

Lily's life story: Black in the USSR

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LILY Golden is as Russian as they come. She thinks in Russian, talks Russian, drinks tea like a Russian. She was born and bred in the Soviet Union. But Professor Golden is black, and therein lies a story — many stories.

This week Professor Golden delivered a paper on the history of Africans in Russia at a symposium at the University of Cape Town's new Centre for Russian Studies.

It's a history that goes back three centuries when Arab and Turkish slave traders first sold to the Tsarists human "wares" snatched from Africa. The great Russian writer Alexander Pushkin was

■ Born and bred in the Soviet Union, black Russian professor Lily Golden tells her moving story during a visit to Cape Town where she took part in the Russian symposium at UCT's new Centre for Russian Studies.

the great-grandson of one such slave — an Ethiopian.

But Professor Golden's roots in the Soviet Union and Russia go back only two generations — she was born in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, the daughter of a black American cotton grower and a Polish Jewish mother who emigrated to the United States.

Her story really begins with the abolition of slavery in the United States. Her grandfather, a freed slave, could read, unlike most slaves. After slavery was abolished he read in newspapers about the

government's offer to former slaves — 40 acres of land and a mule.

He claimed both and bought more and more land in Yazoo county, Mississippi, becoming the richest black in the state from growing cotton. That was more than the Ku Klux Klan could bear. They burnt down his house and with it his records of ownership. He and his family of 10 children were left with nothing and moved north.

One of those children was Lily's father, Oliver Golden, who became a disciple of George Washington Carver, the famous

black agriculturalist who helped to uplift impoverished American blacks. Under him, Golden became an expert cotton grower after first learning as a child to grow cotton on his father's land.

Up north Oliver Golden, who had left-wing sympathies, took part in labour protests in the 1920s. He was thrown in jail where he met a fellow protester, fiery young communist party member Bertha Bialek, who had emigrated to the US with her Jewish Polish parents.

Oliver and Bertha married but a racially mixed marriage was daring in the 1920s, and they were shunned. At the time the fledgling Soviet Union was hungry for agricultural specialists. Oliver and Bertha Golden felt inspired to help.

After a few visits to the Soviet Union, Oliver led a group of 16 black cotton-

growers selected by the great Carver himself to help Stalin's brave new state.

The Goldens settled in Tashkent in Uzbekistan, a central Asian republic of the Soviet Union, an area chosen because it was a cotton-growing area and the Uzbeks were considered "coloured" and likely to be more hospitable. Lily was born and spent her first 18 years there — distinguishing herself by becoming the ladies tennis champion of Uzbekistan.

"My parents did not want to move back to a racist country — the United States," Professor Golden said in an interview, speaking in a heavy Russian accent. She said her parents took Soviet citizenship in the 1930s.

Her father died in 1940, but her mother was still reluctant to take Lily back to the US. She moved to Moscow, enrolling Lily at Moscow State University where she studied black history, eventually joining the Soviet Union's African Institute.

She married Abdulla Kassim Hanga, a bright young revolutionary from Zanzibar, in the early days of decolonisation in the late 1950s.

Hanga had been studying at Oxford University. He was ordered by the Revolutionary Council of Zanzibar to go to the Soviet Union and marry the black Russian Africa expert — Lily Golden.

Hanga obeyed orders and arrived in Moscow where he instructed Lily to marry him. She refused, but he moved from Oxford to Lumumba University in Moscow, which provided for blacks, and pursued his determined courtship.

After two years she agreed to



Picture: LEON MÜLLER, Weekend Argus.

□ **BLACK RUSSIAN:** Lily Golden in Cape Town when she told the story of her Russian upbringing and eventual return to the land of her fathers.

marry him and they had one daughter, Yelena.

When Zanzibar joined Tanganyika to form the newly independent state of Tanzania, Hanga returned in triumph, as vice president to president Julius Nyerere.

But Lily did not accompany him and to this day she is grateful she did not — Hanga was assassinated soon after in 1966. "If I had gone with him, I would have been the first to be killed," she said.

A few years ago, while on a lecture tour of the US, Professor Golden received huge publicity, which resulted in the discovery that she had a large family of relatives, black and white, in America.