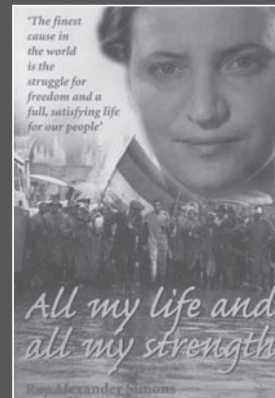


Review

All my life and all my strength

Ray Alexander Simons (STE, 2005), Reviewed by Jenny Schreiner



An intellectual, an activist, a feminist, a socialist – a central attribute of her career is that these identities have been inseparable. *All my life and all my strength*, the autobiography of Comrade Ray Alexander Simons is a testimony to a woman, a comrade and a mother with an inspiring level of dedication, unfailing energy and integrity. Her life story is so intertwined with the history of the progressive labour movement, the Communist Party, the liberation movement and the women's movement in this country that at times it is hard to believe that one woman could have done all that is recorded in the pages of this powerful book.

An intense read, the book, edited by Raymond Suttner, is a detailed history of the progressive labour movement in South Africa, in particular in the period until Comrade Ray went into exile with her comrade and husband Jack Simons. As I was reading it, I wished that as an industrial sociology lecturer I could have had access to such a vibrant account to share with my students. I also wondered how many industrial units of the SACP and branches of Cosatu unions could benefit from reading the book chapter by chapter and discussing her approach to organising workers; her approach to the administration of union business; her approach to

addressing the social and living conditions of the workers she was organising; and her ability to integrate the building of strong and accountable unions with the mobilising of workers around the objectives of the national liberation movement and international struggles for peace and socialism.

The book begins with her childhood in Latvia and her experiences there of anti-Semitism, of repression, of underground organising, of a thirst for education and a culture of avid reading which would resonate throughout her life. At the very young age of 15, she boarded a ship to South Africa and immediately showed a political sophistication way beyond her years in the manner in which she engaged with the workers' conditions and facilitated unionisation of workers in Cape Town. As reflected in the writing style of the book, throughout her long life, Comrade Ray was far more focused on the challenges of organising than on the ideological debates and dynamics within the organisations that constituted her political home. The book serves as a manual for anyone wanting to establish themselves as an organiser – be it for the unions, the SACP, the women's movement or the liberation movement. As she has chronicled the growth of the union movement, she has reflected on the principles that infused her work

and should infuse any progressive organisation:

- At all times the leadership were accountable to the members of the organisation and delegations involved both workers and leaders.
- As secretaries of the unions, she and her comrades pegged their salaries at no higher than the best paid worker in the factories they were organising. Elected leadership and paid functionary posts did not go hand in hand with material benefits.
- She was deeply committed to collective decision making and at times was bound by decisions that she felt should have been different, for example she strongly wanted to join the Defiance Campaign, but the workers instructed her not to as she would have been arrested and this would have impacted negatively on the organising work. She accepted this and even defended the position when the SACP general secretary put pressure on her to join the Campaign.
- Comrade Ray took a very strong stand on sexual harassment both within the factories where she organised and within organisations. Her commitment to women workers and comrades who had experienced sexual harassment or rape at the hands of foremen or male comrades is chronicled in the book. Many were the women who were strengthened by her personal support.

- Everyone who has ever interacted with Comrade Ray has experienced her empowerment of others. She was not one to monopolise positions and at all times trained those whom she was grooming to take up responsibilities in the organisation. This involved explicit preparation of comrades for particular responsibilities, but also involved the ongoing training and political education in all organisations that she was part of. In the unions where she was organising in the '40s and '50s Comrade Ray would ensure that workers were familiar with all the debates taking place in parliament, that they were lectured on union administration and that workers had a thorough understanding of the world we live in.

- Throughout the book, Comrade Ray's commitment to building non-racial unity in organisations is reflected. She fought vehemently against any racial segregation of workers, even when the law enforced it. She played a key role in the formation of the Federation of South African Women that united women across race and class. Her style of leadership in all organisations and communities resulted in her being accepted fully and without prejudice as a comrade and liberator of the South African people, and in particular of the African working class.

- Integrity in the affairs of the organisation was a principle on which Comrade Ray was unshakeable. When money was stolen from workers, the leadership was held to account in full view of the membership, apologies accepted, monies paid back and positions of leadership forfeited.

- Propaganda, both as calls for action and as part of political education, was a fundamental part of Comrade Ray's work. This she

enacted through selling workers' newspapers, writing for such newspapers, and inspiring all of us who avidly read the pages of *African Communist* during the years when the Party [SACP] was banned.

- Comrade Ray was also profoundly committed to well researched and accurate memoranda and submissions. Wherever she went she chronicled the conditions of the workers both at work and in the community, and utilised the skills of other Party members and intellectuals to portray the demands of the workers.

As I sit here on the eve of the celebration of the Constitution, and on the eve of the judgement in a high profile rape trial, and after weeks of the security workers' strike and all that has gone with it, Comrade Ray's book is a reminder of what being a Communist really is all about.

Comrade Ray has privileged us with personal experiences in this book. Experiences of her teenage love, of Comrade Jack's repeated proposals, of her marriage and the lifelong partnership with Comrade Jack, of her miscarriages, of her children's births and illnesses, of the pain of distance from her children in exile, of her friendships with people of rare stature, of the moments leading up to Comrade Jack's death. These very personal reflections reinforce the spirit of the poem that he gave her on her birthday in 1991, which says:

"Your birthdays... live on forever in the minds and hearts of all who love you and marvel at what you've done as a mother, granny, wife and comrade in the lifelong struggle for the rights of children, men and women who are poor and suffer under the yoke of private profit; who struggle to be free and equal

in the land of their birth. You, Ma-Ray, are the universal mother, giving aid and comfort to all who bear the burden of race oppressions, teaching them to organise and fight for justice, peace and liberty..."

There is one part of the book that I wished to learn more about. This was her years in exile and her work in guiding the underground and the mass democratic movement during this period. I was left with a feeling that I did not really know how much or what her interventions had been to lead us from afar. This section chronicles conferences, research and writings, and the amount of work that Comrade Ray put into this despite health concerns. But I wished for a better account of how Comrade Ray guided the building of the Party underground and the strengthening of the union and women's movement through the Party underground. Having benefited from such guidance and inspiration myself, I would have liked Comrade Ray to provide us with details, that is so little recorded, of the work of exile comrades in partnership with those in the underground at home.

In conclusion, this book is a powerful history of a most inspiring women leader.

Also, because of the contribution that Comrade Ray made to working class organisation in this country, is a powerful and personal account of union and Party history in South Africa. To return to the eulogy quoted in the opening of this review, I would amend it having now read the book to: "*An intellectual, an organiser, a unionist, a feminist, a communist, a wife and mother - the essence of our beloved Comrade Ray.*"



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