She had received a letter asking her to come up to Port Nolloth to organise the workers there. On a visit to the Inspector's office about another matter, she had informed him of her intention. He was aghast. These people were degenerate, habitual drunkards and far inferior to the people of the Boland as far as he was concerned. In any case the territory was dangerous for another reason. Illegal diamond buying was rife throughout Namaqualand and she could be arrested as a suspect. He gave her a letter of introduction to the Magistrate of Springbok so as to avoid such an event.

She went up to Port Nolloth in October 1942 and by the 24th of that month a branch of the Union had been formed.

The conditions of life in Port Nolloth was the worst she had ever seen. The people were indeed sick, completely listless and often drunk. The territory was hot, short of water and very little vegetation. The nearest to a desert she had ever seen. Farmers were constantly on the move with their livestock searching for water.

Both children and adults lived on liquor. There was hardly a home where even the children did not drink.

The factory owners were willing to concede some of the demands put to them by the Union but more pay - never! These people would spend such an increase on drink and make their work potential more parlous than it already was, they asserted.

But Ray was angry, She had been shocked by the way the lives of the community had been reduced to the lowest levels imaginable. She knew that they indulged themselves so much only because there was no hope for them at all with the pittance they were paid.

For over a year, discussions and correspondence went on between the Union and the management. They said they would be willing only to discuss such matters as housing, food and clothing. The Union pleaded with the Minister of Labour to appoint a Wage Board to investigate the fish canning industry. Her letters to the government were decisive and persuasive. She, together with other union officials, went to great pains to get all their facts so organised that the government was left with no alternative but to grant this request. Their finding resulted in the employers having to agree with ultimately to an increase in piece-work rates which came into effect in January 1944. It had taken a year of bitter negotiations to bring about this success. But more was to follow, for in February of 1945 the Wage Board Recommendation was made a Waged Determination. So Madeley, the Minister of Labour, fixed the workers wages at a much higher level than that which the industry had agreed to previously.

That same year - the year which brought the end of the war - 1945, Oscar Mpetha wrote to Molteno who in those days was the representative of the African people in Parliament. He wrote about the bad conditions at the fish factory in Laaiplek where he worked.

Molteno was to pass on the letter to Ray and hence started the firm relationship between two of the greatest worker leaders of this country.

#### OSCAR MPETHA

Oscar Mpetha was born in Mount Fletcher - a small town in the Transkei in 1909. After passing standard six, he worked in Matatiele and then in Amanzimtoti. After a while, he signed a contract to work at the Simonstown docks. Once in Cape Town, he found a job at Groote Schuur hospital. Here his dreams of working

as a union organiser took hold but it was to be many years later before this was to be realised.

He married in 1936, then went to Malmesbury for three years and organised the road workers around there. In the 1940's, the Italian prisoners of war came to South Africa. They worked together with these prisoners building roads in the Western Cape. Oscar discovered that the prisoners were getting three shillings and sixpence a day while the local workers were getting two shillings and six pence a day. He started organising the workers. There was a strike and he was dismissed.

He then sought work at a fish factory in Laaiplek near Saldanha Bay.

When Ray Alexander received the letter Oscar had sent Molteno, she wrote to him and sent him application forms for workers to join the union. Oscar organised the workers of Laaiplek and soon became fully integrated into the top union team who pitted their minds against the employers. He eventually became general secretary of the African Food and Canning Workers Union.

As an official of the union, he was not confined to the West Coast.

In 1947 there was a strike at the canning factory in Ashton. This was to be the first strike Oscar was to be involved in as an official of the union. With the strike won, he set off to Wolseley.

He and Amie Adams, the union secretary <sup>signed on as</sup> in Wellington went to work in the factory in Wolseley. They pretended they were ordinary workers and organised inside the factory. Eventually he was caught holding meetings at lunch time on a Friday and was fired. On Monday the workers came out on strike.

When Ray Alexander was banned, it was Oscar and Liz Abrahams that took over the helms of the union.

A dark and dangerous repression had spread over the land. Liz was persuaded to take up the position of general secretary.

#### THE YEARS OF REPRESSION

Liz decided to stay in Paarl and commute daily to the top of Plein Street in Cape Town and back home every night. By this time she was married and did not want to upset the equilibrium of the home by moving into town. It meant of course that she had to wake up early and get home usually when it was already dark. The year was 1955. Workers were living in fear of losing all their hard earned gains. It seemed as if the Government was set on a course of retribution against them for having had the effrontery to demand such basic human rights in the past.

Apartheid had arrived and previous agreements reached could be ignored. A reign of terror was let loose upon the mainly black population in all its fury and in disregard for human rights.

Now was the testing time. Liz and her co-organisers faced this test with great determination.

They had a plan of action. They would take the Union's car, choose some members, usually shopstewards, and drive right into the depths of the canning industry in the Boland.

At each important town or village, they would drop off one of the comrades to carry out the plan agreed upon. This was usually to make contact with the shopstewards or branch members and give them the latest political and union news affecting them. They would have a lunch-hour meeting with the members; hand out membership forms and collect membership fees as well as advertise future events. They would ask for any complaints or queries and promise to communicate with any unanswered advice needed which they could not answer immediately at the meeting.

Liz would usually be driving and would choose the furthest venue for herself. When had finished with her meeting, she would return along the route and pick up the others at a place and approximate time arranged beforehand. This trip usually took one whole day and would then start and end in Paarl.

The same arrangement was made for the West Coast fisheries except that this trip would take a whole week and the office would organise sleeping places with various members at the dorps en route. This was done by phone or by correspondence. Very often meetings had to take place in those villages against the background of intimidation of the bosses backed by the presence of the local police. Invariably the Cape Town Special Branch shadowing Liz or Elizabeth Mafekeng as they had done to Ray, followed them by car for hundreds of miles into this hinterland.

Very often they would arrive at a village in the early hours of the morning, say at about 2am. They would then resolve not to disturb the locals and simply parked at a convenient spot and slept uncomfortably until daybreak after which they would make contact. At other times, the car would get stuck in the soft sands and they would have to call on local manpower and expertise to get them out of the mess. Often the local police would ask Liz to come to the police station ostensibly for trespassing or some other niggling allegation and deliberately keep her waiting for hours without charging her. This was done to upset their itinerary. The Special Branch even tried to create suspicion in the mind of her husband, by telling him she was having affairs with other men on these trips. The same had been done in the case of Elizabeth Mafokeng whose husband had to see to the care of the many children they had while she accompanied Liz on these weekly trips.

Ray had had very similar experiences in the previous decade and had to ward off both the security police and the employers.

She relates how at one factory where she had been determined to gain entry to address the workers, she had been constantly frustrated by management. Eventually, she managed to smuggle herself in only to be intercepted by a huge white security officer who literally lifted her by the back of her neck and

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"carried me like a chicken" with her legs and arms flailing in the air. She was unceremoniously dumped outside the entrance gate.

On another occasion when she was secretary of the Sweetworkers Union, Ray went to a factory in Salt River to inform the workers there of the higher wages granted by the Wage Determination Board. The bosses got to hear of her presence and set two vicious watch dogs on her. They pulled off her skirt. She managed to discard one shoe to divert the dogs and by this ruse managed in her shredded petticoat and one shoe to reach the Ally family-house where she was provided with new clothes to restore her respectability.

(Rahima Ally, who is of Indian extraction and who is a twin, played a very active part politically and administratively in the union. She was a prominent leader in the Western Cape.)

At a factory in Paarden Eiland where again she had to secretly gain entry into the grounds at lunch time, a few of the bosses spotted her and picked up large rakes to chase her off the premises. They threatened to injure her and she had to flee with them rapidly gaining on her. A passing friend in a car saw what was happening and rapidly reversed her car, opened the door and rescued Ray just in time.

Ray did not hesitate to devise ways to fight back. Women on a picket line outside one of the factories in Cape Town complained to her that some of men were breaking the line with the assistance of the police. Ray told them that if any factory men and police again tried to ~~break~~ the line, they were to "grab hold of their balls and squeeze them as hard as possible. That will stop their nonsense", she assured the strikers.

After Ray was banned, nothing diverted or daunted Liz Abrahams and Elizabeth Mafokeng. Their indomitable courage and personal hardships, kept up the morale of the members through the length and breadth of this large area. Such was their determination that the union survived those years of growing repression and managed against the odds to keep afloat and recruit many new members.

#### LIZ AND RAY - THE TEACHER AND PROTEGE

When Liz met Ray in 1943, she was already union shopsteward at Langeberg. Liz too was to become general secretary of the union - a position held by Ray.

The efforts of these two dedicated women were to leave an indelible mark on the lives of thousands of fruit and fish workers in the Western Cape.

Today Liz Abrahams lives in a small cottage in Huguenot donated to her by the workers of the Boland. In honour of Ray Alexander, the building housing the offices and owned by the union in Groot Drakenstein is named "Ray Alexander Centre".

Both came from big families. But the backgrounds were completely different: Varklia, a small town in far away Latvia on the Baltic Sea in Eastern Europe and Huguenot a suburb of Paarl near the southern-most tip of the African continent, could hardly be regarded as the likely setting to produce two such leaders to rescue the fisherfolk and canning workers in the rural areas from the depths of despair into a brighter and more hopeful future.

Ray was twelve years of age and Liz 14 years when their respective fathers died. The impact on both their lives was dramatic.

Ray had been brought up in a studious, middle-class atmosphere. Their house was large and she had been encouraged by her father who was a teacher, to believe in orthodox doctrines of the old testament and in Zionism. There could be no higher goal than a return from the diaspora to the original home of the Jews in Israel. She had been encouraged to read which she did voraciously from an early age. This was made even easier for her as the doctors declared that she had an "innate" heart disease from birth. So she was no doubt coddled a bit by her parents to take the quieter life of books rather than the normal rumbustious activities of most children. She doted on her father and when he died so suddenly, she was inconsolable and in her bitterness would not adhere any more to supporting the God who had been so cruel.

She became increasingly influenced by Mr Joffe, her school principal, who was a Marxist and a secret Communist Party member. It was not too long before she turned to this philosophy which she reasoned was the only way to everybody's salvation - not the Jews alone from their anti-semitic persecutors. At the age of 15 she was already immersed in underground work against the ~~Tsarist~~ pogroms and the regime's oppression of the weakest and most vulnerable elements in society. She indulged in surreptitious visits to the woods where revolutionary classes were held and where secret activities were devised to overthrow the oppressors. Soon one of her best friends was taken into custody and she was finally whisked off to South Africa to save her from the same fate.

When Liz's father died as a result of T.B. of the lungs, she was completely oblivious of political philosophy or any such high-fangled ideas. She had to supplement the family coffers - "pure and simple". Or starve! She had no notion of underground work or politics of any sort. The bosses, not ~~Tsarist~~ cossacks or any other police, were to shortly become her arch-enemies. Her horizons were fixed on the bench and the opportunity to earn a few more pence.

Little did she suspect that her job would commit her to fighting for the rights of workers and would bring her both hardship and harassment.

Both Ray and Liz, the teacher and the protege, carried on their crusade for the benefit of the workers with almost a religious



dedication and passion. Nothing ever diverted them from this course. Not even their deep love for their own families.

Ray the pioneer had travelled the length and breadth of the Western Cape starting the union and consolidating its gains from before the outbreak of the Second World War until she was banned in the early fifties. Liz who succeeded her to the position of general secretary in the middle fifties, found that she had to go over the same ground again - restarting and rebuilding the structure of the union which the authorities had smashed through unleashing a reign of terror.

However they succeeded in maintaining the morale of the workers over the years. Both were able to keep in touch with events by employing unorthodox methods such as having secret meeting places in different offices in Cape Town. Ray used these regularly after her bannings and was able to impart her experiences to the new officials and suggest ways and means of combatting all the repressive laws: Liz, during the Fattis and Monis strike employed the same method to help in bringing that historic strike to a successful end. She also simultaneously succeeded in foiling the attempts of a government stooge to split the union in Paarl into different factions of Coloured and Africans.

#### CONCLUSION

It is a matter of record now that both women met in Botswana on several occasions during Ray's exile in Zambia and when Liz herself was banned from the union. There they discussed such matters as tactics to be employed in their own union; but also the best way of bringing about a federation of many unions throughout the republic. The Food and Canning Workers Union was to play an important role in bringing about the birth of COSATU. This union has fought heroically over the years to bring about the changes that all South Africans are now witnessing.

The prestige of the union took a firm hold throughout South Africa. Oscar Mpetha remembers how he travelled all over the country with Liz after his two-year banning order expired in 1956. They organised new branches in Durban, Cape Town and Johannesburg before he was banned for a second time in 1959 - this time for five long years.

Now an old man, this veteran trade unionists has suffered bannings, detentions and imprisonment. At the age of 82 years, he is confined to bed having lost both legs as a result of sugar diabetes. Although weak, his entire being is focussed on winning freedom - a dream that he has dedicated most of his adult life to realise. For all who are close to the old man will know that Oscar Mpetha has changed the slogan "freedom in our life-time" to "freedom in my life-time."

His illness which confined him to a wheelchair at the height of the repression in the mid-eighties did not prevent him from being wheeled across the vast Nyanga fields in the dead of the night to address the dairy workers. Aided by a false leg and a walking

Oscar

End

stick, he continued tirelessly to give of himself in the service of securing basic rights for the workers of this country.

Now on the eve of one of the greatest upheavals in the history of this country, Oscar Mpetha hangs on to life to see the freedom which he strove so gallantly for. He is cared for by three nurses through the day and night - a service funded by British trade unions.

Ray Alexander and Liz Abrahams have long passed retirement age. But these grey-headed women remain active. They both speak regularly at public meetings, were both honoured guests at the historic ANC conference held in Durban, and keep in close contact with the great union which they have served so ably over the years.

They still insist that their watch word is vigilance. They say that even in a new dispensation, basic human rights, painstakingly fought for, would have to be jealously guarded. *end*

Ray will be 79 years of age this year. She will have been politically active for 64 years. Liz, 66 years of age and still living in Paarl where she was born, has been politically involved for 51 years.

Oscar Mpetha, 82, lives in Guguletu close to the township of Nyanga where he had reared his children. He had lost his wife, Rose and his son Carl while imprisoned and was not granted permission to attend their funerals.

Their efforts and those of many others alongside them will not have been in vain when the draft bill of rights is accepted as part of a new constitution for this country. Article six of this draft, "Workers Rights" is set aside dealing specifically with 12 demands on their behalf. It is as though they contain the exact demands made by the Food and Canning Workers over the past half a century.

When Frank Marquard and his co-workers at H Jones and Co endured the hardships that went with strike action so many years ago, they began the process of writing into the draft bill of rights that "Workers shall have the right to form and join trade unions, and to regulate such unions without interference from the State" (clause one).

When they took action after hearing of Cecil Capello's dismissal who had chaired the union meeting which they all attended, they affirmed that "Workers shall be free to join trade unions of their choice, subject only to the rules of such unions and to the principles of non-discrimination set out in this Constitution, and no worker shall be victimised on account of membership of a union." (clause two). That "their right to organise and to bargain collectively on any social, economic or other matter affecting workers' interests, shall be guaranteed (clause three).

Article Six will bar any employer from setting dogs on trade union organisers as they did to Ray Alexander when she entered the premises of a Salt River factory all those years ago. "Trade

unions shall be entitled to reasonable access to the premises of enterprises, to receive such information as may be reasonably necessary, and to deduct union subscriptions where appropriate.(Clause four).

When Article Six, part of the draft bill of rights, is formally written into the constitution, the painstaking gains made workers in South Africa will have been formulated into law by our legal professionals.

Clause five says that "no law shall prevent representative trade unions from negotiating collective agreements binding on all workers covered by such agreements."

" Workers shall have the right to strike under law in pursuance of their social and economic interests subject to reasonable limitations in respect of the interruption of services such as would endanger the life, health or personal safety of the community or any section of the population." (Clause six).

" Workers shall have the right to peaceful picketing, subject only to such reasonable conditions as would be acceptable in a democratic society". (Clause seven).

"Trade unions shall have the right to participate in lawful political activities."(Clause eight).

" Trade Unions shall have the right to form national federations and to affiliate to international federations."(Clause nine).

"Employers shall be under a duty to provide a safe, clean and dignified work environment, and to offer reasonable pay and holidays".(Clause 10).

"There shall be equal pay for equal work and equal access to employment."(Clause 11)

"The State shall make provision by way of legislation for compensation to be paid to workers injured in the course of their employment and for benefits to be paid to unemployed or retired workers."(Clause 12)