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## Book Reviews

### Culture, Politics and Language

Miriam Basner, *Am I an African? The Political Memoirs of H. M. Basner* (Witwatersrand University Press, Johannesburg, 1993), xxi + 248 pp., £12.95 pbk, ISBN 1 86814 210 8.

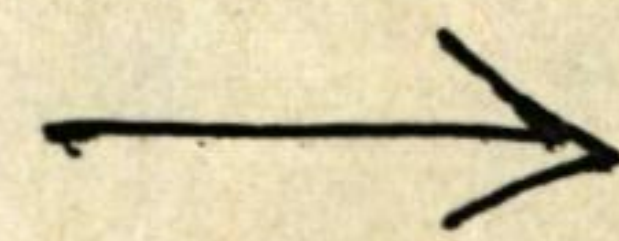
Paula Podbrey, *White Girl in Search of the Party* (Hadedu, Pietermaritzburg, 1993), 204 pp., £9.99 pbk, ISBN 0 86980 904 0

\* Sadie Forman and André Odendaal (eds), *A Trumpet from the Housetops: The Selected Writings of Lionel Forman* (Zed, London, 1992), xxxiii + 230 pp., £12.95 pbk, £36.95 hbk; also published by David Philip and by Ohio University Press. ISBN 1 85649 046 7 pbk (Zed), ISBN 1 85649 046 9 hbk (Zed)

These three books concern three people, each of them Jewish, who were leading members of South Africa's Communist Party. However, there are significant differences in the form of presentation: Hyman Basner's memoirs, described in the foreword as 'not quite biography', draw mainly on an incomplete autobiographical narrative adapted by his wife; Pauline Podbrey's account is straight-forward autobiography; and Lionel Forman's book consists mainly of a selection of his writings.

Although less than 3 percent of white South Africans are Jewish, Jews have been particularly well represented in radical movements. According to Baruch Hirson, writing in his autobiographical *Revolutions in my Life* (Johannesburg, 1995) eight of the twenty-five white political prisoners held (in the mid-1960s) at Pretoria Local were Jewish, and about two-fifths of the radical whites included by Gail Gerhard and Thomas Karis in *Political Profiles, 1882-1964* are Jews. Whilst this phenomenon has yet to be adequately explored, some obvious considerations have been advanced. An estimated 70 percent of South African Jews had their roots in Lithuania, where, during the early years of the twentieth century, the socialist Bund and Zionism were powerful influences; and, in South Africa, a high proportion experienced poverty as well as anti-Semitism. Thus, it would seem likely that many South African Jews were predisposed to the radicalising impact of the Russian Revolution and, in particular, opposition to racism and Nazism. The lives of Podbrey (born in 1922) and Forman (born in 1927) tend to confirm this account. The former, who came from Lithuania, was the daughter of a Bundist who had communist friends; the latter, a native of Johannesburg, had a Lithuanian father, and, before becoming a Communist, he was a member of *Hashomer Hatzair*, the socialist-Zionist youth organisation. Basner (born in 1905) had a rather different upbringing. By birth, he was a Latvian, and, in 1922, his parents, who were Chassidic Jews, were able to send him from Johannesburg, where the family then lived, to Los Angeles, where he was to be trained as a lawyer; and it was in the USA that he was politicised. However, as a consequence of his parents' limited financial resources, he was unable to complete his studies, and he was forced to return to South Africa.

Basner joined the Communist Party in 1933, Podbrey in 1939, and Forman in 1945 (having joined the Young Communist League two years earlier). Each became well-known: Basner as a lawyer and politician, Podbrey as a trade unionist, and Forman as a writer and Treason Trialist. They were all, however, independent thinkers, and, in time, they all became dissatisfied with the party hierarchy. Basner resigned his membership following the 1939 Russian invasion of Finland, but he had already become disillusioned with the party's Johannesburg-based politbureau, which, at the time, was more concerned with relating to white workers than the African masses. Indeed, in December 1938, a party





conference heard that, in Basner's view, because the local politbureau was rooted in the bureaucracy of the Communist International, it was already incapable of reform. Podbrey's break, which occurred in 1955, was a direct consequence of her experiences in Budapest, where she and her husband, H. A. Naidoo, had worked in foreign-language broadcasting for three and a half years. This was clearly a painful period of her life, which she devotes one of her three main chapters to describing. Forman never left the party, but, had he lived longer, one suspects that he would have done so. He was opposed to the organisation's dissolution in 1950 and to the invasion of Hungary in 1956, he argued strongly against the party's attitude to the national question, and he tended to sympathise with Peking, rather than Moscow.

Basner eventually qualified as a lawyer, and it was as a defender of Africans—poor and privileged, rural and urban—that he gained an understanding of the awful reality of segregation, developed contacts and built his reputation. This was all to his advantage when, on two occasions, he stood for election as the Senate representative of Transvaal and Orange Free State Africans; in 1942, he defeated the incumbent, J. D. Rheinallt Jones of the Institute of Race Relations, thereby reversing the outcome of the 1937 election. Jones was unofficially backed by the Department of Native Affairs and by the Chamber of Mines, and Basner's victory reflected wartime radicalisation and his ability to win support from key members of the African National Congress (which, as an organisation, was then divided). In parliament, Basner co-operated with the other representatives of Africans, but as the foreword to his book makes plain, this did not, as some writers have assumed, make him a liberal. Rather, he was a maverick socialist, who, in 1943, helped to launch both the left-wing African Democratic Party and the mainly-white Socialist Party. In 1947, he resigned from the Senate and withdrew from politics; his reasons are not entirely clear, but financial irregularities in his legal practice and political demoralisation were factors. In 1960, after a spell in detention, he fled South Africa. Following five years in Ghana, where he was a speech writer for President Nkrumah (a period not covered in this account), he retired to Britain, where he died in 1977.

The Basner book has one annoying weakness. As a semi-biography it falls between two stools; either the original sources should have been published, complete with errors and imperfections, or a scholarly biography should have been produced. As matters stand, we never know whether we are listening to Hyman or to Miriam Basner. Who, for instance, is responsible for the suggestion (surely erroneous) that Jessie McPherson joined the Socialist Party subsequent to being Mayor of Johannesburg? However, the book does have two great strengths. First, Tom Lodge has contributed meticulous annotations and a thoughtful foreword, both of which are excellent. Secondly, particularly in the period from 1942 to 1947, Basner was in a unique position to observe South African politics. He participated in important events, including Alexandra bus boycotts, wartime squatters' movements, the African miners' strike and the attack on South Africa at the 1946 session of the United Nations (where he co-operated with Naidoo). Also, he knew well a wide range of significant individuals—Sidney Bunting, Charlotte Maxeke, Clements Kadalie, John Marks, Edwin Mofutsanyana, Paul Mosaka, Seloape Thema and so on—and, to some extent, General Smuts and King Sobhuza. Thus, his 'memoirs' provide a rich treasury for historians of pre-apartheid South Africa.

The core of Podbrey's book covers the period from when she joined the party to when she left South Africa. In the early years, she was based in Durban, where she became the founding secretary of the city's African Commercial and Distributive Workers' Union, which rapidly became one of Natal's largest unions. During these years, she fell in love with Naidoo, the key figure, not only in the revival of the Durban party, but also within the left-wing of the Durban labour movement and the Indian Congress: one might note here that, had it not been for his subsequent disillusionment, he would surely have found a place within the pantheon of Party heroes. In 1943, when Naidoo was promoted to a full-time position on the Central Committee—where, uprooted from his base in the labour movement, he was never so successful—Podbrey went with him. Away from the disapproval of Durban's Jewish community and Podbrey's parents, the couple found it rather easier to make a life together, and eventually they married. She became Secretary of the Sweet Workers' Union and, in 1948, was chair of Cape Town's Trades and Labour Council. However, by 1951, life in South Africa had become impossible—they were a racially-mixed couple, and Naidoo was a named person, prohibited from staying in Cape Town—so, with the party's blessing, they left for England.

Podbrey has produced a very personal account of the period, much of it about her relationship with



Naidoo, and the obstacles they confronted. It is honest (although it seems unnecessary to disguise some of the personalities) and it is sometimes moving, but it is also unduly modest. Podbrey is a talented writer who participated in a particularly exciting period of labour and Communist history; she was surely capable of a more substantial work, more analytical and richer in detail. Nevertheless, as it stands, the general reader will find this an interesting story, and the specialist will discover numerous novelties.

Forman came to prominence as a student leader, first, in 1945, at the University of Cape Town, then, later at the University of the Witwatersrand, where he studied law and edited *Wits Student*; finally, he spent two years in Prague, where he was employed by the international Union of Students on *World Student News*. After completing some autobiographical writing (part of which is contained in this volume), he edited and wrote for *Advance*, the pro-Communist newspaper, and, later, for its successor, *New Age*. In December 1956, he was arrested for treason, and during the trial he worked on the historical *Chapters in the March to Freedom*. Sadly, from childhood, he had been dogged by a serious heart condition, and, in 1959, aged only 31, he died while on Christian Barnard's operating table.

Forman is probably best known for his contributions, included in this collection, to debate on the national question. He argued that, in South Africa, unlike Europe, oppressive laws were aimed not at restricting sections of the bourgeoisie, but at 'driving the African workers to the factories and the farms'. From this, he asserts that the main demand of the people should be, not 'secession and self-determination in their own areas', but full equality throughout the whole of South Africa. Not much controversy here. However, using Stalin's definition of a nation, which stresses common territory and common language, he went on to claim that the South African nation did not exist, and that in South Africa only pre-nations were present (Zulu, Xhosa, etc., Afrikaner and, possibly, Coloured). Further, he argued for the right of pre-nations to self-determination, and he suggested that the development of specific African nations was likely to precede the development of a general African nation, which would probably pre-date the establishment of a South African nation. Forman was clearly committed, able and critical, and it is sad that he did not live to develop his position. However, as matters stand, his case is naive, mechanical and anachronistic: he seems to envisage a purely democratic revolution followed by a series of national transformations, and the possibility of a multi-ethnic or rainbow nation is precluded. At worst, he would now have grave difficulties in opposing reactionary demands for Zulu and Afrikaner autonomy. This, then, is a book which makes a contribution to Communist Party history, rather than Marxist theory.

On reading these books, it is difficult not to be impressed by the humanity, intelligence, integrity and dedication of the three principal voices. Equally, one is reminded of the damage done, both to people's lives and to the development of Marxism, by the straight-jacket of Stalinist orthodoxy.

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Rob Nixon, *Homelands, Harlem and Hollywood: South African Culture and the World Beyond* (Routledge, New York and London, 1994), x + 305 pp., £14.99 pbk, ISBN 0415 908861 2.

In the introduction to *Homelands, Harlem and Hollywood*, Rob Nixon outlines a fascinating project. What he is going to do, he tells us, is, 'trace the creative possibilities and dilemmas that have arisen from the refracted images that South Africans and Americans have produced of each other' (p. 3). As a literary critic, Nixon's main focus is on cultural production. The first of the book's three sections contains essays on the Sophiatown Renaissance, the long struggle of the South African state to prevent the introduction of television, and four films dealing with apartheid. The second section starts with an essay on Bessie Head and then moves on to sporting and cultural boycotts. In these latter two pieces, Nixon's focus begins to shift from a concern with cultural production to a more general concern with a history of the struggle against apartheid. This shift becomes more marked in the final section where we find essays on Mandela and the media, on Multi-Culturalism and the New South