

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training  
Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

**RUTH JACOB SPECTOR**

*Interviewed by: Daniel F. Whitman*

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[Note: This interview was not edited by Mrs. Spector.]

*Q: I'm talking with Ruth Jacob Spector, the spouse of Brooks Spector, and she's here partly because she's Brooks' spouse and partly because she's seen a lot of what happened in South Africa in the past 20, 30 years and is an eyewitness to many of the changes. Ruth, let's start if we could, by telling us a little bit about your social background. Where did you fit into this complex society?*

SPECTOR: Well first, I am South African born, and became an American citizen when I married Brooks in 1976. So I am black South African, because in the old definition, we are colored South African, but Americans do not quite understand that idea, so now with Obama as President you understand biracial people more. My education is in Johannesburg. I had two parents who were principals of school. Both of them go back to a very civil generation of teachers, ministers and musicians in our community. This was always the highest level of professionalism we could aspire to at the time; anything else was not available at the time.

Then I was educated in Jo-burg at the schools of both my parents. Well, it was a very strict upbringing. We were not allowed to acknowledge our parents during school. We had to reach the highest standards possible. It was a fact that you couldn't go outside your community for schooling, you went to the school near your neighborhood, and those were the two area schools.

*Q: What neighborhood was it?*

SPECTOR: The neighborhood of Coronationville, where I grew up as a young child. That is where my mum was principle, at St. Theresa's School. I still have a close alumni relationship with that school, even though my mum has passed on. In Bosmont, in my teenage years, I lived there and my father's school was there. He was a huge force to be reckoned with in South Africa, in Jo-burg in particular. I believe he was a consular diplomat, because he worked very hard to create opportunities for people, while stating his opposition to Apartheid, while still trying to keep doors open.

*Q: Thus putting himself in the middle of people who were in the system and trying to do the best they could, versus those who were impatient for change and willing to take further measures.*

SPECTOR: Yes, he was not a militant. He was always on the lists of the government; the Special Branch was always visiting on a regular basis. He was always protecting his teachers. I grew up in a background of political awareness of the point of view of my own background.

*Q: You mentioned earlier, before the interview, that you had friends and relatives in the Cape?*

SPECTOR: Well, both my parents originally were from the Cape. In South African society, we cultivate family relationships and ties in a way that you perhaps do not do in the United States. Mainly because, in a way, it was a good thing, but it was also part of the necessity of maintaining that familiarity. When someone left the Cape to go work in Johannesburg, there was always some pocket of financial support you were sending back to your home. So for economic reasons, that relationship was necessary and people did not easily leave the regions they lived in for economic reasons but in order to support.

*Q: Is this the reason your parents left the Cape?*

SPECTOR: Not my parents, but my grandparents. My great-grandfather actually left the Cape to try to make a fortune, and he lost. He used to own a horse and carriage company, and it's said that Queen Victoria actually gave him the license to operate, and as a black man that meant a lot. But he took his fortune and came up to Kimberly, and by that time the trains were coming in, and his company was no longer able to sustain itself in the same manner. So he came to Kimberly and lost what he had as a business person.

*Q: Kimberly, because of the gold?*

SPECTOR: Diamonds. So my grandfather, at some point, grew up in Kimberly. And as happens to most people, he used a little bit of money to go to boarding school. He went to a boarding school called Dower College and he received an excellent education. By the time my grandfather entered the First World War, he was so well-educated that he was assigned as a translator in which ever place in France that he was serving in, I've forgotten the name.

*Q: French and English?*

SPECTOR: I don't know the exact details of it, but he was very qualified. I mean, I learned Milton and Shakespeare from him reading it to me. That was the time. Grandfathers read the Bible to you, read Shakespeare to you and Milton to you. It was what you thought you had to know, whether you understood it or not. You had to listen.

*Q: It happens far too rarely now.*

SPECTOR: It was a great bonding experience, that reading of words. In any case, later my mother was sent by my grandfather to Dower College when she got older. She also

received a splendid education from there. These colleges, there are certain education institutions of various nature. Some of the ones in the black world came from missionary traditions. Going back to my mother's tradition; she comes from a very prominent family in a place called Genadendal. Now, Genadendal houses the first real black museum of recorded history. These people were Moravians, and by their tradition, church records were meticulously kept. One of the people, if you find the chance to pick up a history book written by a man named Isaac Barley, you must go interview, you will find that he took the records of that community and wrote it down into a great big book. He also took all the artifacts he could find and set up the museum. Right now, Nelson Mandela is one of the prime admirers of keeping of tradition.

*Q: I don't know if there is any direct relation, but the Annals School in France, in the '60s and '70s, was studying church records. Simple daily tasks were logged, like the demographics and the food prices. Then they extrapolated a history from that, as opposed to the study of great men and great conflicts. I don't know if this is known by Mr. Barley.*

SPECTOR: You should really interview him. He is a remarkable man. In South Africa, talking about family history is a great tradition, great oral tradition. When we get together as a family on a Sunday afternoon, what do we talk about? Other relatives. As my mother once said, "In the small way in which we live, it's pretty important that you know everybody. You don't want to end up marrying your own cousin because you didn't know."

*Q: (Laughter) You wouldn't want to cross that line.*

SPECTOR: Yes, because it's a huge population of people in shifting relationships.

*Q: In some societies it's perfectly acceptable to marry one's cousin.*

SPECTOR: Not in this one, since we come from a missionary background. You don't do that. When we lived in Indonesia, we noticed some odd things. In traditional societies, not Americanized ones, but we would ask, "Why is it that a person can do that?" When we were in Swaziland, one of the things that would happen, you would be riding along the road in little Swaziland and the traffic would come to a dead halt. Two men would get out and go to meet each other. They would greet each other. And the greeting would include a family history, so you say, "I am so and so, and my father was so and so, and his father was so and so." It's all about how you are related. You really need to know these things in such a small community.

*Q: Would these two men be acquainted with each other?*

SPECTOR: Strangers. You meet someone and you recognize a name, but you have to go further beyond that.

*Q: In island nations and other small nations, it's all the more important. It's very likely that you could be related to almost anybody by chance, since the communities are so small.*

SPECTOR: The relationships are much more formal, in that sense.

*Q: Now, about your own background. You mentioned that you went to schools that were presided over by your parents. What subjects drew you?*

SPECTOR: As a child, things were not always available to you. I read a great number of my father's books. He was the head of a school, but also the founder or leader of a great number of other institutions.

*Q: Was this frequent in South African society?*

SPECTOR: What?

*Q: That ones father would have an extensive library?*

SPECTOR: I think that it depends. Some people, when they think about black families, don't realize how many generations our histories go. Some people think that educated black people only came now. They've existed for three or four hundred years. They've been around for a number of years. There were places where the missionaries came to educate the "natives", and intermarried. What happened, in the white households, the story goes that they couldn't afford to import educators, so they got highly educated servants into their homes and doubled as tutors. Interestingly enough, the wealthy, educated white people were taught by the so called servants.

*Q: The development of the Afrikaans language was developed because the servants started to understand Dutch and mixed it with their own language and then taught the children this language, as their way of communicating, and Afrikaans developed.*

SPECTOR: Yes, it was a sort of pidgin language at the beginning.

*Q: It became the standard language of the children.*

SPECTOR: Correct, in fact in the late 1940s or '50s, the decision was made by the nationalist government that the language of Afrikaans belonged to the Afrikaners, the white Africans who are not British. The place where my father came from, is known as the city where the language originated and officially known as the home of Afrikaans. They have some monuments for it too, that say that they own the language. They knew it was their language, the servants and blacks, and suddenly the white claimed it as theirs too, and it angered many, many people.

*Q: I guess. What I was driving at was that the servants of the households were the educators?*

SPECTOR: Very often.

*Q: They taught the children the language skills.*

SPECTOR: Yes, but they were typically employed to clean and run the households, but to also be the tutors of the children. It's not been spoken about too much really. There is huge pride, particularly in the mixed race community, and an aspiration to that, because remember, if you could get a job doing that you were guaranteed a job in life.

*Q: So this was a much defined objective for a people with very limited options in life.*

SPECTOR: I can't say it was a defined objective, but it was something that was there and people knew was a good place to be. That is how it was.

*Q: So Ruth Jacobs at that time was in Johannesburg?*

SPECTOR: Yes, for my high school years. Then I went to University of Cape Town. Being in a close-knit family of seven siblings, I had to make a decision. It was assumed in the family that I would become educated. When you go to Cape Town, you will find that this is the case in many homes.

*Q: So when you went to UCT, did you have an idea of what you wanted to do?*

SPECTOR: I had the idea that I wanted to become a doctor. That was the ultimate thing to aspire to. You were always, while in primary and secondary school, saying, "What is the greatest thing I could do. Well... I could be a doctor!" Then I thought I could help people. When I applied, my dad said something along the lines of, "Well there are probably many people who are going to become doctors that you should think about other things too." He probably knew that I wasn't as smart as my brother, who did become a doctor, but he never told me that.

(Laughter)

You ought to apply to a variety of things. Maybe music? They offer spaces.

*Q: To what group?*

SPECTOR: The top ten percent of the black population of students in the '60s and '70s were allowed to enter into the two open universities, which was Wits University and UCT.

*Q: Now this on the condition that the subject matter was not offered in one of the other schools?*

SPECTOR: In those days, there was not yet a school designated for just black people. But soon, UWC was established as such, and there was a lot of controversy.

*Q: And there was much ferment on that campus in the '70s.*

SPECTOR: Yes, it showed up. But before that began, people like my father and many other people from the Cape, protested the setting up of a separate university for just black people. They thought the standard of education would be compromised. Then we wouldn't have the international credentials.

*Q: I think it's an interesting fact that the amount of money being spent was so drastically different. That doesn't mean that the education was inferior-*

SPECTOR: Initially it was because it was prescribed education in the beginning. Interestingly enough, the whole fact that it was prescribed actually led the students to become quite radicalized. So we will go there for the education, we won't accept it, but we will take it and try to change it. That spirit came about because of the way it was set up.

*Q: You successfully resisted going there?*

SPECTOR: Yes. My father and brother advised me to go straight to UCT.

*Q: So how did this work out? Did you declare a major in a year or two?*

SPECTOR: I didn't know what I wanted to apply for. I didn't want to be a teacher when I first got there, both my parents did that. My parents said, you have eight years of music training, why not apply for that? I hadn't even thought of that before. So I did apply.

*Q: What type of music was this?*

SPECTOR: Piano performance. I had reached the 8<sup>th</sup> grade level, which was the highest needed to enter college for music.

*Q: How many people played music in your family?*

SPECTOR: Oh, just about everyone. In those days, we would all gather and play Victorian dance. Very old music. That was family entertainment.

*Q: So you didn't see it as a profession, but you saw it as very much a part of your family education.*

SPECTOR: My mother had been a music teacher, organist and pianist before. She played wonderfully by ear. She could even play with the movies. Yes, it went that far back.

*Q: So you ended up studying music at UCT.*

SPECTOR: Voice, actually. Once I'd been accepted I said, "I've been told I sing rather nicely." There was a group called the Eon Group, very famous in the Cape. But this group was a group of, in those days, only colored performers; led by an Italian man. These guys, by ear, became fantastic opera singers. They performed in all these incredible civic theater. Of course there was controversy. I was involved with Opera Africa at the time, to try to evolve a more diverse audience. In those days, the Eon Group visited and performed in the civic theater, some performances they could not perform to a black audience or a white audience. They made the mistake once and there was a lot of backlash.

*Q: These performances were typical of the political issues.*

SPECTOR: Yes. The Eon Group is lauded for the fact that they did push these issues so much, and continue to do so. As I explained earlier, my father was very closely involved in things at the Cape. The Eon Group came here, there was no place for them to live, and the hotels wouldn't take them. We put them up in our houses. The technicians, who were at the civic theater, couldn't even use the toilets at the civic theater. They had to go across the street. Don't forget, Brooks has archived these records. He's a great source of information there. They hired him a few years ago to go through the archives and save the things that are important and write everything down into nice anthologies.

*Q: So, UCT... music... then back to Jo-burg?*

SPECTOR: I move back to Johannesburg after graduating UCT. I degree in BA music. I had wanted to become an opera singer, but as a black person was very difficult to do. I couldn't join the opera group at school because it meant that I would share the stage with white people and that was banned. We could do academic music, but you couldn't appear on stage.

*Q: Even on relatively a progressive campus?*

SPECTOR: It was called an open university since I could go there, but it was not socially open. I got in the doors and that was it. Of course, there were some people who were able to successfully move in between. Those were students who were more politically conscious of the country at the time.

*Q: You were studying "Voice" for the BA music. This would have been the late 1960s and finishing the early '70s. We are approaching the time when you met a certain Brook Spector?*

SPECTOR: After I graduated from university there. I took my father's advice and got my teaching certificate as well. He told me, "You never know if you will get a job as a singer in South Africa, so better safe than sorry." I was of the mind to never leave the country, even though I could have sung abroad. There were many of us though, who were qualified to leave the country and make a living elsewhere in the world, but who felt too

connected to South Africa to leave. Some did leave. It all depended on your outlook on the country and what you were enduring. Many people saw it as a necessary cauldron where you dealt with it slowly. Those people just decided that you could be that kind of activist at home.

*Q: There is no single right answer to these very complicated problems.*

SPECTOR: No. There cannot be a single right answer. Every individual has the right to do the best they can for their survival.

*Q: So you took the teaching degree.*

SPECTOR: I did. My first teaching job was in District 6. It was a very famous school called Trafalgar High.

*Q: About a third of the people in this project attended or was otherwise connected somehow to that school.*

SPECTOR: Alright. Well, I was a teacher there and had a failed love affair and left Cape Town for Johannesburg.

*Q: This is just the story of almost all of us.*

SPECTOR: Yes, it's something that tells us that we had enough and its time to move on to the next place. So I left the Cape and came to Jo-burg and then became a lecturer. In those days it was rare to have someone with my qualifications and they needed someone at the teacher training college here, to teach teachers the basics of music education to bring into the classrooms. So as a fairly young person, I was thrown into becoming a lecturer of teachers. I was doing this at the time I met Brooks.

*Q: I don't want to make a big deal about you meeting Brooks, but it is the reason I met you and we are doing this interview at all! So Brooks was here as a junior cultural officer here in Johannesburg.*

SPECTOR: Yes, it was his second post. His first was in Indonesia. He still speaks their language too.

*Q: Now we have on record, Brook's version of the courtship and marriage. Fascinating slice of life. Now let's get the real version.*

SPECTOR: I first met Brooks here. He later came to the college once he knew me, and I allowed him to visit the college. As you know now, I come from a very traditional, Cape based family, and in our family, in those days, there was a hierarchy of two obviously, authoritative parents and seven siblings. Every child was trying to do their thing in Apartheid in South Africa. My older sister, who is ten years older than me, was trying to start a softball club for the kids in the neighborhood. She called the American embassy.



We had a friend named Basil Arendse and he was the curator of museums. He was the librarian at that time. He was the librarian and lived in our neighborhood, and related to us by marriage.

On a side note, at the time there were 3 million people of mixed race. Now that figure has grown. But you must look carefully at the numbers. It's not any longer just the mixed race population. But you have people outside the community too. The circumstances are completely different. So it's inevitable that we would all know each other.

So Dorothy, my sister, calls Basil and says, "I'm trying to start a softball club here. You're sitting there with all the useless Americans dancing with the South Africa government. You look like your doing something, without actually doing anything." That was our view of them at the time. Anyway-

*Q: They may have duped themselves into thinking they were actually doing something.*

SPECTOR: Well it's not for me to judge, but it appears that way, yes. To the outside. Anyway, she called Basil and told him that since he was working for these people and sending people overseas, but you never come to the neighborhoods to talk to us. Basil said they had a great new guy at the embassy. "Let me speak to him and see if he'll help you out." She reminded him we couldn't learn about softball from our library, it didn't have books on it, and the whites wouldn't tell us about it. So we had heard about this sport, but didn't really know anything about it. Get him to tell us about the game.

*Q: It was thirty years later that the sport really helped South Africa out with the public policy agenda.*

SPECTOR: Yes, it was through sports that people motivated one another. South Africans were not going to sit on their bottoms and say "Woo is me." They were going to get up and do something about it. This is a very sports oriented country. So it was through some form of activity that you motivated young people. Basil went back and the word was that this is not what we mean by culture, this is sports. But the junior officer, they sent out went to my sister's house. I refused to go, stating that I wouldn't go into the same room as an American who is coming to teach us about sports, and considering how reluctant the Americans were about it anyway, why would I got sit in a room to listen to some guy tell me about softball which I'm not interested in the first place? My mother said, "Everybody in this family makes an effort. It is your responsibility to support your sister."

*Q: So your mother encouraged you to support Dorothy.*

SPECTOR: I did go, and I sat in the corner, made no eye contact and made it very clear that I was there and didn't want to be there. I was a 24 year old who was already very adamant about principles of some kind; I've no idea what they were at this point. Because you see, in those days, so much was emotional and personal since you couldn't do anything physical. You built a shell around yourself to protect yourself from the problems.

*Q: You mentioned this meeting, so it must have had some importance?*

SPECTOR: Okay, well Brooks did give a talk about softball. It was admitted 20 years later that it was interesting. I was very annoyed though. I left without speaking to him.

*Q: Did you see this as trivial candy for the masses?*

SPECTOR: I saw it as a symbolic gesture that was meaningless. What were the chances that we could play softball? Where could we get the equipment? And he was passionate about the sport as well. I did leave; I don't think I spoke to him then. Two weeks later, through Basil called me and said that "A diplomat here asked if he may phone you?" I said, "You must be joking, I don't even talk to those people." I asked Basil if it was about visiting my school at the time and he said it was, but it was also about maybe getting tea together at some point. I was astounded, "Where do you go for tea around here?"

*Q: It seems very unlikely.*

SPECTOR: But Brooks was very persistent through Basil.

*Q: It should be noted that Brooks is a very persistent person in general.*

SPECTOR: I guess at that point he decided he was going to marry me or something. I was just not interested at all. This is a very long story that you are hearing. He, as all good diplomats do, figured out how to create the opportunity to meet. He called my home for several weeks, and I declined to talk to him, but he did speak with my mother. After a few weeks, my mother was getting annoyed with me. "Just give him a chance!" She kept telling me about how funny and polite he was and how all he wanted to do was meet and talk once. I was just not taking it, I was just not willing. No agenda. I was very aware and skeptical of what his agenda was with me. I didn't know what he really wanted in the end.

*Q: His devious diplomatic agenda!*

SPECTOR: Yeah, I didn't know. If he wants to visit my school, fine, that's professional, but anything else..., I don't want a cup of tea with you. He spoke with my mum and she had a great sense of humor and he did too. So mum said to me, "He knows some Afrikaans. Just greet the man, stop being so rude."

*Q: But if it were not for your mother and Basil none of this would have happened.*

SPECTOR: So, of course, I went to the phone and greeted him. And he said, "Hi, how are you?" in Afrikaans? He butchered the pronunciation and it was hysterically funny, because he was trying so hard.

*Q: A hopeless misfit.*

SPECTOR: Yes. And we had a good laugh about that. He said, “Well, you will have to teach me how to say this properly.” A well known ploy! Well, fine. I taught him the right word over the phone. Then he asked if he could take me out for tea. I said, “Look. I am not interested in tea.” Eventually he called back later and said, “I understand you work as a lecturer. I would really like to visit that, since that is my job here. I learn about the educational institutions here and report about them.” I said, “Fine. I’ll give you the name of the Rector and you can meet him.” So Brooks went to talk with the Rector, visited some classrooms and then found my classroom and visited that as well. But of course, my assumption was that he was genuinely visiting the institution.

*Q: That may have been partly true.*

SPECTOR: Sure, probably. But we’d never had an American visit before. This was also when I began to start to say, “Yeah, I guess he is a serious guy too.” He will come out to the schools and neighborhoods without a driver or a team of staff. Just him and do it, just get his job done. Then I think at one point, I had a concert there and he came and listened to that. Now I forget the sequence of events a little bit here, but our first date was after this. Brooks called me saying, “You know the University of Witwatersrand is an open university, you can go without fear of a separate event. It’d be a mixed audience. Jean-Pierre en Paul is coming to play the flute.” I said, “Oh god, I’d love to hear that.” He said, “Well, I’m happy to take you.” So we went to this concert and I remember some funny stories about that. But, you know, here was this White, American embassy man and me, the black South African, normal citizen woman, so even on an open campus, we were always being watched. Actually, when we arrived to the campus, these two younger guys rammed their car into Brooks’ car. Brooks got out and said, “If you really need my number plates, I’ll give it to you.” I thought that that was quite brave. When we went to the actual concert hall, many of the people there were Brooks’ cultural contacts. They saw him with this black woman on his arm and they turned the other way.

*Q: He described this exactly the same way.*

SPECTOR: Yeah. They didn’t greet him. They were people he had met and had a relationship with. And this was an open campus, but socially they were not integrated. This to me was very interesting. He had a bit of fight and fun in him. I did start going out with him occasionally. This was during Apartheid South Africa, the days of immorality, I was liable to have seven years of jailing, simply for being in a relationship. Usually there had to be photographic evidence involved. As we were courting, we were always shutting curtains and locking doors, we had to be very cautious. Yeah, so we did have a courtship. Not too far into the courtship, Brooks decided to propose. But he did it the right way. He went to my home, had a conference with my father, because he was an American, he understood how important approval was.

*Q: He had done his homework as a cultural observer.*

SPECTOR: Yes, yes. So it was very important that my parents were in approval. Amazingly my dad was delighted with Brooks. Brooks was somehow able to talk with

my dad, and have a non-argumentative discussion with my father. He had this ability to hold meaningful conversations with my dad, they didn't have arguments, and they had conversations. This to me was amazing! Brooks is very grown up and a very good debater.

*Q: This is most fascinating. Can I get a summary in Swaziland, because I literally have to check out of my hotel room, its actually passed time?*

SPECTOR: Oh, sure. Well, the summary of our marriage because of the immorality act, and the American Embassy wasn't going to brush off the marriage, but they expedited the process to let us leave South Africa and get married.

*Q: So they captured the spirit of this.*

SPECTOR: Brooks had a friendship with a lady who was African before meeting me. And this may have affected his standing in the State Department. He was reprimanded for going out with someone who was black, while in Johannesburg, and that made him very angry. So by the time they had been briefed to his feelings.

*Q: So the consulate was cooperative in the end though. What exactly did you need from them?*

SPECTOR: We needed papers that would let us get married in Swaziland, since we couldn't in South Africa. So they had to expedite our getting to Swaziland. We also needed papers to prove that I had security clearance and then papers that said I was the spouse of an American diplomat, so that I could travel more freely with Brooks.

*Q: So they were at the edge of the rules. You had the papers before you were actually married and that could only happen, the marriage itself, in Swaziland.*

SPECTOR: Yes. At that point, they had decided to change things a bit more. This was just after the riots of 1976. It was after that that the Americans and South Africans had a wake up call. The riots were in June and we married in August.

*Q: The wake up call being the consulate being aware of imminent change and they risked being dinosaurs if they didn't catch on.*

SPECTOR: At that point, they had to do the right thing.

*Q: Well, we don't always do the right thing, but in this case we did.*

SPECTOR: I think for several years before that, Brooks and other diplomats had spoken to their leadership about the state of the country. They were in complete denial but in June of '76, that was the wakeup call.

*Q: Well, so people can learn very fast when they have to.*

SPECTOR: Yes, they did the very right thing by doing that. So we got married in Swaziland. We had a civil marriage, and again the consulate was very supportive. Remember, to get back to the United States, we had to go through the South African international airport.

*Q: Where you were an illegal item.*

SPECTOR: Right. So, by that time, I was married by then, had I not been married, that transition would have been incredibly serious and the potential for a diplomatic incident was extremely high. As you know, my parents were very discreet. When these people came to ask questions, my parents pretended to have complete ignorance. We had to keep it as low key as possible.

*Q: Did you have anytime in Johannesburg in between?*

SPECTOR: No, there wasn't time. We didn't want to take that risk. There were people outside the international lounge who were less than friendly, but the U.S. took precautions for our safe passage through customs. Brooks said, if anyone tries anything, yell out that you are with the American government and that there are cameras on you. Of course there are no cameras.

*Q: Just bluff your way through.*

SPECTOR: Yes. And people were well aware of risk.

*Q: In fact, in my understanding you made it through with no issue whatsoever. Where your parents there?*

SPECTOR: No, they had to be extremely ignorant about everything. For their own protection, anything was regarded as a threat to the state.

*Q: At this moment, my time has run out and I have to leave, but I hope to continue this by phone and I feel that I will be returning to South Africa.*

SPECTOR: Thank you very much for doing this.

*End of interview*