

## RUTH FIRST (1925-1982)

by Diana Collecott

Ruth First was a completely focussed activist, analyst, researcher and writer, journalist and teacher. She was also a warm, humane, beautiful woman and a firm friend.

When I first met Ruth in 1975, she didn't fit my idea of a leftist intellectual. Despite working intensively, she was very stylish! This was Durham in the 70s, not Johannesburg in the 50s, so she didn't maintain the bandbox perfection of a lawyer's wife and newspaper editor doubling as a dangerous revolutionary. But whatever her weekend in London held – interviews with the BBC, meetings with politicians and publishers, gatherings to address, reports to be written – her initial appointment at 9 am on Saturday was at the hairdresser's!

Ruth was an excellent cook and loved to entertain – her home in South Africa had been a multiracial meeting-place. But she had one rule in the kitchen – no dish should take longer than half-an-hour to prepare – and those dishes were delicious! For two years, separated by one that Ruth spent in Africa, we shared a small house in Mavin Street, and she was the easiest housemate because of her clarity, tolerance and sense of humour.

Then in her late forties, Ruth was embarking on an academic career. She was also maintaining a home in London for her three daughters, while her husband Joe Slovo was based in Luanda as chief of staff of the armed struggle against the Apartheid regime. They had met as students at the University of Witwatersrand and married in 1949. Both were members of the South African Communist Party (SACP) – you could say Ruth was born into it, as her parents were founder members in the 1920s. Nelson Mandela was a fellow student with whom Ruth remained in touch throughout her life. Ruth and Joe were founding members of the African National Congress (ANC) and also active in the Congress Alliance, helping to draft the Freedom Charter.

In South Africa, the 1950s were crucial for many reasons: the tightening of the apartheid system led to widespread protests against the infamous pass laws and to strikes against working and living conditions. Joe was a labour organizer in the thick of this, while Ruth was an investigative reporter writing hard-hitting articles about migrant labour in mines, slave labour on farms, bus boycotts and slum housing. She edited a succession of radical weeklies, including the Jo'burg *Guardian* and *Fighting Talk*, which were successively banned by the government.

In 1954, the Suppression of Communism Act meant that known communists could be 'listed' and proscribed from attending public meetings, publishing or even being quoted in the press. Ruth was one of the first South Africans to be 'banned' under this act, and before long she, Joe and 156 other key figures in the Congress Alliance were arrested and accused of treason. After four years, all were acquitted, but then in 1960 came the Sharpeville massacre, when police shot and killed protesters against the Pass Laws. In the ensuing State of Emergency, Ruth and Joe were both banned. He was then imprisoned for six months, and she fled with their children to Swaziland.

In response to state violence, the ANC and SACP formed an alliance and created MK (Umkhonto we Sizwe, the armed struggle). Key members of these underground groups were betrayed and arrested during a secret meeting at Rivonia in 1963. This would lead to the

infamous year-long Treason Trials, during which Joe (as a defending lawyer) would himself be charged with high treason. As a result he, and Ruth's father, went into exile. A worse fate awaited Mandela and his co-defendants Walter Sisulu and Govan Mbeki: life imprisonment.

Before these cases came to court, Ruth was arrested, kept in solitary confinement, and held without charge under the notorious 90-day detention law. Despite repeated interrogation by the Special Branch, which took her to the brink of suicide, she resisted 'pressure to provide information about her comrades'. After 90 days, she was released and immediately re-arrested, spending a further 27 days in jail: this is the subject of her powerful memoir *117 Days*. She later recommended Gramsci's *Prison Diaries* as an introduction to Marxist thinking and I sometimes wondered whether living in Mavin Street (which ends in the wall of Durham Jail) reminded her of this traumatic time, but I was underestimating her incredible discipline and her capacity for moving on to the next task in the struggle.

*117 Days* was published by Penguin in 1965, after Ruth, her mother, and the three girls had joined Joe in exile in England. It was later made into a film, with Ruth acting herself. The family were now living in Lyme Street, Camden Town, near the headquarters of the Anti-Apartheid Movement. The house – a meeting-place for other exiles and activists – is now marked by a blue plaque, unveiled by Nelson Mandela in 2003.

As anti-Stalinist Communists and anti-Zionist Jews, both Ruth and Joe were demonised in South Africa and Israel alike. They were robustly independent thinkers, unafraid of challenging the party line. Joe's essays include 'No Middle Road' (c. 1972), which argued that the only choice for South Africa was between increased repression and the overthrow of apartheid. This challenged received opinion in the SACP, of which he later became General Secretary.

During the 1960s, Ruth worked tirelessly as a freelance writer, developing original analysis within a Marxist internationalist framework. As well as incisive articles for the press, she researched and edited Mandela's *No Easy Walk to Freedom* and Mbeki's *The Peasants' Revolt* (while they were in jail), as well as Oginga Odinga's *Not Yet Uhuru*, about the freedom struggle in Kenya. She also co-edited *South West Africa: Travesty of Trust* and *The South African Connection: Western Investment in Apartheid*, which in due course made her an exceptionally articulate supporter of Durham Students' Union's campaign to persuade the university to disinvest from Barclays Bank.

In the 1970s, Ruth researched and published *The Barrel of a Gun: The Politics of Coups d'état in Africa* (1970). This analysed the role of European and American military powers in African coups, but also criticised corrupt African leaders post-independence. She went on to write *Libya: The Elusive Revolution* (1974): Ruth was the first woman to interview Colonel Gaddafi.

In 1972, Ruth took up a research fellowship at the University of Manchester, which led the following year to a lectureship in the Department of Sociology at the University of Durham. Her role here was to teach Development Studies, which she interpreted broadly, collaborating with colleagues in the Middle East Centre and in Arts departments. Taking women's liberation as well as African liberation in her stride, she engaged energetically with feminist theory, forming friendships with Sheila Rowbotham, the women's historian, and Ros de Lanerolle, one of the founders of the Women's Press. She also collaborated with Anne Scott on a biography of *Olive Schreiner* (1980).

During her five years at Durham, Ruth continued to be active in the Anti-Apartheid Movement, went to Africa for UNESCO and spent time on secondment at universities in Tanzania and Mozambique. In 1978, she was invited to become research director at the Centre for African Studies at Eduardo Mondlane University in Maputo. She was delighted to be going back to Africa, which for her was going home. There, she embarked on a pioneering study of migrant labour – especially the men from Mozambique who worked in the South African gold mines: this would be published as *Black Gold: the Mozambican Miner* in 1983. Her next project was to be a study of the women who remained in Mozambique and kept their families and farms going while the men were away.

One morning in August 1982, after a UNESCO conference at Maputo, Ruth was opening her mail at the university, when a letter bomb sent from Pretoria exploded with such force that it annihilated this brilliant, vibrant woman. Recalling how Ruth had been banned and imprisoned in South Africa, her friend and fellow exile Ronald Segal described this atrocity as 'the final act of censorship'.

Ruth First considered herself an African. Her daughters were among those attending the funeral in Maputo, and were grateful for the culture there that allowed them to express their grief, celebrate their mother's life and start to deal with her loss. This loss was felt worldwide; as one obituary put it: 'she was one of the most gifted and dedicated South African revolutionaries of our time'.

Two of Ruth's daughters are gifted writers. The eldest, Shawn Slovo, wrote a version of her mother's life at the time of the Treason Trials, which was filmed as *A World Apart*. It is also the story of Shawn's childhood and her screenplay won a BAFTA. In the film, Ruth is played by Barbara Hershey and Shawn at thirteen by Jodhi May. The director was Chris Menges and the film won the Palme d'Or at Cannes in 1988.

Ruth's second daughter, Gillian Slovo, writes fiction. Her novels include *Ties of Blood* about her family and the freedom struggle. Gillian also bravely made a documentary about her mother's death for BBC Radio, which included her meeting with the man responsible for Ruth's murder. Major Craig Williamson of the SA Police was exonerated for this assassination, and for the attempted assassination of her father in 1984.

Fortunately, Joe Slovo survived to play a key role in bringing about the post-apartheid state that Ruth, and many like her, never saw. In 1990, he returned to South Africa and helped to negotiate Mandela's release. Four years later, after the first multiracial election, Joe was made Minister of Housing in President Mandela's first cabinet. When he died of leukemia the following year, his funeral was attended by the entire high command of the ANC, including Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki. Neither Ruth nor Joe had swerved from the demanding road they had set out on, yet both had lived joyfully and freely while helping to achieve freedom for their country. They were among the few minority South Africans of their generation who (in the words of Fergal Keane, the BBC's correspondent for Southern Africa) 'chose to step outside the privilege of their skin'.

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This text is based on a talk delivered by Diana Collecott at a 'Celebrate Africa' Day held in Durham in October 2011. Diana was a full-time Lecturer, and then Senior Lecturer, in the Durham University English Department from Oct 1974 to Dec 2004, continuing part-time until 2006. She was Organizing Secretary of the Ruth First Studentship Committee from 1983 to 1992 (when Professor Richard Brown was Chair). She represented the University on the WUS committee for Southern Africa for part of that time, which included the initiation of an annual Ruth First Lecture and the setting-up of Durham City Council's support for the Ruth First Scholarship. During this period Shawn Slovo visited Durham to present *A World Apart* and Ruth's closest colleague Huw Beynon left to take up a Chair at Manchester (he is now at Cardiff).