Story of idealism and courage

L. Carneson, ***Red in the Rainbow: The Life and Times of Fred and Sarah Carneson***

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Fred and Sarah Carneson were prominent anti-apartheid activists from the late 1940s until the collapse of the apartheid state in 1990. They were also dedicated communists and fervently believed that international communism would unite the human race and build an equal, just and peaceful society for everyone. They were prepared to sacrifice themselves for this cause. As a result they did not hesitate to confront the might of the apartheid state. The title of the book reflects their political affiliation. Nelson Mandela referred to the new South Africa as the "rainbow nation" and for Lynn Carneson, her parents and fellow communists became the "red" in this rainbow, the colour symbolising communism.

Sarah Carneson (née Rubin) was born in Johannesburg in 1916, the child of Jewish parents who had fled tsarist Russia to escape anti-Semitism. Her parents were committed Marxist trade unionists and were founding members of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA). At a young age Sarah joined the CPSA. Fred was born in 1920 as the son of a railway worker in Cape Town and grew up in a large impoverished family. His decision to become a communist was, in contrast to Sarah, not an instinctive one because his father hated Stalin. Fred's conversion to communism began when he had to leave school at the age of fourteen to contribute to the family income. However, he never stopped learning. Through his insatiable reading he was introduced to Marxism

and joined the CPSA by the late 1930s. With the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, Fred immediately joined the army to fight fascism and saw combat duty in North Africa and Italy. Fred and Sarah, who had met in 1938, were married in 1943.

After demobilisation in 1945, Fred became the general secretary of the CPSA in the Western Cape. A year later he was a member of the party's Central Committee. He was also the manager, fund-raiser and occasional editor of the party's mouthpiece, the *Guardian*. The CPSA was a vehement critic of the Smuts government's segregationist policies, but had the protection of the rule of law. With the National Party (NP) in power after 1948, communists were at the mercy of the apartheid state in terms of the draconian Suppression of Communism Act of 1950 which declared the CPSA an illegal organisation. This meant that although Fred was elected with a large majority by the blacks of the Western Cape in terms of the Native Representatives Act of 1936 as their representative in the Cape Provincial Council in 1949, he was stripped of his seat in 1952. In 1953, Fred and Sarah were banned, prohibiting them from being members of a long list of organisations. The banning was extended in 1954, preventing them from being part of a gathering of more than two people while they were confined to a small part of Cape Town. The Carnesons' freedom was restricted without any recourse to the legal process. In 1956 Fred eventually had his day in court when as one of the accused in the Treason Trial, he was acquitted.

Sarah experienced prison when she was incarcerated in Roeland Street Prison without trial during the state of emergency between April and the end of August 1960 after the massacre at Sharpeville. Lynn Carneson, their daughter, is seemingly unaware that the Carneson family home, named Mount Pleasant, situated in Oranjezicht, Cape Town, was until 1941 the home of F.S. Malan, a leading Cape liberal who was imprisoned for a year in 1901 during the South African War. Comparing Malan's description of his time in Roeland Street Prison with Sarah's experience, one is struck by the fact that conditions and treatment of prisoners between 1901 and 1960 remained virtually unchanged.

By going into hiding, Fred escaped imprisonment during the state of emergency. He was fortunate to avoid the police sweep because Mount Pleasant was under permanent observation by the security police and was frequently raided to look for incriminating evidence – or simply to intimidate the family. On one occasion snipers, probably the security police, fired shots into the house at night. Lynn Carneson's descriptions of the effect of the police raids on her and her two much younger siblings, as well as the bullying and the ostracism they had to endure at the hands of fellow pupils and teachers because they were the children of communists and anti-apartheid activists, makes for harrowing reading. According to Lynn the horror, the fear and the grief of these years caused wounds that are deeply embedded in her soul.

Fred, despite being hounded by the security police, courageously continued to resist apartheid. He was eventually arrested, detained without trial and brutally tortured. In May 1966 he was sentenced to five years and nine months imprisonment for being a member of the banned Communist Party; for participating in the activities of the party; and for encouraging students to join an illegal organisation. He was, however, acquitted on the more serious charge of sabotage. Released in 1972, he joined Sarah and the children in London after they had left South Africa as exiles in the late 1960s. Here Fred, until the collapse of the apartheid state, played a leading role in the British Anti-Apartheid Movement. Back in Cape Town – they returned from exile in May 1991 – the

Carnesons were active in the Communist Party, but apart from their immediate family and former comrades their role in the anti-apartheid struggle was forgotten. Fred, knowing that he was terminally ill, asked Lynn to write his and Sarah's life story because he felt it should not be forgotten. He died on 8 September 2000.

The main weakness of most filial biographies is the inhibition of children dealing with parental flaws. *Red in the Rainbow* is, however, a warts-and-all biography because although Lynn Carneson clearly admired and loved her parents, she is not blind to their shortcomings. She writes candidly about Fred's heavy drinking, womanising, volcanic temper and her parents' volatile, but ultimately happy marriage. It is, however, odd that she makes no real attempt to explain why her idealistic parents were so blind to the tyranny of the Soviet Union. In 1939, Sarah followed the Moscow line in opposing South Africa's involvement in the Second World War against Nazi Germany, because it was a capitalist and an imperialistic war. This was at a time when the Soviet Union, allied to Nazi Germany, invaded and occupied eastern Poland, attacked Finland and annexed the Baltic republics. Not even Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin's crimes, or the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956 and the execution of Imre Nagy in 1958, could shake the Carnesons' faith in communism and the Soviet Union. Their unquestioning loyalty was rewarded in 1974, six years after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and the crushing of the Prague Spring, when they visited the Soviet Union as VIP guests of the government. The description of their stay at an opulent health spa, treated with caviar and champagne (did the Carnesons ever read George Orwell's *Animal Farm*?), makes for uncomfortable reading. It seemingly never entered their minds that while they were enjoying their champagne and caviar, dissidents in the Soviet Union and in its satellites were being harassed, tortured and imprisoned by the communist version of apartheid's security police. The Carnesons remained loyal supporters of the Soviet Union until its collapse in 1991, an event which left them saddened.

Lynn Carneson's failure to contextualise Fred and Sarah adequately is another weakness of the book. It is, for example, puzzling that she makes no attempt to explain what the system of white Native Representation entailed. The book is furthermore marred by an unfortunate error, namely that Dr Colin Steyn as the Minister of Justice, banned Fred in 1953. It is difficult to see how she made this glaring mistake because Steyn was certainly not in the government – he was a member of the United Party. In fact he spoke out, and voted against, the Suppression of Communism Act in parliament!

And yet, despite these flaws, *Red in the Rainbow* is an important contribution to the literature on the liberation struggle because it provides a window into the lives of a remarkable and heroic couple that sacrificed themselves for the ideal of a free and non-racial South Africa. The book furthermore sheds light on the complexity and ambiguity of life in the apartheid state. As an awaiting trial prisoner in Pollsmoor Prison, Fred had a very humane chief warder who did his utmost to provide some comforts for him. The warder's wife even provided him with portions from her Sunday meals. Then there is the integrity of Judge Corbett, who in convicting Fred expressed his respect for the sincerity of his political beliefs and in a hostile atmosphere, acquitted him on the charge of sabotage, restoring an anguished Lynn's faith in humanity.

With *Red in the Rainbow* Lynn fulfilled her father's wishes because her compelling biography will ensure that Fred and Sarah Carneson's heroic role in the struggle against apartheid will not be forgotten.

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