

Sally Gross

Take a look inside the Sally Gross Collection, donated to GALA by Gross' brother and a friend after her death in 2014. Gross led a remarkable life during which she wore many caps, including that of a Catholic priest, an anti-apartheid activist and an intersex activist. The collection consists of Gross' personal documents, photographs and memorabilia and reflects her life as a priest, work with the South African government and her crisis of faith and subsequent interest in Buddhism and Quakerism. Some of her academic writing is also included.



King David Primary School, Cape Town. c. 1959

Gross was born in 1953 in Cape Town to Jewish parents who upon the advice of doctors was told to raise baby Gross as a boy despite ambiguous genitalia. Intersex was little understood in the early 1950s, and so Gross was named Selwyn and raised as a boy. Although Selwyn's parents were not particularly religious, young Selwyn became an Orthodox Jew and in high school went to the United Kingdom to attend rabbinical college. Gross also spent two years studying and living in Israel after finishing school.



'Olivia and me', Israel, 1981

Gross returned to South Africa to continue studying at the University of Cape Town (UCT) and became increasingly involved in anti-apartheid student activism. Gross fled South Africa as a political exile in 1977 having attracted the attention of apartheid authorities, first going to Botswana, then back to Israel, and finally settling in the United Kingdom in 1981 after joining the Dominican Friars at Oxford as a novitiate.



Oxford, 1981



Gross With Penuell Maduna, Lindiwe Mabuza and Franklin Sonn at the Institute for Democratic Alternatives in South Africa (IDASA) meeting in Dakar, Senegal in 1987. Gross was an active member of the African National Congress (ANC).

Gross had converted to Catholicism while at UCT, having become disillusioned with the rigidity of Orthodox Judaism, as well as the lack of response by the greater Jewish community in South Africa to apartheid. Gross was ordained as a Dominican Friar in 1987, and continued to teach Philosophy and Theology at Blackfriars Priory, Oxford University.



Eastbourne, 1993

In 1993, after years of inner conflict, Gross eventually underwent medical tests confirming her intersex status and changed her name to Sally and began living as a woman. Subsequently Rome excused her from her vows and a lengthy and painful battle with the Catholic Church followed – as a woman, Gross could no longer serve as a priest. Much of this correspondence between Gross and the Catholic Church form part of her collection.

“I was ostracised, stripped of status and even identity, and forbidden to exercise my vocation”.

Gross returned to South Africa after 1994 and worked for the Human Rights Commission and the Department of Land Affairs. She also started an organisation called Intersex South Africa, aimed at supporting other intersex people, was an advocate and lobbyist for intersex rights and legislation, and also made the documentary *The Third Sex*.

“Much needs to be done to educate the public about intersex. They need to learn that it is part of the fabric of human diversity and not a threat, a rights issue and not pathology. Teachers and curricula need content about it. Medical students need input from a medical-ethics and human rights perspective. Religious leaders need to be educated about it to educate others. Research about the prevalence of intersex in SA, and about attitudes and practices, is needed. We need legislation to limit and regulate non-consensual genital surgery on the intersexed, and legislation must be screened with implications for the intersexed in mind.”

Sally Gross – African Sexualities: A Reader, page 236
(Ed. Sylvia Timale, 2011)

Despite engaging with other religions after leaving the Catholic Church, including Buddhism and Quakerism, Gross died in Cape Town in 2014, having never been able to reconnect with her faith and at the time of her death professed to consider herself an atheist.



Blackfriars Chapel, Oxford, 1980s.



Memorial programme for Sally Gross - the cover is a painting by Sally's friend, artist Gabrielle le Roux



Sally Gross' story also featured in GALA's 2016 exhibition Journeys of Faith at the Apartheid Museum, Johannesburg.