

WITH GANDHI IN SOUTH AFRICA: SONJA SCHLESIN

*

Harriet Feinberg

Here's a question you've probably never contemplated: What did Gandhi think about Yiddish? The answer, which casts light on the complex relations between Jews and other groups in pre-World War I South Africa, is my prelude to Sonja Schlesin and her extraordinary eight years with Gandhi.

Gandhi did think about Yiddish because South African Jews campaigned to categorize Yiddish as a European language so as to differentiate Yiddish-speaking Jewish immigrants from those who were Indian or Chinese.

This campaign arose because the white population was looking for a bureaucratic way to restrict Indian and Chinese immigration that would not be racist on its face. In 1902, the Cape Parliament devised and passed an immigration law stating that immigrants had to be able to fill out an application in a European language.¹ Some in the Jewish community were concerned that Yiddish, although structurally a European language, appeared somewhat suspect because it is written in the Hebrew alphabet and read from right to left, and hence might be classified as non-European and used by those who disliked Jews to restrict Jewish immigration. They launched and, in 1906, won a campaign to have Yiddish officially designated as a European language; this proviso exempted Jewish immigrants, the majority of whom were Yiddish-speaking Jews from Lithuania, from possible exclusion.²

A major campaigner was the lawyer Morris Alexander. He and his wife Ruth Schechter Alexander, daughter of Solomon Schechter,

were both staunch Gandhi supporters; Gandhi even stayed at their Cape Town home on his very last night in South Africa before embarking for India.³

Yet Morris Alexander fought with all his lawyer's skills to get Yiddish specifically included in the bill that stated that immigrants had to write an application in a European language. As a white European, he could advocate for the rights of Indians but resist any law that *classified* Jews with Indians and Chinese. That was a 'no-no'. This double advocacy coexisted in the same person. He was indeed a 'Jew in the crosshairs.'

Gandhi felt that the effort to declare Yiddish European was disingenuous. He first called attention to the question in June 1903 in his weekly newspaper *Indian Opinion* in a short piece interestingly entitled 'Is Yiddish an Eastern Language?'⁴ His comments in 1906 on the Jewish success in designating Yiddish a European language were bittersweet⁵; subsequent issues of *Indian Opinion* dealt with the issue in various ways, which included printing the texts of the relevant legal passages.⁶

In 1909, still musing about these matters, Gandhi invoked his ace in the hole: the Sassoons. About Sir Edward Sassoon, who at that time sat in the House of Commons, he wrote "his grandparents lived in Bagdad and Bombay, wore Asiatic costumes, and were never regarded in any other light than as Asiatics."⁷ Yiddish might indeed be a European language, but Gandhi *knew*, not from reading it in a book but from his life, that not all Jews were white Europeans. Indeed, he knew about the Sassoons long before he met the Litvaks of South Africa. Gandhi thought of the Jews as bridging East and West. My interpretation from the tone of these writings is that maybe he felt rather disappointed, maybe exasperated, maybe resentful, that the Jewish communal leaders, rather than join with the Indians and Chinese to oppose this discriminatory legislation, instead worked to exempt Jewish immigrants from it. Individual Jews, especially the lawyer Henry Polak and the architect Hermann Kallenbach were among Gandhi's closest friends and supporters, but the Jewish

Harriet Feinberg's interest is in international feminism in the pre-World War I years, and particularly in activist Jewish women. She first came across Sonja Schlesin while researching the three months that international suffrage leaders Aletta Jacobs and Carrie Chapman Catt spent in South Africa in 1911 encouraging women to organize. This article is an adaptation of a talk given at the Association for Jewish Studies conference in December 2106 as part of a panel entitled "Jews in the Crosshairs of Empire: Between Colonial Privilege and Anticolonial Revolt".

establishment of his day backed off from any alliance.

With that prelude the curtain goes up on Sonja Schlesin (1888-1956), the daughter of Lithuanian Jewish immigrants,⁸ who leaped over all these distinctions and was one of the very few whites of that era who lived a multiracial life, including not only protests and meetings but friendships, work, and fun. Besides her closeness with the Indian immigrant community, I discovered that she had some social relationships with black Africans. That was even more unusual.

For eight years - from the time she was eighteen until she was twenty-six - Schlesin was immersed in Gandhi's circle and made an exceptional contribution to his efforts in South Africa. But after he returned to India in 1914, her life changed completely. He became 'Mahatma Gandhi' of worldwide fame while she sank into obscurity, except among Gandhi scholars. I hope to bring her back into the light.

Young Sonja Schlesin was recommended to Gandhi, who needed a new secretary for his Johannesburg law office, by his very close Jewish friend, Hermann Kallenbach.⁹ She could take shorthand with lightning speed and soon moved into ever larger roles, embracing and participating in his movement of nonviolent resistance.



Sonja Schlesin with M K Gandhi and Hermann Kallenbach, 2013

During Sonja's years with Gandhi he led many protests against injustices affecting Indian immigrants, leading up to the huge marches and protests of 1913 when he and many others practicing *satyagraha*¹⁰ went to prison. Providing, even in condensed form, an account of the tumultuous events of that period is beyond the scope of this article. Instead, I prefer to present six vignettes of Sonja, three of public protest and engagement with the injustices of the time, and three 'backstage' moments portrayed in private letters.

On to the first vignette: Sonja Schlesin prepared a stirring speech for a rally of over 2500 Indians and their supporters

on New Year's Day, 1908, at the Hamidia Mosque in Fordsburg, Johannesburg, to protest discriminatory legislation. Gandhi delivered the speech for her. Here are a few lines: "But I implore you not to flinch from the hardships which now confront you, not to falter at the shoals ahead Let me remind you of a similar crusade now being waged by my sisters in England. I refer to the suffragettes. For the sake of a principle they are prepared to lose their all, to brave innumerable trials ... If delicately nurtured women can do this, will hardy men, inured to toil, do less?"¹¹ She was nineteen years old when she wrote that.

The second vignette comes from the memoir of Gandhi's great-nephew Prabhudas Gandhi, who got to know Sonja when he was twelve and living at Phoenix, an interracial, interfaith community Gandhi established in the countryside outside Durban.¹² The community had a school. Sonja spent considerable time there teaching and helping out when she wasn't managing Gandhi's Johannesburg law office.

"About a dozen of us from Phoenix school were walking to Durban. We reached the tramlines after we had covered 8 out of the 12 miles distance. Miss Schlesin was chaperoning us. She was an exceptionally courageous, fair-minded and intelligent person. It was because of her that the train conductor was unable to manhandle us. I remember that Ramdas Kaka was greatly hurt at the insulting manner of the whites and it was with difficulty that Miss Schlesin was able to pacify us".¹³

So here is Sonja first walking eight miles with a group of Indian teenagers, probably all boys. Then, when they board the tram to travel the rest of the distance, she seeks simultaneously to keep the conductor from roughing up the students while keeping the latter from shouting angry remarks at the conductor and the white passengers. All this by a girl still in her early twenties.

The third vignette is a letter Sonja wrote in 1912 to a railway official after receiving a written reprimand for refusing a train conductor's request that she move to a 'white' car. At the time of that request, she was with a group of Indian women en route to a meeting. An exchange of letters ensued, which Gandhi published in *Indian Opinion*. In the last of her three replies to the official's three reprimands she wrote, "My work throws me greatly with non-European people, and I am bound to state that I shall be obliged to disregard requests to separate from friends with whom I may be traveling ... I trust, therefore, that you will be good enough to issue instructions that there shall be no interference in cases such as mine."¹⁴

In all three of these vignettes - the speech at the Hamadia mosque, the scene on the tram to Durban, and the letter to the railway official - we see a young woman who is committed, completely determined, and prepared to speak out where necessary. Gandhi recalled years later that she had "a character as clear as crystal and courage that would shame a warrior".¹⁵



Gandhi flanked by Hermann Kallenbach and Sonia Schlesin, photographed shortly after Gandhi's arrest on 6 November 1913

Now we'll go backstage for three more glimpses of Sonja. These are from the letters of Betty Molteno, a white liberal from a prominent South African family.¹⁶ Whenever she and her life partner Alice Greene were separated, Betty wrote to Alice almost daily. Fortunately for historians, and very fortunately for me, a selection of Betty Molteno's hard-to-decipher handwritten letters from November 1913 to January 1914 - the time of the great *satyagraha* - have recently been made accessible by a relative, Catherine Corder.¹⁷

The several glimpses of Sonia Schlesin in these letters are vivid and revealing.

Molteno, who was in her sixties in 1913, admired and supported Gandhi, and during that crucial period spent time at Phoenix.¹⁸ She spent even more time staying at another community she embraced which was only two miles away: Ohlange, the first residential school for African students, established by the noted African educator, minister and ANC founder John Dube.¹⁹ Much scholarly ink has been spilled over the somewhat prickly relationship between Gandhi and Dube, but for the young people in both institutions, walking back and forth the two miles was easy and not unusual.

Here's the first of three vignettes from

Betty Molteno's letters: "Last night - just as I was sitting down to supper with Dube and his wife, Miss West and Miss Schlesin appeared and remained a good while - It was a moonlight night [sic] - They came alone bringing a lantern with them - Presently Miss Blackburn appeared and later she, Miss West and Miss S went to Charles Dube's cottage".²⁰

You don't just drop in at dinner time and stay a few hours unless you feel comfortable with your hosts and have visited several times before. The 'Miss Blackburn' Betty Molteno mentions was an African-American teacher at Ohlange with whom she writes elsewhere that Sonja Schlesin had an intense friendship.²¹ So we see three women: Sonja, Miss West, who is a white friend from Phoenix, and Miss Blackburn, her black friend from Ohlange - going off all together to the cottage of John Dube's brother, Charles.

A second glimpse comes in a letter of 14 December, 1913. Betty Molteno is in Johannesburg looking for John Dube and bringing a handwritten poem she has written about Ohlange for him to read. She writes to Alice that she went to the office of Rustumjee,²² "to find not him but Miss Schlesin - Down we sit in the little bureau and I dictate 'Ohlange Heights' and the clever girl's fingers play upon the stops [word unclear] and in no time the poem is typed - So rapid has she been that I take courage to ask her to type 'Phoenix' and soon that is also typed in purple ink - I depart."²³

This anecdote portrays Sonja as a 'go to' person. I picture Betty seeing her and thinking, 'Aha! Sonja could type this.' She does, at amazing speed. Then 'Could you perhaps type something else?' Of course. Sonja whips off typing two poems from dictation in no time in someone else's office when requested by someone who is not her employer.

One more letter of 12 January 1914 takes us behind the scenes to the preparation of flower garlands for some Muslim women who had been imprisoned during the great *satyagraha* and are about to be released. "I noticed that several bunches of cut flowers had been deposited upon the long table and I wondered what was to become of them. Finally Sonja Schlesin came in and Thambi Naidoo and the flowers I found were to make garlands for the Mohammedan ladies who are to return this afternoon [she reports on several conversations] Meanwhile S Schlesin went on ripping off with a great pair of garden shears head after head from the bunches of pink carnations that lay upon the table and a fine looking Indian who had come in called for needle and thread and

proceeded to make the garlands.”²⁴

I love this passage that pictures Sonya chopping off the stems while an Indian threads the pink blossoms into necklaces. She was at the heart of this massive movement, her role ranging from simple tasks like this to large-scale organization and management, and Gandhi did not hesitate to give her major responsibilities while he was in prison.

There are many tributes to her services by Gandhi and others, but I especially like this one from Gandhi biographer Ramachandra Guha: “The most steadfast woman supporter of the *satyagraha*, however, was Gandhi’s secretary, Sonja Schlesin. In times of peace, she dealt patiently - not to say heroically - with her employer’s indecipherable scrawl, his eccentric work and eating habits, and his many and various clients. In times of strife she was called upon to urge and mobilize the women” - and so on for two pages.²⁵

After Gandhi returned to India in 1914, Sonja Schlesin’s life changed completely. She went back to school, obtained a BA and MA from the University of the Witwatersrand and became a high school Latin teacher in Krugersdorp, a mining town near Johannesburg. There she remained, living alone and in later years considered eccentric, the rest of her life. She wrote no memoir and amazingly, even after Gandhi became world famous no one ever came to interview her about her years with him or did an oral history. She periodically corresponded with Gandhi but they never saw one another again.²⁶ No one will ever know what went on with her inwardly after her whole enveloping vibrant community essentially dissolved.²⁷ Still, for those eight glorious years I think she deserves a place in the pantheon of Jewish women who made a difference in the world.



Sonja Schlesin as a school teacher in

Krugersdorp

I’ll conclude with a mystery. I first learned of Sonja’s existence from a passage in the diary of American suffrage activist Carrie Chapman Catt, who spent three months in South Africa in 1911. In her account of the day she met Gandhi, she described his secretary as a ‘Russian Jewess.’ Catt had been in Johannesburg only two days. So who had already characterized Sonja to her that way? I’ll probably never know, but to me it shows that although Sonja had left traditional Judaism and found a totally different community, to Catt’s white Christian liberal supporters she was still not quite ‘one of us’, still in her own way a “Jew in the crosshairs”.

Acknowledgements

I could not have prepared this paper without the earlier research of Gandhi scholar George Paxton. He searched for all available documents and primary sources concerning Sonja Schlesin, and wrote his short biography at a time when he could still question some people who had known her in her later years. He has been very encouraging and helpful.

I am also very grateful for the generously shared bibliographical suggestions of Peter Limb, and for the advice and support of Veronica Belling, Karen Harris, Heather Hughes, and Thomas Weber.

ADDITIONAL READING

Belling, Veronica, “Recovering the Lives of South African Jewish Women during the Migration Years, c1880-1939. Doctoral dissertation in the Department of Historical Studies, Faculty of Humanities, University of Cape Town, 2013.

Chatterjee, Margaret, *Gandhi and His Jewish Friends*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1992.

Gandhi, M.K. *Satyagraha in South Africa*, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad 1957

Harris, Karen L, “Gandhi, the Chinese and Passive Resistance,” in *Gandhi and South Africa: Principles and Politics*, eds. Judith M. Brown and Martin Prozesky, New York., St. Martin’s Press, 1996, 69-94.

Hirson, Baruch, *The Cape Town Intellectuals: Ruth Schechter and her Circle*. Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University Press, 2001.

Hofmeyr, Isabel. *Gandhi’s Printing Press: Experiments in Slow Reading*, Harvard University Press, 2013.

Itzkin, Eric, *Gandhi’s Johannesburg: Birthplace of Satyagraha*, Witwatersrand University Press, Johannesburg, 2000.

Lev, Shimon. *Soulmates: The Story of*

Mahatma Gandhi and Hermann Kallenbach. Delhi, Orient Blackswan, 2012.

"Sonja Schlesin 1921-43", pp. 16-17 of Chapter Five in a history of Krugersdorp High School compiled by Sharon Farrell

NOTES

- 1 "Prohibited immigrants shall mean and include any person who when asked to do so by any duly authorized officer shall be unable through deficient education to himself to write out and sign in the characters of any European language an application to the satisfaction of the Minister" (Act 47 of 1902). Cape Town was the main port of entry for immigrants.
- 2 Alexander, Enid. *Morris Alexander: A Biography*, Juta, Cape Town and Johannesburg, 1953, pp25-36. The Immigration Act of 1906 (Act 30) contained a proviso to section 26: "for the purpose of this subsection Yiddish shall be accepted as a European language." Between 1902 and 1906 Jewish organizations pushed, on the whole successfully, for an informal exemption.
- 3 Morris Alexander's photo appears in the *Golden Number of "Indian Opinion" 1914: Souvenir of the Passive Resistance Movement in South Africa*. Facsimile edition, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, Africana Book Collectors, 1990 [hereafter *IO*], published to celebrate the successes of the 1913 *satyagraha* (roughly meaning "truth in a firm cause", as the Indian Passive Resistance Movement was known). The caption reads "the Jewish M.L.A. of the Castle division of Capetown, who has eloquently and at all times urged just treatment of Indians" This publication includes a number of group photos of historic interest and several cartoons; there are seven individual photos of Jews, including Sonja Schlesin, Henry Polak and Hermann Kallenbach.
- 4 He continues "This question is puzzling the Hebrew community of the Cape...", *IO* 11 June, 1903, p3.
- 5 Entitled "Gratitude for Privileges" the text reads: "A letter has been addressed, on behalf of the Jewish community of Capetown, to a prominent Jewish member of the Cape Assembly, [Morris Alexander] expressing gratitude for his actions in obtaining the recognition by the House of Assembly, by a unanimous vote, of Yiddish as a European language; in connection with the administration of the Immigration Act. We are very glad that the Jewish community should have been freed from a galling restriction. But we take leave to point out that the Cape House of Assembly, by its actions, has opened wide the door to the immigration of an alien population, whereas, by its non-recognition of the great Indian languages....the Cape has ruled out subjects ... who had, by the Queen's Proclamation, been promised equal liberties with their white fellow subjects." *IO*, 30 June, 1906.
- 6 Nine issues of *IO* between June 1906 and December 1907 mention the maneuvering about Yiddish in some way.
- 7 He further wrote: "But it is a little difficult to understand how our contemporary can fairly claim European origin for Jewish people. One flagrant case comes to mind ... of Sir Edward Sassoon, a descendent of a Beni-Israelite family hailing from Bombay ... Undoubtedly he would, according to the *Jewish Chronicle*, be entitled to describe himself as a European ... With all deference to the opinion of Mr De Waal, we cannot understand how a race of Asiatic origin, or almost pure blood, exclusive, and distinct, can claim to call itself European, whatever its length of residence in the Western continent." *IO*, 26 June, 1909, p274.
- 8 Sonja's parents were Isidor Schlesin and Helena Dorothy (Rosenberg) Schlesin ... Isidor was born in Plungian, Lithuania. At some point the Schlesins moved to Moscow, where Sonja was born on 6 June, 1888. When she was four, the family immigrated to South Africa, arriving in Cape Town in June 1892. See Paxton, George, *Sonja Schlesin, Gandhi's South African Secretary*, Glasgow, 2006, pp3-7.
- 9 Kallenbach was acquainted with Sonja and her family because relatives of her mother's came from the same Lithuanian town he did, Neustadt.
- 10 See note 3.
- 11 The text of the speech is in CWMG Vol 8:47 and also in Paxton, p10. Gandhi greatly admired the suffragettes but objected when they turned to violent tactics. I have read four explanations of why Sonja didn't deliver the speech herself: she was too shy; her father objected; Gandhi was sensitive to the religious scruples of the audience; he gave her speech in Gujarati.
- 12 Phoenix was first established in 1904 and gradually developed to include homes, a school, a clinic and the printing press that produced *Indian Opinion*. Gandhi's second cooperative colony, Tolstoy Farm, was established in 1910 near Johannesburg. Schlesin and another Jewish woman, Mrs. Vogt, hosted a lively picnic party there for several hundred Indian children, their families, and other guests. "A Great Day at Tolstoy Farm" (*IO*, 31 December, 1910, p1).
- 13 Prabhudas Gandhi, *My Childhood with Gandhi*, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1957, p104. Paxton quotes at length (pp23-5) from P. Gandhi's almost-reverent recollections about Schlesin's humor, teaching style, and independent nature.
- 14 Schlesin's three letters of 20 March, 21 April, and 9 May [from which this excerpt is taken] and the three letters of Assistant General Manager W.H. Bartlett are printed in *IO*, 31 August, 1912. White privilege does come into play as she is simply admonished while Gandhi years earlier was thrown off the train in Pietermaritzburg for refusing to leave the 'white' car.
- 15 Gandhi, MK, *An Autobiography: The Story of my Experiments with Truth*. Boston, Beacon Press, 1993, p209.
- 16 Elizabeth Molteno (1852-1927) was the oldest child of the Cape Colony's first Prime Minister, John Molteno, and grew up in a highly privileged environment. She was an ardent suffragist and feminist who supported African and Indian rights.
- 17 At this time Alice was in Cape Town while Betty had gone up to Natal where the action was. Selections from the letters are in Catherine Corder and Martin Plaut, 'Gandhi's Decisive South African 1913 Campaign: A Personal Perspective from the Letters of Betty Molteno', *South African Historical Journal*, 2013, 1-33.
- 18 Her first mention of Schlesin is in a passage reporting what she has found out during an evening visiting Phoenix: "All the big ones are in prison. Mr. Gandhi was first imprisoned at Dundee....Kallenbach and Polak are each at different prisons. Mrs Gandhi and her younger children