

Pessa Weinberg, 1927–2025

by Mary Kleinenberg

Pessa Weinberg (née Karpolowsky) was born in Johannesburg on 15 June 1927, the third of five children, and grew up in Yeoville. Her father, Harry, was a vocalist, a lay person who led the synagogue congregation in song and prayer and a mohel (a person who performs the Jewish rite of circumcision) from Belarus; while her mother, Sarah, had her roots in Lithuania. Pessa's grandfather was expelled from Moscow in the 1880s by an edict of the tsar who forbade Jews under a certain income level to live in the city. Like many whose ancestors had come to South Africa as refugees, Pessa embraced what numerous Jewish immigrants aspired to – being integrated into their adopted home.

While training as a nursery school teacher in Durban, Pessa met Leslie Weinberg who had just been discharged from his army service in World War II and they married in 1948. Leslie studied law and joined a firm in Pietermaritzburg, later opening his own practice where he was respected as a human rights lawyer. Les and Pessa had three children, Janeen, Jonathan and Paul, and lived in Pietermaritzburg for many years.

For both Pessa and Les it was important to remember they had come from an oppressive history, the memory of which spurred them to work tirelessly against apartheid, and for community organisations. So, it was not surprising that they joined the Liberal Party, which stood for universal suffrage, the rule of law, human rights and social justice. And, Pessa became a member of the Natal Midlands Black Sash at its inception in 1955. Both organisations shared similar values and the Weinbergs were able to express their anger about various horrendous laws promulgated by the National Party apartheid government.



Pessa Weinberg

Pessa's passion and training was music and by 12 she had played the piano publicly. She taught music at a number of schools including Epworth, as well as teaching private pupils. Included in her vocation was working with teachers and children in townships such as Edendale, Caluza and Sinathing and at Amakholwa School, forming an enthusiastic recorder group as well as choral groups in Georgetown and Ashdown. She said in an interview that it was a lot of fun and she found the children very responsive to learning the music by tonic sol-fa as there

were no pianos. Pessa took a little harmonica with her to give a note and then they would sing. She found it a wonderful experience to work with children lacking opportunities and who were so exuberant. She also led the University of Natal choir for many years.

Later in life Pessa furthered her musical studies obtaining a masters degree in musicology. Her UNISA dissertation on the folk music of Zulu children's songs for all occasions was published as a book called *Hlabelela Mtwanami* (Sing my Children). She explained how pleased she was to have done this because it was the first such UNISA ethnic musicological dissertation and it was important to record and preserve this music.

Pessa played wherever she was needed – in synagogues, churches, schools and universities. One of her last projects was to transcribe songs of the acclaimed artist Gerard Sekoto who had a jazz band while living in exile in Paris. Making three copies she covered them in beautiful wrapping paper and presented them to Iziko Museum.

Pessa described how Pietermaritzburg people reacted to Black Sash protest stands, remembering how in the beginning many people angrily threw tomatoes and

spat at the protesters. Occasionally there were some who said, ‘I am so glad that you are doing this.’ She continued to take part in protest stands for many years as well as writing letters to the press, giving talks, and being an active participant in Black Sash events.

The police security branch in Pietermaritzburg regularly used intimidatory tactics. But Pessa, who was chairperson of Black Sash in Pietermaritzburg in 1984, reacted in her usual feisty manner when she was summoned by the security police brigadier for interrogation after writing a strongly worded letter to the *Natal Witness* about a man who had been arrested without trial and simply disappeared. Deciding not to wait for questions from the brigadier, she launched into asking him how he would feel if his son disappeared, and how his Christian principles allowed him to act with such callousness. She described the interview as being a bit like a boxing match with her giving one punch followed by one from the brigadier.

After 1994, because it was important that everyone was able to sing the new national anthem, Pessa brought copies of the words to a Sash meeting and got the group singing with great gusto; but, to her disappointment, a total lack of musical ability.

Pessa valued the tremendous bond that members of the Black Sash experienced in working together, supporting and understanding each other. Given the devastating political circumstances, she believed that

her involvement in Sash was inevitable: it was critical not to remain silent, but to protest vigorously against atrocious laws. She found Sash a wonderful venue to say what had to be said. Her work in Sash was an important part of her life and she was very grateful to have had the opportunity to stand and be counted. She felt vindicated because eventually the National Party, bent on destroying the country, was itself destroyed. After 1994 she was, like many, euphoric about democracy and universal suffrage, although remaining sceptical about the ANC’s ability to fulfil all its promises.

After the death of Les in 2010, Pessa decided to move to a retirement facility in Sea Point, Cape Town where she would be close to her family. Her beloved piano just fitted into her living room and she embraced the new surroundings in her indomitable fashion. As always, she extended her warmth at any gathering, and staff and residents soon grew to love her, calling her Auntie Pessa. Many remember Pessa’s need to touch, to hold hands while she talked to you, calling everyone ‘my darling’. She had an irrepressible sense of humour, often defusing tense situations.

Pessa died on 28 May 2025. A highly principled woman, she had the relatively rare ability to make those she came into contact with feel valued. Kind, warm and supportive, she will be remembered as an indefatigable activist for human rights.