

Else Schreiner: Activist and social campaigner (1922–2018)

ON 2 August 2018, Else Schreiner's life drew to a close at 'Highwood', her home on Town Hill, Pietermaritzburg since 1959. She was two months short of her ninety-sixth birthday.

She was born Else Kops in Ficksburg, on 1 October 1922, where her parents lived on a farm 'Harmonia'. It was here that her values began forming when, as a girl she mixed with farm workers and their families and learnt their language, which developed in her a love and respect for people of all races, colours and creeds.

The family moved from the farm; first to Cape Town and then to Johannesburg. She attended Parktown Girls High School and was subsequently sent as a boarder to Potchefstroom Girls High because her mother felt that boarding school would improve her sense of discipline. In this she succeeded as Else was a focused and disciplined individual throughout her life.

She matriculated in 1940 and began studying for a B.Sc. at the University of the Witwatersrand. Her path crossed that of Deneys Schreiner, another science student, but no sparks were kindled at that time. Else graduated and began working as a research technician in Johannesburg.

Deneys graduated and joined the South African 6th Armoured Division in the Italian campaign. At the end of the war he went to study at Cambridge



University. On a holiday in South Africa in 1946 he met Else again at a party. This time they connected and a real romance began. Deneys returned to Cambridge for the Michaelmas term and Else made plans to join him.

Awarded a research grant, Else sailed to Southampton in 1948 where she began work focusing on the habits of bees for the British Department of Scientific and Industrial Research. She and Deneys toured Italy, becoming engaged. They were married in Cambridge in January 1949. Settled into Cambridge life, their first child Oliver was born in March 1951.

The Schreiner family crossed the Atlantic in 1951 so that Deneys could take up a research fellowship at Pennsylvania State College (now Pennsylvania State University). While Deneys found his research stimulating, Else found socialising with wives of American academics trying. She

labelled the parochial campus spouses, who were scandalised by the Schreiners' letting little Oliver splash naked in mountain streams, the 'Stitch and Bitch Club'. Else gained her revenge by inviting the 'Stitch and Bitch Club' to her home in which she hung a female nude painting in a prominent place, gleefully recounting that none of the American women dared raise their eyes! The Schreiner's second son (another Deneys) was born in Pennsylvania in 1952.

Returning to South Africa in 1953, Deneys took up a position at the Bernard Price Institute at Wits. Resistance to National Party apartheid measures was mounting and he and Else joined the newly formed Liberal Party. Deneys's father, Appeal Court Judge O.D. Schreiner was embedded in legal tussles with the Strijdom government that was trying to remove coloured voters from the common roll. While ex-servicemen organisations formed the core of civil society resistance to the Nationalists, white women also began mobilising. Else was one of the first members of the Black Sash and took part in its inaugural march in Johannesburg in 1955.

Later that year she participated in a march to the Union Buildings to present a petition to Prime Minister J.G. Strijdom. Strijdom was not in his office, so the petition was received by Ben Schoeman, the Minister of Transport, who according to Else sat insolently with his feet on his desk and his pipe in his mouth. This march was overshadowed by the more famous Women's March of 1956 in which Else did not participate being heavily pregnant with her daughter Jenny at the time.

In 1959 Deneys was appointed Professor of Inorganic Chemistry at the University of Natal and the Schreiners

moved into a double-storey Victorian home in Wendover Road in Pietermaritzburg. The boys completed school in Johannesburg, and daughters Jenny and Barbara were schooled at Epworth. Else flung herself into social work: from 1962 she was the first general manager of the Kupugani feeding scheme, performing the task with distinction. She was an active member of the National Council of Women, one of few organisations to successfully retain multi-racial membership and international recognition during apartheid. Becoming president in 1982, she pushed for improved education for black children, especially for girls. When Else had a cause, little stood in her way and she was adept at recruiting volunteers.

In 1974 Else stood as Natal Provincial Council Progressive Party candidate for the Pietermaritzburg North constituency. The campaign was disastrous. Her running mate withdrew, the party leadership publicly supported Theo Gerdener, a *verligte* and former Nationalist Provincial Administrator of Natal, and Else was left fighting Frank Martin, a formidable local politician and senior United Party member, almost alone. Despite losing her deposit in the election, she won the support of redoubtable Progressive Party MP Helen Suzman, who sympathised with Else at the patronising treatment she received from the male party leadership.

As active patrons of the arts, 'Highwood' was full of works by young and established African artists. In addition to purchasing art, the Schreiners supported artists and their families. Their dedication is memorialised in the Schreiner Gallery at the Tatham Art Gallery. Sunday evenings at the Schreiner home were usually open house when students, academics, visitors and townsfolk

would gather, eat, drink, argue and talk. Sunday evening soirées became Pietermaritzburg legend.

In 1977 Oliver, the eldest son, was tragically killed by a hit-and-run driver while cycling to college in Oxford; a devastating blow for the family. At the height of the ‘total onslaught’ in 1987, Jenny, an active member of Mkhonto we Sizwe, was detained in Cape Town. Deneys and Else moved to Cape Town to support her. Else hounded security police officials and used every connection possible, from judges to members of parliament, to gain access to Jenny who was suffering physical and mental abuse in prison. During Jenny’s trial Else kept copious notes, which formed the core of her account of the ordeal later published as *Time Stretching Fear: The Detention and Solitary Confinement of 14 Anti-Apartheid Trialists, 1987–1991* (Cape Town, Robben Island Museum, 2000). The trial continued long after Mandela’s release, with Jenny eventually receiving indemnity in 1991. Life for the Schreiner family could return to normal at the dawn of the new South Africa, for which they had fought so long.

Normality included a rededication to community service. Else and Deneys were leading figures in establishing Tembalethu Trust, located in the old Girls Collegiate School in Burger Street. It ran as a successful community centre for more than twenty years.

As transition unfolded, Else was a member of one of the first groups of whites to visit the ANC in Zambia, where she was hailed for her stoic role supporting Jenny and other co-trialists. Returning to Pietermaritzburg, she picked up the spear again and helped form the Natal Midlands Women’s Coalition, which was influential in all local and regional negotiating forums. One of their goals was to adopt the Women’s Charter for Effective Equality. Her service was recognised by the City Council of Pietermaritzburg/Msunduzi when she was presented with civic honours by Mayor Omar Latiff.

In her later years Else wrote and illustrated *Lesothosaurus and the Ancestor’s Bones*, based on tales she told her grandchildren. Else’s 90th birthday in 2012 was a landmark occasion, celebrated in Pretoria at her daughter Barbara’s home. It went so well that the police arrived three times to put an end to the noise. She was delighted at this achievement: many parties for nineteen-year-olds are shut down by the police, but not many for ninety-year-olds!

She continued to live at ‘Highwood’ and delighted in visitors who were enjoined to take the regulation two glasses of red wine with her in the evening. She is survived by her three children, her son- and daughters-in-law and six grandchildren.

GRAHAM DOMINY