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A Soviet Journey

A Critical Annotated Edition

Alex La Guma

Edited by Christopher J. Lee

Foreword by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o

Preface by Blanche La Guma

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Foreword

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o

He was not there in person—he was under house arrest back in apartheid South Africa—but Alex La Guma dominated the literary discussions at the 1962 Conference of African Writers of English Expression, held at Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda. Among the attendants were some of the leading writers of the continent, and they included Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and Christopher Okigbo from Nigeria, Kofi Awoonor of Ghana, and a group of exiled South African writers, among them Es'kia Mphahlele, Lewis Nkosi, Arthur Maimane, and Bloke Modisane. La Guma's book *A Walk in the Night* had just been released by the Mbari Writers Club in Nigeria, founded by Ulli Beier among others. La Guma's realism was often compared and contrasted with that of Chinua Achebe's, whose novel *Things Fall Apart* had been published by Heinemann in 1958. It's interesting that both novels had titles drawn from English literature—Shakespeare in the case of La Guma, and Yeats in the case of Chinua Achebe—reflecting the dominance of English literature in the education of the writers present. But the two texts were seen as mapping new directions in African literature in English, heralding the Africa emerging from colonial domination. Alex La Guma spoke to me and to this emergent Africa from the place of his house arrest through his words.

I met Alex La Guma in person for the very first time in Sweden at the 1967 Afro-Scandinavian Writers' Conference held at Håsselby Castle, Stockholm. Those attending included Wole Soyinka (Nigeria), Albert Memmi (Tunisia), Kateb Yacine (Algeria), Tchicaya U Tam'si (Congo), and Dan Jacobson (South Africa). In the course of delivering the opening lecture "The Writer in Modern Africa," Soyinka made a reference to the African writer in some independent African country and who, in despair, was reduced to carrying guns and holding up radio stations.

It was of course a reference to himself, but it was Alex La Guma's response that raised the whole question of the role of violence in revolutionary change. As a South African, he said he was prepared to run guns and hold up radio stations, because, whether as writers or common laborers, the situation called for fundamental change. I was struck by his coupling of writers and workers and by his speaking on behalf of the

working class in apartheid South Africa. For him, the writer was a worker with a pen. In person, he dominated the discussion in Sweden much as his text *A Walk in the Night* had done at Makerere five years earlier.

La Guma was tall, serious, and focused, but once I did see another side of him. It was at a party held for us at some house in Stockholm. When some jazz music was put on, I saw Alex La Guma, on the floor, jiving. Yes, he could jive! He was free, the picture of one who loved life.

Six years later in September 1973, he and I would meet again, this time in Moscow on our way to the Fifth Conference of Afro-Asian Writers at Alma-Ata in Kazakhstan, then part of the Soviet Union. This meeting followed previous ones held in other capitals including New Delhi, Tashkent, and Cairo. Among those attending were Okot p'Bitek (Uganda), David Rubadiri (Malawi), and Lennie Peters (Gambia). Our guide was the late Victor Ranzes who had done so much to translate African writing into Russian. It was during this visit that discussions began about La Guma returning to tour the Soviet Union and write whatever he wanted to write about it. I was also asked if I, too, would come back and do the same. The invitations were out there.

I never took up the offer, or rather, when eventually I did in 1975, it was not to tour the Soviet Union, but to go to Chekhov's house in the Caucasus Mountains overlooking Yalta to complete my novel, *Petals of Blood*. That was also the last time I met Alex La Guma, but in a hospital in Moscow.

The last time I heard of him he was the ANC representative in Cuba, and then the loss, in October 1985. He never lived long enough to see post-apartheid South Africa, but he had no doubt that it would come to be, or rather he had seen and predicted it in his novel *In the Fog of the Seasons' End*.

I felt his loss in a very personal way. I always felt him to be a kindred spirit. His spirit of hope lives on in the books he left us. He is a central figure alongside Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and others in the making and consolidation of modern African literature.

But I will always carry the image of the Alex La Guma whom I once saw jiving the night away in Stockholm, a year after his exile from the South Africa he loved. In his life and books, he struggled for a society in which all people could find their humanity. Joy in life was part of that humanity, and it comes through in his novels and memoir.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o
June 2016

Preface

Blanche La Guma

My husband, Alex La Guma, was an ardent political activist in South Africa who worked to overthrow the fascist apartheid regime in his country and suffered the consequences of detention in prison without trial, house arrest, the infamous Treason Trial, and exile. While under house arrest, Alex wrote quite a few short stories, but because of his intermittent imprisonment, frequent police raids, and his writing being taken by the police, he was unable to write more. Alex eventually wrote, over the course of his life, six books, which, due to him being banned, could not be read in South Africa. He was, however, vastly read internationally and particularly in the Soviet Union.

Alex's father, James Arnold (Jimmy) La Guma, played a very influential role in the political thinking of Alex. He guided him with books to read and had many discussions with and explanations for Alex. Jimmy was a member of the Communist Party of South Africa—later known as the SACP—which came into being in 1921. In 1927 Jimmy with some other South African activists went as a delegate to Brussels to attend the League Against Imperialism conference. After the conference, the delegation from the Soviet Union invited them to visit Moscow.

Since Alex could not make a significant contribution in South Africa, he, I, and our family went into exile. Soon after arriving in London, Alex was contacted by a member of the Afro-Asian Writers Association (AAWA), which in due course invited him to attend an AAWA conference in Uzbekistan. He traveled to Moscow and from there to Uzbekistan. Yusuf El-Sebai from Egypt was elected Secretary General of the AAWA and Alex became his deputy, thus starting Alex's trips to Moscow for the AAWA. He traveled to Moscow several times a year and at times from there to the countries of affiliate members of the AAWA to arrange conferences and meetings, poetry readings, and discussions with the executive members. Writers of the AAWA were mainly from countries in Africa and Asia and often from countries in political turmoil and thus had financial difficulties. Moscow covered all expenses.

Alex was also one of the chairmen of the World Peace Council, which supported the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons. This organization