

## Life story of Hillel H. Ticktin

Hillel Ticktin was born in 1937 to a Jewish family in Cape Town, South Africa. He has had a life filled with adventures and controversy in South Africa, the USSR, and the UK. One of his most significant achievements was to become Professor of Marxist Studies at the University of Glasgow in Scotland in 2000, just two years before his retirement.

As a schoolboy, during World War II, he learned about anti-semitism. It was made very clear to him that he was Jewish, thus different, and not always welcome. “Given the way in which the South African population was divided by race and the white group by ethnicity, “Hillel says, “it may have been inevitable.” Most memorable about the war, for him, was the loss of family members on his father’s side who had been living in Poland, and were killed by the Nazis.

Later, some time after the war, Hillel attended the University of Cape Town, achieving a BA and BSc. He became active in left-wing politics during this period, to the point that the police raided his parents’ home and questioned him. Many years later he wrote *On Karl Marx’s Grundrisse* for the THES (Times Higher Education Supplement) in which he described what happened on this day in 1956 when he was 19. “I hid my Marxist books under the bedcovers,” he says, “and the maid saw me do it and threw the books out of the window, so that when the secret policeman, who was searching my room for banned books, etc., sat down on the bed, to my surprise nothing happened.”

In 1960, he managed to get elected to the Students Representative Council on a left wing anti-racist platform. He had been political since he was 19, he says, and describes himself at this point as an anti-Stalinist Marxist. He participated in political activity post-Sharpeville—after the demonstration against apartheid—and then left the country. “The Government declared a state of emergency,” Hillel explains, “and arrested political activists around the country. I had gone with some others to distribute leaflets in a black township, which was doubly illegal in that whites were not allowed in black townships without permission and because the leaflets themselves were not legal.” He went underground for a while, then left that same year for the UK. He and his father had talked it over and decided the best move was for him to further his education overseas. It was not for thirty years—till 1990—that he returned to South Africa.

Scholarships were available for students to attend university in the Soviet Union, and so Hillel made plans to leave England. He went to Kiev first, in the Ukraine, providing assistance in a protest against Ukrainian racism witnessed by students from several countries, among them Egypt, Ghana, Nigeria, and Cuba. The main role he played, he says, was behind the scenes, at student meetings leading up to the strike and supporting the students who participated in the demonstration following that. As one of a group of six who went on to meet with government leaders (during the reign of Khrushchev), Hillel showed his support for the group while they expressed their grievances, then left for Moscow.

In 1961, with the aid of a scholarship, he began his PhD studies in the Faculty of Economics, University of Moscow. Meanwhile, still in Moscow, he married a young woman from Kiev, and they had a son. His difficulties with authorities were not over, however. The thesis he wrote was not accepted, he says “because it was critical of the South African and the United States Communist Parties.” He was also expelled from the Union of South African students in Moscow, nominally at least, for being white.

On his return to the UK, in 1965, he took a job as assistant at Glasgow University, in the Institute of Soviet and East European studies. Some time later his wife and infant son joined him, and several years after that a daughter was born. His career progressed, as after being assistant, he “then became lecturer, then Reader, in Soviet Studies, and finally, Professor of Marxist Studies.”

About his time at the university he says, “My life at Glasgow University was a long struggle against censorship and control over the teaching of my courses and over my research...I taught Marxist Political Economy, History of International Communism, and a course on the Social Structure of the USSR, which was renamed a course in the disintegration of the USSR. In 1973 I helped found the journal Critique, Journal of Soviet Studies and Marxist Theory, of which I am editor. It very soon became Journal of Marxist Theory, dropping the ‘Soviet Studies’...I have written a few hundred articles on the USSR and its successors and on Marxist Political Economy in its broadest sense, and a few books on the same themes.” Summing up his work he says, “My work on the political economy of the USSR was, therefore, around the laws governing its operation, showing it to be inherently unviable, and nothing to do with socialism, while not being capitalist. My work on capitalism—or the West—has been to demonstrate the nature of the decline of capitalism, discussing finance capital and the importance of the Cold War.”

Hillel had intended to return to South Africa as soon as possible after getting his PhD, assuming it was possible. But there was still danger there, he realised, and it got progressively worse as the crisis in South Africa intensified. Finally, in 1990, he did return for a visit. His retirement was not far off at that point and he did try for a job there, though not with a great deal of effort. He was satisfied to visit over the following years, for up to a month at a time, lecturing at various places, and to continue writing on events that were happening there, while living in Scotland with his family.



Professor H. H. Ticktin. Capetown, South Africa. 2003. 50th anniv. high school reunion (SACS). Photo courtesy of H. Ticktin

In 2000, Hillel was appointed Professor of Marxist Studies at the University of Glasgow. He says, in the THES (2000) report of his appointment, “I’ll be doing exactly what I was doing before. There is no change,” he said. “But I think this is a very impressive commitment to academic freedom by Glasgow University. It is a recognition that a Marxist theoretical approach is itself acceptable. That was not always the case.”

Hillel officially retired in 2002, age 65, as an emeritus professor. Two years previously he had married his partner of several years, and she was particularly supportive at this time, he says. Their children, two each from previous marriages, are for the most part, grown now. His thoughts on retirement as well as newspaper articles about him over these last three years, both before and after retirement, reveal more about the transition he went through and the changes it has brought about.

In conclusion, Hillel addresses “the question of mandatory retirement,” which, he says,

is particularly pertinent at this point because the European Union has issued a directive on ageism which the government seems to be doing its best to dilute. Unfortunately it has become mixed up with the British government’s evident desire to raise the retirement age. The trade unions are strongly opposed to the latter and I fully agree with them.

In my view, there ought to be an age at which people can retire if they wish to and they will, at that point, receive their full pension. On the other hand, they ought to be able to continue working if they so prefer. Some employers seem to be opposed to this, and from my own soundings it looks as if university administrations do not want lecturers to have such a right. Newspapers are now reporting that the government will approve a compromise under which workers can continue working if the employer agrees. This is unacceptable and unworkable. If the employee is competent, he ought to be able to continue working. Employers have the ability to remove those who are not doing the job whatever the age. Clearly the problem arises within the universities because it is hard to prove that anyone is not doing the job. Unfortunately this is where discrimination of various kinds can play a considerable role. The real point is that at 65, most academics are not far removed from their peak ability to do research and teach, and it is a real loss to the institution as well as for the lecturers involved.

Life story of Professor H. H. Tickin written by Sue McPherson following email interview in 2004.

Diversity in Retirement website: <http://DiversityinRetirement.homestead.com> 2004-05.  
*The Dilemma of Mandatory Retirement.* Sue McPherson writer, website design