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UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG
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"The horse that made it all the way: Towards a political biography of Issie Heymann."

Colin Purkey and Leslie Witz

History Workshop Conference, February 1990

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years we have been involved in a research project to examine the history of the white left in Johannesburg in the 1930s and 40s, which as Baruch Hirson has pointed out is largely unchartered. [1] The aim of the research is broadly twofold: to examine why different people became involved in left-wing political movements in this period and the changing trajectory of their political involvement. Out of this research it was envisaged that a set of biographies would be written about some of these political activists, highlighting some important questions and issues from their lives within the specific context that they arose.

Once we started researching and writing the biographies, however, we found that the process raised important questions of method. What say does the subject have in what we write? We are also raising political issues for debate. What role, if any, should political organisations have in the production of the biography? What are the implications of consultation for academic rigour? This paper attempts to answer these questions through an examination of the process involved in the production of a biography of one of these activists, Issie Heymann.

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1. B Hirson, "Death of a Revolutionary Frank Glass/Li Fu-Je/John Liang 1901 - 1988", in Searchlight South Africa, vol 1, no 1, September 1988, p 38.

## TOWARDS A POLITICAL BIOGRAPHY

Political biography has a long tradition in South African and general historiography, especially among left-wing political writers. These biographies have generally taken on two distinct forms. On the one hand there is the political biography which attempts to promote a specific political line. Using the medium of a subject's life political lessons are drawn either explicitly or implicitly for the reader. Doreen Musson, for example, has prefaced her recent biography of the trade unionist Johny Gomas with the following: "Today, when the need for fundamental change is so clear, it is more necessary than ever to draw on the lessons of Gomas's life and his ideas remain relevant. In this sense we cannot speak of Gomas in the past tense only, nor do we want to make him into a monument. Instead, his ideas need to be incorporated in the struggle."[1] Alternatively political biographies are histories of people who engaged in political activities and which attempts to contextualise those activities historically. An understanding of the relationship between an individual and a specific context in the past can help towards raising debates and developing strategies for the present.

The political biography of Issie Heyman which we intend to write falls into the latter category. The decision to write about Issie was firstly motivated by his long involvement in left-wing political struggles in Johannesburg. At the beginning of Issie's political career in the early 1930s the trade unionist Ben Weinbren had posed the following question: "Here we have got Issie Heymann who has embarked on a life of politics. Politics is a slippery road. Its like a racecourse.. You see a horse running towards the end but stops halfway. Some horses just go beserk and may turn round and they may go back. Some horses run and never get anywhere. But some are horses that are going to be champions... What sort of pferd[2] Issie Heymann is going to turn out to be we don't know yet."[3] Bennie Weinbren needn't have worried. Issie joined the Communist party in 1936, committed himself to the national liberation struggle, and despite being gaoled and placed under a banning order, is still as committed to that struggle today. Issie is a horse that made it all the way.

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1. D Musson, Johny Gomas Voice of the Working Class: A Political Biography, Buchu Books, Cape Town (1989), p5

2. Horse or donkey.

3. Interview with Issie Heymann, conducted by C Purkey and L Witz, Johannesburg, (hereafter IH), 1/3/87

Secondly, a great deal of this history of white political involvement in the 1930s and 40s was being lost, either through the participants dying without leaving any records or through deliberate forgetfulnees. Indeed, as Issie pointed out to us, when referring to the radical Jewish Workers' Club, "to this day people are scared to be reminded that there was a Jewish Workers Club and they were members".[1] Issie was part of this history and he was partly a medium to discovering this "hidden past."

Through a biography of Issie we also saw a way of showing the involvement of ordinary people in political activities. Politics is not just about leaders and although Issie participated actively in the political movements in the 1930s and 40s he did not become a major political leader.

## ISSIE HEYMANN'S ROLE IN THE PRODUCTION OF THE BIOGRAPHY

It is almost inevitable that as the major source of information about his life Issie has played a major role in determining the shape and content of his biography. Issie is articulate and has a clear narrative style. This may impose a logic upon us as writers of the biography. On the other hand, it certainly is very helpful in trying to develop a coherent sense of his life.

Apart from the issue of the inherent logic of narrative which confronts oral historians, the production of this political biography has also been determined by the constantly changing relationship between the writers and Issie. In fact this relationship started developing before we actually went to interview Issie. Our knowledge of Issie had come through our friends who knew that he was from Lithuania, had been a member of the Communist Party and the Jewish Workers Club, had been imprisoned in the 60s and was a listed person. An initial feeling on our behalf that some of his views may accord with our own made us aware of fears that he may have surrounding the security of the information and its political sensitivity in relation to the Communist Party. When we met Issie to set up the interviews we were very open, we explained to him our reasons for documenting his life and asked permission to use a tape recorder. Furthermore we committed ourselves not to using any of the information without his prior consent and to store the tapes in a safe place where they were not available for use by others unless he gave permission.

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1. I H, 6/12/87.

Once the interviews started it became apparent to us that Issie was committed to the ideals of the Party. In fact, as a participant in the Party he felt that it was important that he "should tell his story so that you can learn or his followers can learn from what he has to say ". [1] The converse of this was that he did not want to undermine the ideals of the Party in any way. While we might not have agreed totally with Issie's views, our sympathies and, even at this stage, our developing rapport made us want him to become a more active participant in whatever we produced. At Issie's request the first two interviews were transcribed as quickly as possible and copies were given to him to possibly read, consider and use for future reference.

It was only after the initial interviews that a closer relationship developed between Issie and ourselves. Besides the days when we interviewed Issie we paid him regular visits, often talking about contemporary political issues such as perestroika, the role of trade unions in South Africa, and the threat of the far right. We were invited to and participated actively in Mayday and New Year parties which were held at his house. Over the past few years Issie has spent a lot of time writing. After a discussion with Issie on the need for a workshop on prison literature, Colin approached a member of the Congress of South African Writers and such a group was established. Some of Issie's work on prison literature was used in the workshops. He also wrote the first part of his autobiography and passed it onto Leslie for comments and criticisms. We have been with Issie to Geduld extension, near Springs, to try and locate the area in which he worked as a concession store assistant in the early 1930s. As we write this paper Issie is very ill and Colin visits him regularly. On Issie's request, Colin is recording stories about his life.

In practice what were the implication of this close relationship with Issie for the production of a political biography? Issie, for instance, had began telling us about an issue relating to political organisation in the 1950s in an interview. Later he requested that we switch off the tape recorder, with which we complied. This was an indication to us that he regarded this information as politically sensitive, particularly in relation to his own political position. When writing up the biography how were we to deal with this information?

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1. IH,1/3/87.

In trying to find an answer to this question we looked at a similar issue which confronted Eddie Roux when he wrote his famous biography of the trade unionist, early Communist Party member, and a victim of Party purges, S P Bunting. Writing on the book had started in 1936, shortly after Bunting's death and Roux's leaving the Party. [1] Roux had worked closely with Bunting in the Party for many years and regarded him as a close friend.[2] According to Eddie Roux's wife Win, this close friendship and Eddie's intimate knowledge of Bunting's political activities made it "clear that no one was in a better position than Roux to tell the story of Bunting's life".[3]

Roux's research for the book initially involved his own personal recollections of Bunting's life of the twenty years he had known him up until his death. For information on the earlier period of Bunting's life, between 1873 and 1916, Roux either spoke to or corresponded with the Bunting family, Labour Party members and a S A Rochlin who "had preserved an exhaustive collection of political records."[4] He also delved into the newspaper files of The International and Umsebenzi.[5]

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1. At the Congress of the South African Communist Party in 1989 S P Bunting was re-instated as a member of the Party.

2. Eddie and Win Roux, Rebel Pity: The Life of Eddie Roux, Rex Collings, London (1970), pp 149-50, 166-9.

3. Eddie and Win Roux, Rebel Pity, p167

4. Eddie and Win Roux, Rebel Pity, p 166.

5. Eddie and Win Roux, Rebel Pity, p166.

Once Roux had completed the manuscript he sent it out to the Bunting family and others who had known Bunting, including members of the Party. One of the people who received the manuscript, a Communist Party member S Buirski, inferred that Roux wanted "to hear the opinions of the late comrade's family and collaborators before the manuscript goes to print".[1]

By and large their response to the manuscript was that it should either be changed or not published at all.[2] The objections were twofold: to the way that Sidney's character was represented and "with regard to the Communist International and its role in South African affairs".[3] Some members of the Party felt that the book "couldn't be printed as it stands" and Rebecca Bunting, Sidney's wife, felt that the material Roux had collected was useful and asked for "the chance to rearrange it".[4]

It seems that Roux did take some cognissance of the comments made on the manuscript. He re-wrote a controversial paragraph on the trade unionist Bill Andrews and he included a preface stating the Bunting family's objection to the book. "Mrs Bunting...does not agree with much that I have written both as to the character of her husband and with regard to the Communist International and its role in South African affairs".[5]

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1. S Buirski, Comments on manuscript,n.d, Bunting Papers, Historical papers Section, University of the Witwatersrand library (hereafter HPS), A949

2. R Bunting to E Roux, 30 May 1943; B Bunting to E Roux, 30 May 1943; R Bunting to E Roux, 9 August 1943; S Buirski, Comments on manuscript for Bunting family,n.d.; A H Bunting to E Roux, 31 December 1943, HPS, A949.

3. E Roux, S P Bunting: A Political Biography, published by E Roux, Johannesburg (1944), preface.

4. R Bunting to E Roux, 30 May 1943, HPS, A949

5. E Roux, S P Bunting, Preface; E Roux to R Bunting, 26 August 1943, HPS, A949.

On the whole, however, Roux, decided to go ahead with the publication of the book and not to re-write it in a manner that no one would be offended, as he claimed this would be impossible. He stated that there were places "where I feel that I must be allowed to have my own way".[1] Roux insisted that he had to include his own opinion on the foreign policy of the Communist International, a telegram from Moscow closing down the League of African Rights, and a description of Albert Nzula's death in Moscow due to his alcoholism.[2] The book was published in 1944, largely at Roux's own expense.[3]

Like Eddie Roux we had a very close relationship to the subject and the subject's family. But, Roux's main aim was to promote a specific political idea: to show the way for "true revolutionaries... on how NOT to conduct political affairs".[4] By and large, he thus ignored the criticisms. Roux's biography is in large part an expose, by a dissilusioned Party member, of the Party's arrogance and its blind adherence to the line from Moscow. Interestingly, the biography has been used extensively and rather uncritically by academics writing on the early history of the Communist Party.[5]

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1. E Roux to R Bunting, 26 August 1943, HPS, A949.

2. E Roux to R Bunting, 26 August 1943, HPS, A949; E Roux, S P Bunting, p 143 and the preface; In a recent article by Paul Trewhela , "The Death of Albert Nzula and the Silence of George Padmore", Searchlight South Africa, vol 1, no 1, 1988, it has been noted that the death of Albert Nzula is a matter of extreme controversy. He suggests that Nzula was a victim of Stalin's purges.

3. E Roux to Issy?, 30 October 1943, HPS, A949.

4. E Roux, S P Bunting, preface. Emphasis in original.

5.See, for example, L Witz, "A Case of Schizophrenia: The Rise and Fall of the Independent Labour Party" and M Nicol, "'Joh'burg Hotheads' and the 'Gullible Children of Cape Town': The Transvaal Garment Workers Union's Assault on Wages in the Cape Town Clothing Industry, 1930-1931", both in B Bozzoli (ed), Class, Community and Conflict, Ravan Press, Johannesburg (1987)

Unlike Roux we are attempting to write a biography of a political activist within an historical context in order to try and come to a clearer understanding of why decisions were made. It is the nature of the political biography we are attempting to write and our relationship with Issie that seems to place us in a position of making the subject, and perhaps his family, more active participants in the production of the biography.

What did "more active participation by the subject" mean in terms of issues which Issie clearly saw as politically sensitive? At the time when Issie requested us to switch off the tape recorder he was telling us about the progressive serviceman's organisation, the Springbok Legion. Issie had joined the Legion while in the airforce in Egypt during the Second World War. According to Issie, within a few months he had the virtually the entire squadron organised into the Legion,[1] with Jack Curtis as secretary of the branch. The Sprinbok Legion was a major part of Issie's life in the war years and after the war ended he tried his utmost to keeping it alive. But in the post-war political environment this proved to be a difficult task. In the atmosphere of the cold war many whites lost their sympathy towards the Party. The coming to power of the Nationalists in 1948 instilled a great deal of fear among white opposition groupings and book burning took place on a large scale in the northern suburubs of Johannesburg. The Springbok Legion lost members as people were more interested in looking for work than involving themselves in Legion activities.

The changing political environment among anti-apartheid forces within South Africa also led to the demise of the Springbok Legion. The African National Congress was emerging as a strong, militant organisation and the Communist Party was starting to give it its fullest support. The role of the Springbok Legion in this alignment of forces thus came to be questioned.

In our interviews with Issie he has clearly stated his opinions on the events which followed in relation to the Springbok Legion. We were aware that for him these opinions were politically sensitive. As writers of the biography we also felt that though the information was controversial it was important as it pertained to the involvement of whites in progressive organisations and the debates surrounding the nature of that involvement. Therefore we first wrote about these events and wanted to show it to him for his comments. In the light of the relationship we had developed with Issie we had decided to give considerable weighting to his opinion.

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1.IH, 1/3/87.

Before we could show him this part of the biography Issie fell ill and was unable to offer any comments. But he felt that he could trust us enough to allow us to use our own discretion. While this may be indicative of the rapport we had established with Issie we also felt that it placed a greater onus on us to be responsible towards his sensitivities. It also raised the question for us to what extent our responsibility extended to different members of Issie's family, an issue we have not as yet thought through. This, coupled with Issie's illness and a need for far more research on the demise of the Sprinbok Legion and the formation of Congress of Democrats, has led us to the decision to exclude the information at this stage.

The question as to what say the subject of a biography should have in the production of the work does not have a single, definitive, static answer. As in the case of our research on the biography of Issie Heymann it is largely determined by our changing relationship with the subject in the process of researching and writing. We decided to actively involve Issie in the production of the biography. This, and the nature of the poltical biography we are attempting to produce, has resulted in extensive deliberation over the selection of information. Ultimately, it is up to us, as producers of the biography, to make the final decisions.

CONSULTING WITH POLITICAL ORGANISATIONS

This still left us with the question as to what role, if any, political organisations should have in the production of the biography. The question is important for us because, although we are not writing a biography promoting a single political idea or organisation, we feel that organisations and their members can usefully engage in the issues and debates which we hope to raise through the biography.

Eddie Roux's biography of S P Bunting, which was promoting a single political idea, came under severe attack from Party members. They felt that Roux was not acting in the interests of the Party by publishing information about the domination of the Party by Comintern . "Although we might have disagreed with the Comintern and the party we have never exposed this to the public. Why should we do so now? Who will benefit by it?", asked Rebecca Bunting. [1] Buirski, another Party member, was particulary anxious about the image of the Party that Roux's book would create. "I can imagine the book reviews of the bourgeois press with headlines 'Ex-Communist leader denounces CP', 'Once Rand deportee reveals secrets of communist conspiracy'."[2] He maintained that "The whole work breathes hatred against the Party nationally and internationally". [3] Like Rebecca Bunting he also felt that it was an inappropriate time to publish this information. "When the old wounds are getting healed, when one expelled member after another... is coming back to the party, at a time when we all agree to close the book on past tragedies the writer finds it necessary to open up old quarrels...."[4]

Although Roux, at the time when he wrote the biography, was not a Party member, he maintained that the "Communist Party in South Africa is still the only political organisation of any consequence that fights...for the political, social and economic emancipation of all the people in South Africa".[5] His views, however, were not in accord with the dominant Party position at the time. He used the biography to promote his views, which included many negative criticisms of the Party, which he felt would further the long-term interests of the Party and the liberation struggle in South Africa. It would seem that perhaps this was one of the reasons why he sought the opinions of members of the Party.

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1. R Bunting to E Roux, 30 May 1943, HPS, A949

2. Buirski comments on manuscript, n.d., HPS, A949.

3. S Buirski, comments on manuscript, n.d., HPS, A949.

4. Buirski comments on manuscript, HPS, A949.

5. E Roux, S P Bunting, preface.

In seeking opinions of members of political organisations we, unlike Roux, are not attempting to promote a single political idea. We are not in any way attempting to prescribe to them policies which they should or should not adopt. The views of these individuals are important for us in terms of whether they think the issues and debates which we raise could be of use to members of their organisation. They could also raise criticisms on style, language, content, sources and provide pointers as to the direction of the biography. Like any other comments and criticisms we receive on the biography, they will be considered and acted upon or discarded. It is thus not our intent to approach organisations to get their official stamp of approval.

## THE IMPLICATIONS FOR ACADEMIC RIGOUR

What are the implications of consulting with members of political organisations and the more active participation of the subject in the production process for the academic rigour of the biography? In terms of the former this question is largely insignificant. We are not writing the biography for a single political organisation, and the comments which we receive will be regarded along with other opinions which we seek. The selection and representation of information will not, in the last instance, be determined by organisations and their members, but by us with our own ideas and assumptions.

The more active participation of the subject in the type of political biography we are attempting to produce can have more serious implications for academic rigour. It can lead to, as is the case in this paper, of the deliberate exclusion of information. But all historians do select information, whether consciously or unconsciously. By openly presenting the process of the production of history we are attempting to consciously show how we are selecting and representing information. Indeed it might be a step forward for academic rigour as it provides a way for historians to critically examine their own assumptions. Moreover, for the reader it lifts the veil of the mystique surrounding the "objectivity of history", and perhaps provides a starting point for them to become active participants in the production of history.