

Biography of an independent, non-racial and committed freedom fighter

By Moira Levy

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Professor Ben Turok will be remembered for the many roles he played during his 70 years of activism as an underground cadre, a treason trialist, a trade unionist, a (not always successful) saboteur, a political prisoner, an exile, a

Member of Parliament, an academic and, most of all, an independent thinker who always spoke truth to power. This biographic article looks at what underlies Ben's political persona and what shaped him into the man he was.

Ben Turok started off his many years as a political exile with an argument. While attempting to cross the Tanzanian border from Kenya where South African exiles were not welcome, with his wife, Mary, and their three young children, a protracted disagreement with a border patrol officer ensued.

It was not Ben's first argument with a policeman, but it had to have been one of the strangest, and possibly the most poignant. It erupted over a single question in the standard immigration form. Everything had been going swimmingly until Ben reached the very last line, which required that he disclose his race. The problem was that his choices were limited. He could tick only "European", "African" or "Other". Ben had only to place his tick next to "European", and the whole family would be granted entry into Tanzania, but he refused.

Ben insisted that he was not a European, he was not from Europe and anyway he was a South African. The policeman pointed to the colour of his children's skin. "White," he declared. "Therefore, you are European," he said patiently. Obviously, he had no idea of what he had come up against. >>

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Ben tossed the officer's words aside and back and forth they went, apparently for some time, until Ben came up with a compromise. He proposed that next to "Other" he wrote "white African". The policeman was suitably convinced, the family was somewhat relieved, and Ben was well satisfied.

That was in 1966 and the bemused Tanzanian policeman could not have known that he was one of those who had publicly encountered the essence of Ben Turok. During his 70-year political life, many came to know Ben's determination in the face of any challenge to his principles, his intellectual persistence when clear thinking and rigorous analysis was required, and his dignity when a satisfactory compromise could be brokered.

Ben recently recounted the story of the Tanzanian border affair to a group of students and academics at the University of the Western Cape during a session on the topic of decolonisation in Africa. Ben felt it a duty to participate in the renewed enthusiasm for Pan-Africanism and self-reliance inspired by the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall student movements in the country. He demanded that he too be recognised as an African and a comrade in the struggle against neo-colonial authority. He told his audience: "I could not say I



was European. Something stuck in my throat."

This must have taken some courage – a meeting of that sort could easily have gone awry – but he recognised the importance of the debate, which at that time had our universities seething. Ben was never deterred when faced with a political conundrum, the more complex the better. He was ready to stand his ground, but no one in the lecture hall objected. They listened to Ben's demand for an end to colonial legacies in South African universities and society.

He bemoaned the turn to structural adjustment in the 1980s and 1990s, the imitation of European aesthetics and political culture by African states and institutions, and the behaviour and attitudes of South Africans to the rest of the continent. He concluded: "We have a hell of a lot to do. We have a big anti-colonialism agenda left, and decolonisation should not be mystified into some obscure psychological distortion. It is the reality of a system that is in place and which is doing a lot of damage, everyday and all day."



POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT -FROM BUNDISM TO NON- RACIALISM

Political debate was Ben's natural habitat. In his autobiography he says his parents were "gregarious people", which is a nice way of describing a childhood home always full of opinionated and highly politicised people who loved a good debate, even more so as it got louder. He emerged out of a Bundist home in Tsarist Russia. The Bundists were far left-wing Jews who supported the workers' movement and, for the most part, the 1917 Bolshevik revolution. They rejected Zionism, with its colonial aspirations, and demanded socialism in their country, in their lifetime. That was the environment into which Ben was born. As a boy two additional factors helped mould him into a man who could not tolerate apartheid, or any form of racism and oppression.

Firstly, he grew up experiencing

the grim reality of poverty. His was a poor working-class family, living first in Byelorussia and then in the Jewish ghetto of Latvia in a single unheated room. Recession drove his father out of work, and eventually forced him to leave his family and travel all the way by boat to South Africa to seek a way of supporting those back home. He started out selling oranges from a handcart to passers-by. Meanwhile, back in Latvia, Ben's mother supported her three sons by walking door to door selling linen goods, which she carried in two large suitcases. Ben wrote: "We bathed once a week in a tub of hot water heated on an open fire. We ate sparingly, the treat of the week being the cake crumbs purchased from the local cake shop."

Second, his experience of fascism and his own intimate encounters with anti-Semitism forever shaped his political attitudes. He never forgot an experience of being stoned by

jeering boys taunting him as "Jude! Jude!" (Jew! Jew!) A number of Jewish leftists who fled pogroms in Russia turned up in South Africa where their own experiences drove them into anti-racist and anti-fascist activism. Their experiences in Eastern Europe gave them an ability to identify with South Africa's poor and marginalised majority. It was therefore inevitable that Ben would take up the struggle early on, and keep at it without once letting go, though all its challenges and formulations, to the very end of a long and extraordinary life.

There was, however, within Ben a personal anomaly that he encountered soon after his arrival in South Africa. This contradiction became apparent to him at the age of seven and was to stay with him for the rest of his life, intensifying his political goals and determination. The disparities between black and white South Africans haunted >>



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him from the start. Two pages into his autobiography, reaching back into his childhood memories, he recalls joining the family's domestic worker, Arabia, seated on the floor, as was expected of her. Ben would often sit on the floor at her side. He recalls how greatly such inequality distressed him. This discomfort never left Ben; nonracialism and a deep-rooted hatred of inequality were the principles upon which his political commitments were constructed.

In his later years he would often refer to the informal settlement of Masiphumelele located not far from his Noordhoek home and the irony of well-off (mostly) white people situated in close proximity to an abjectly poor black community living under appalling conditions without services. That such an injustice could still be found after more than 25 years of democratic government was, to Ben, appalling, unacceptable, incomprehensible.

With knowing foresight, he wrote nearly 20 years ago of a need for white people to rid themselves of "sensations of superiority" and "convert" to non-racialism. Ben believed he had a head start in that, describing himself as being "fortunate in a way – being poor and going to a school that was not too scrupulous about judging the whiteness of skin colour ... No doubt my conversion to non-racialism was greatly

assisted by the nature of my origins".

In his first autobiography, *Nothing but the Truth*, Ben wrote, "before dealing with the deeper politics of the movement, I feel I must explore our [the ANC's] origins more fully. We continue to affirm that the ANC has a non-racial vision ... We fought hard and over many years for the legitimacy of non-racialism as a principle and so I want to reflect on how people of such differing origins became part of the same movement".

In an interview published in *New Agenda* (issue 64), Ben recalls that it was finally the Treason Trial that brought the movement together as a non-racial force: "The extraordinary thing about the Treason Trial is that there were 156 accused and we were all members of different organisations, from the Indian Congress, the Coloured Congress, the ANC and the Trade Union Congress. Although the prisons were racially segregated, we were all in court together. It was this that cemented the Congress Movement politically. The Congress Movement became a reality in the Treason Trial as a non-racial movement." As one of the last surviving members of this generation, Ben felt a responsibility to pass on the heritage of non-racialism that was cemented in the movement during the 1950s.

INDEPENDENT THOUGHT

Non-racialism was a principle that Ben developed at an early age, and it resulted in a rebelliousness that remained with him for the rest of his life. His political environment at home, where arguments were conducted in Yiddish and concerned exclusively with Jewishness and the preoccupations of an unassimilated immigrant population still obsessed with pre- and post-revolutionary Russian politics, seemed disconnected from Ben's growing political concerns: "I began resenting all these old fogies who persistently intruded into our home, squabbling at the tops of their voices about some Jewish issue or other, and

which increasingly seemed irrelevant to the world I encountered outside the walls of our home ... As I grew older, I thought the cult of Jewishness futile, representing a fading past, beyond recapture – a lost cause drowning in extravagant sentiment."

The act of rejecting the orthodoxies of family politics was the first of many statements of independence. He wrote of the experience as "a watershed. It freed me from the confines imposed by a narrow community, from the straitjacket of tradition, and from the restricted horizons of an inherited world view."

Not only did his new-found independence introduce Ben to the art – later perfected by him – of disregarding authority, dispensing with old world thinking and adopting a determined freedom of thought and action, it was a rebellion that was to serve South Africa well in the dark years ahead.

While the country was squeezed in the grip of apartheid, and the townships caught up in the political turmoil of the 1950s and '60s, his family's circumstances steadily improved, and the Cape Town suburbs and seafront offered the option of the comfortable life of a white professional with his new qualification as a town planner. Ben found himself torn between two entirely different, and incompatible, worlds. He admits that it was something of a struggle to shake off the trappings of white privilege, but he had to make a choice.

The world knows that he chose to stay on the right side of history. The rest of his story is by now well known, including his propensity to never miss an opportunity for a good argument, as that Tanzanian border official learned so long ago, as well as his ability to concede defeat if proved wrong, and determination to find a solution to take the matter forward. In more than 70 years Ben never stopped arguing for the South Africa he believed in. For that, this country and its people thank him. **NA**