

Trotsky's Flocks

by [Jillian Becker](#) (August 2021)



The Conservationist Ball, William Kentridge, 1985

A denomination of Communism which most firmly sticks to Karl Marx's opinion that the urban working-class—the "proletariat" was his word for it—are the ideal leaders, rulers, dictators of *all humankind*, is Trotskyism.

Leon Trotsky—co-leader with Lenin and Stalin of the Bolshevik dictatorship over Soviet Russia in its early days—was born in Ukraine in 1879 and murdered by order of Stalin in Mexico City in 1940. Billions of words have been written about Trotskyism, but it can be fully expressed in just three: *Revolution everywhere forever.*

The actual exercise of power, the control of government, the dictating, would be done, Trotsky conceded, not by the whole perpetually revolutionist class, obviously, but by a "vanguard" of it—by which he meant himself, though he was not a proletarian but the son of a wealthy bourgeois businessman.

Sparse but passionate support for him spread in the West after his death. An assortment of Trotskyist groups appeared in Europe, America, and the British dominions. One group would break off from another, again and again, the way amoebas reproduce. Fine differences were cited. But there's nothing unusual in that. Where there is ideology, there is schism.

I had close encounters with two Trotskyist groups in South Africa. And I met the South African leader of another group in Britain.

To those who did not see that Communism of any shade was indefensible, a stronger case for it—at least for a proletarian revolution—could be made in South Africa than elsewhere in the Western world. South Africa was not a free society. Almost no Black could rise by his own efforts because the lid of apartheid kept the black population down as a permanent underclass. Yet Ted Grant left his native land and went to Britain to work for the "permanent revolution" of Trotsky's vision. He would have argued that it was unimportant where it was worked for, because in the event it would be global.

He was the brother of a close friend of mine, Zena Bowen, who owned and ran a nursery on some acres north of Johannesburg. It was an hospitable place, Pomona Nursery, fondly though inaccurately known among her numerous friends as "Zena's Farm", where everyone who knew Zena and her accountant husband, Ted Bowen, would go to be happy; a resort for the restoration of their souls, the delights of Zena's kitchen,

and—under arbors of jasmine, among glorious borders, or in the plain but extraordinarily comfortable one-story house—for gatherings of the most agreeable company to be found in the city. Their parties were legendary. On many a Saturday, or Sunday, or holiday, a piglet would be set a-roasting in the morning, turned slowly over a smoldering fire in the Bowens' garden by a mechanical spit (a device with a ratchet and weight that simply needed re-setting at intervals through the day), and in the evening, by lanternlight, dozens of happy guests would assemble on the patio and lawns to devour it. In the mid-distance, beyond a dreary wide stretch of bare veld, the innumerable fires of the black township, Alexandra, flamed upon the night. In those bad old days of apartheid, its residents had no electricity; all cooking and lighting had to be done with open fires. A pall of smoke would lie over the tin roofs from six o'clock onwards, but the prevailing winds did not bring it to the little paradise of Zena's Farm. In addition to her resident black servants, Zena employed day laborers from Alexandra. And many a wife from there with a child or two, many a friend, found sweet air, safety, and a good dinner with those who worked for Zena when they too sought sanctuary on her land.

No praise could be high enough for Zena. She was beautiful, warm, kind, joyful, and unstintingly generous. She too had considered herself a Trotskyist, having been convinced by a lodger in their house (as had her brother), that Trotsky knew the remedy for man's inhumanity to man. A remedy being urgently needed in South Africa, where white man was blatantly inhumane to black man, idealists would meet to talk about Trotsky's prescription. One of them was a landscape gardener named Raymond Lake. Zena married him, but when, through him, she discovered the joys of gardening, she lost interest in Trotsky. She and Raymond started Pomona Nursery together. After some years they divorced but remained partners and friends. (Raymond's second wife, Helena, was the widow of the delightful comic writer Herman Charles Bosman.)

By the time I met Zena in the early 1950s, her brother Ted had long been gone. I met him in London in 1961, where he led a group called the Militant Tendency–Trotskyist of course, and claiming unconvincingly as many as two hundred members. In his late forties he was scruffy and seedy in appearance but still as enthusiastic for perpetual revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat as he had been in his youth. He came to my house to fetch a gift sent to him by another sister of his, who lived an elegantly bourgeois life in Paris. Over a memorably excellent dinner in her apartment, she had told me that whenever her brother Ted came to visit her, she put all his clothes in an incinerator and had him dress in garments from her husband's wardrobe. She entrusted me with a parcel of new socks and his phone number. I invited him to lunch. He was keenly optimistic about the possibility of international revolution, but full of anxious uncertainty about his personal life. He had fallen in love with a woman who had recently joined his organization, but unfortunately so had most of the other members of the all-male committee. I remember him as a disheveled lovelorn middle-aged boy, confidently expecting a utopia, but a possibly lonely life in it. Lonely or not, he died of natural causes in England at the age of ninety-three.

I listened sympathetically to his love story, but not to his political opinions. I had grown impatient with Trotsky. I don't remember if I told this ardent disciple that shortly before leaving South Africa, I had firmly turned down an invitation—if that's what it could be called—to join a Trotskyist organization.

It was more a demand, an instruction, an order.

It came from a visitor who appeared in the garden of our thatched cottage on a bank of a narrow river in a northern suburb of Johannesburg, one Sunday afternoon in early 1960, while I and my husband and two little daughters were sitting round a tea table on the lawn. The visitor was Baruch Hirson,

a dark-haired bespectacled man with a limp and deformed fingers. He and his wife had occasionally visited us, but we hadn't seen him for two years or more. Now here he was again, alone and unexpected.

He joined us at the table and told us he had come to talk about a serious matter. The little girls fled to better entertainment. There had been enough talk, he said, among white liberals; nothing was ever achieved by mere talk to put an end to the oppression of the Blacks; the time had come for action. He and some other Trotskyists were forming a resistance movement. And they were going to use terrorism. Trotsky, who was, we must remember, a great humanitarian, had made it clear that it was moral and right to use terrorism in the great cause of proletarian revolution—which, in practice in South Africa, meant Black revolution. And while their intention was to harm things but not people, still, if some people, white or black, were incidentally harmed, that was a punishment Whites deserved for being oppressors and a price Blacks would be prepared to pay for their liberation. He was recruiting members, he said, so he was being utterly candid and truthful, laying it all out to everyone he approached, every carefully chosen likely candidate. Whoever joined must know the full extent of what they were committing themselves to. But there should be no hesitation about it. It was their duty to join.

Many years later, when I wrote about that afternoon's never-to-be-forgotten conversation in an article in the American magazine *Commentary* and it was reported in the Johannesburg *Sunday Times*, Hirson denied only one detail. Indignantly he informed the paper that he'd had no intention of recruiting me; he had been addressing his message only to my husband. But it was I, not my husband, who had answered him. I said that nothing justified terrorism. Upon which he had left in anger. And I was at least as angry as he was.

This is an aching, self-reproachful recollection. We

should have informed the police about Hirson's plan. But we didn't even think of it. It was an impossible thought in those times, to report a friend, even a distant sort of friend, *anyone at all*, for anti-apartheid activity to the apartheid regime's police.

Four years later, at four o'clock in the afternoon of July 24, 1964, a young white schoolteacher named John Harris, a member of Hirson's group which then called itself the African Resistance Movement (ARM), placed a bomb, packed in a valise with gasoline and explosive, on the floor of a Whites-only waiting room at the Johannesburg railway station. It exploded half an hour later. It blew the flesh off the limbs of an old woman who lived in unimaginable pain for a few hours before dying in hospital. It blew off half the face of a twelve-year-old girl who, even after enduring plastic surgery many times, so despaired of her looks that she lived as a recluse for the rest of her life. It burned a nine-year-old boy's head and arms. It set the clothes of a three-year-old girl on fire, and though her older brother had the presence of mind to tear them off her, she was so badly burnt she was hospitalized for months. In all, twenty-four people who had been sitting on the benches waiting for their train were harmed by the bomb. Twenty-three survived. Some never fully recovered.

John Harris was tried, found guilty of murder and hanged. Baruch Hirson was arrested with 28 other members of the (apparently all white) African Resistance Movement, tried and sentenced to prison for nine years. The organization dissolved. In 2011, seventeen years after the fall of the apartheid government (which owed nothing to the ARM), John Harris was honored among other terrorists as a hero in a solemn ceremony conducted by President Jacob Zuma.

On another day after the change from white rule to "democratic" rule, a gang of thugs crossed the veld from Alexandra Township—still a slum, but with electricity—to

Pomona Nursery. There they found Zena, then a very old woman, and savagely battered her. They looted the house of everything they could carry away and trashed what they couldn't. The Bowens sold the land, the business, the oasis of peace, the haven of friends and shelter of the oppressed, and moved into a flat where Zena faded away.

The third Trotskyist leader I knew was a poet named Vincent Swart. Long before he became a follower of the perpetual revolutionary and vanguard of the working class, he had stayed with my family for a while when I was a small child. At that time he had been engaged to marry a friend of my mother's, Eunice Black. He was club-footed – "like Lord Byron," the women said as they came and went.

One of his poems has been saved from oblivion by being anthologized in *A Little Treasury of Modern Poetry English and American*, published in London in 1947 (years after he had left us). There his name, E. V. Swart, is stacked in the Contents among the securely celebrated: W. B. Yeats, Rudyard Kipling, Emily Dickinson, Gerard Manley Hopkins, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, Dylan Thomas, Robert Frost . . .

E.V. Swart's poem, *Casey Jones*, is placed in the *Part II Light Verse* section.

It begins:

*Casey Jones has left today,
The decision was made in a desperate way,
Short as a wire and quick as a plane
And he isn't going to see any of you again.*

That last line annoys me because it doesn't scan.

The poem has a refrain at the end of each of its five verses:

There was no kind of sense in staying on

When the delight was gone.

Those two lines stuck in readers' minds. I was to hear them repeated now and then, for a time.

Other than that, I heard nothing of him after he left us until I was twenty, when I met him again through fellow university students. He had returned to Johannesburg after living in England for some years. He had married and divorced Eunice and married again. He and his second wife, Lillian, were Trotskyist revolutionaries. He distributed among select readers a Trotskyist magazine, published in Britain, for which he wrote copiously. It was called *Contemporary Issues: A Magazine for a Democracy of Content*.

Lillian was the daughter of a rich man. She inherited half his estate, his widow the other half.

Vincent and Lillian liked to say that they despised inherited money and had proved their ideological contempt by treating her father's patiently built up fortune in what they believed was an exemplary manner, by squandering it. They boasted, laughing, that they had "bought caviar by the bucketful and eaten it with tablespoons." When all the money was spent they came home—there being no kind of sense in staying on when the delight was gone—to live on an allowance from Lillian's mother.

Vincent had given up writing poetry. And, he said, he had persuaded other artists to give up practicing their art on becoming Trotskyists, because revolutionaries had to be single-minded.

He and Lillian organized an unrevealed number of Trotskyist cells, some white members being accepted on condition they subscribed to *Contemporary Issues*. I attended the meetings of a cell, naïvely curious to hear what Trotskyism was all about. I recall them now ruefully, with both amusement and abhorrence.

I don't remember if I subscribed to the magazine. (I have no copies now when they'd be useful for this essay.) Though I was still a student, I was married and expecting my first child, and I knitted little garments as I listened to what Trotsky had said, and what Vincent had written about what Trotsky had said. I remember only what was most often repeated: Stalin's "socialism in one country" was wrong, the revolution must be global; Stalin had betrayed the Bolsheviks; Trotsky was principled and it was important to be principled.

One of the cell members owned a pistol, and when the meeting was at his parents' house (and his parents out for the evening), he would use it in defense against mice. We could hear them scuttering invisibly overhead across the ornate pressed-tin ceiling. Every now and then as the tiny feet began a run, he would point the gun upwards and shoot. The running stopped and "Got him!" the gunner crowed. But after a short pause the scuttering always started again. Vincent or Lillian, I forget which, joked that these were the first shots of the permanent international proletarian revolution.

Vincent's organization became notorious for just one political action: a bus-riders' strike. Fleets of green buses ferried multitudes of black workers from Alexandra township some ten miles north of the city into the center, from where they dispersed to their jobs, and at the end of the working day, bore them back again to the township to light their fires for their evening meal. In 1957, the bus company raised the fare by a penny a ride – amounting to a shilling a week – which made the meals less affordable. Vincent's Trotskyists moved among the workers in the township, called meetings, organized protest gatherings which black members addressed to persuade the commuters that if they boycotted the buses the fare would go down again. The workers wanted to believe the speakers, so people rose in their dark houses and shanties in the small hours of the morning and walked—many of the men shod in sandals made at home from old tires—ten miles to get to

work on time, and at the end of the working day they walked ten miles back. They did it six days a week for three months. Finally, the bus company got employers to pay the extra charge and the exhausted black workers gave up the boycott and rode to and from work again. The settlement broke the hearts of Vincent and Lillian. "If they'd only stuck it out a little longer, we could have made a revolution," Vincent lamented.

To help him and Lillian become independent—whether at their wish or not I don't know—her mother bought them a smallholding with a low drab house on it a few miles east of Johannesburg, and a used van, and a flock of a dozen or so chickens. They invited me to visit them. As I walked from my car to their door, I saw the chickens lying dead in a wire enclosure. The first thing I did was ask them what had happened to their birds. They were both more than a little tipsy, and as Lillian poured me a mug of very rough brandy she told me, laughing, that it was a common thing for chickens to get a disease and "just keel over and turn their toes up to heaven." They plainly felt the loss didn't matter, though Vincent did say in a momentarily responsible tone that he "must get round to hiring a boy" (a black man) to bury the corpses.

The last I heard of Vincent was that he had died in a cheap hotel room, in the throes of a terrible bout of delirium tremens. By then Lillian had divorced him, there being no kind of sense in staying on when the delight was gone.

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Jillian Becker writes both fiction and non-fiction. Her first novel, *The Keep*, is now a Penguin Modern Classic. Her best known work of non-fiction is *Hitler's Children: The Story of the Baader-Meinhof Terrorist Gang*, an international best-seller and Newsweek (Europe) Book of the Year 1977. She was Director of the London-based Institute for the Study of Terrorism 1985-1990, and on the subject of terrorism contributed to TV and radio current affairs programs in Britain, the US, Canada, and Germany. Among her published studies of terrorism is *The PLO: the Rise and Fall of the Palestine Liberation Organization*. Her articles on various subjects have been published in newspapers and periodicals on both sides of the Atlantic, among them *Commentary*, *The New Criterion*, *The Wall Street Journal* (Europe), *Encounter*, *The Times* (UK), *The Telegraph Magazine*, and *Standpoint*. She was born in South Africa but made her home in London. All her early books were banned or embargoed in the land of her birth while it was under an all-white government. In 2007 she moved to California to be near two of her three daughters and four of her six grandchildren. Her website is www.theatheistconservative.com.

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