

JOE SLOVO

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The point you make about the role of journalists, I think it was absolutely criminal because we had no public platforms, we couldn't operate at any open legal level, and the only way in which we could express our objectives and participate in influencing the course of events, is through the various organs that were published from time to time. The point about it all is that, Ruth, I think in each case, played perhaps one of the most important roles apart from anything because of her skills. If you look at the journals that appear in the Fifties, which have provided the only kind of public guidelines in the theoretical sense to the struggle that was going on - the various versions of "The Guardian" and pamphlets and leaflets, so I would say that all this played a more important role, perhaps, than any other factor in keeping the spark alive.

Don : The things I can't get from other people or the newspapers are things that I need to just back up a bit about her background - where her parents were from.

Her parents were from, I think, one from Latvia and the other from Lithuania - I could check on that. I'm not absolutely certain. I know that he, [Julius] I think, was from Latvia.

Don : I don't know where Tilly was from. I asked her but she couldn't remember.

Well we could find that out.

Don : And things like significant events in her early years - formative things that might have made her a journalist or which made her the type of person she was. In early childhood, in school ... did you know her at school?

No, I didn't. I only got to know her when we were at ...

Don : At university?

No, not even at university. I wasn't at university. I was a worker. In fact, I met her in the early Youth Movement of the Party - the YCL. I knew her then, but by the time I got to university, she had just completed so we didn't have knowledge of one another's activities at university.

Don : Did she ever talk about things? I know nothing about her childhood at all. It's not a major part ...

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She did talk about her childhood from time to time. Ruth was a sceptic far earlier than most of us about some of the distortions that were becoming apparent, even in those times about what was going on in the socialist world. And she had parents who were absolutely and unconditionally uncritical of all that and I think that it was partly her good sense and partly the natural rebellion of children to be critical of the firm views of parents that she more than anyone else, sort of questioned. It wasn't always easy to do it openly but she developed a scepticism about the kind of unconditional commitment that the whole Movement had towards what was going on there.

Don : Ronnie developed another kind of scepticism which was right out.

Well, in his case, he became anti-political but that was a sort of a sibling relationship (thing) you see, the parents were always very proud of Ruth because of the role she played and her political commitment - this was the most important thing in their lives and I am sure that Ronnie felt the degree of discrimination. I don't think there really was any, actually.

Don : Because he was her younger brother ...

He was her younger brother, yes.

Don : During the 1930's when she was at school, there was a lot of fascist anti-semitism around coming from the Nationalist Party. Did that have any influence on her?

I don't think so at all because when it came to Jewish culture, I think the whole family was far more separated than even I was and I was brought up in the Jewish tradition. They were not and I am not sure whether she had any special experiences. She never especially talked about it.

Don : Which parent was most influential? Tilly?

I think Tilly was influential in both a positive and a negative way. I don't know if one should say this, but there was always tension between them.

Don : Yes, I picked that up.

It was like all parents in the Jewish tradition in the way they bring up children and all of that ...

Don : Was there a bit of competition there?

Well, yes. In a sort of a way. Not political competition. Not at all. From that point of view they were absolutely proud and taken up with her.

Don : Was she involved in politics at school?

I don't know.

Don : At university ...? This is a particularly difficult area for me. I have talked to a lot of people who knew her afterwards but not anybody who knew her at university. The only person who knew her there that I have talked to is Ishmael Meer. Was he quite influential in her journalism or her politics?

Yes, they had a relationship and it was destroyed by the Group Areas Act.

Don : Really.

I'm not sure what would have happened because Ishmael was here on permit and then, when he finished his studies, he was ordered to go back to Natal. So he had no right to be in the Transvaal. And I think there is a question of Ruth having to make a choice of whether she was going to join him. I have the impression that, by that time, the relationship had waned a bit. I wasn't involved at all so I'm being quite objective. I think he must have had, I'm not sure what influence ...

Don : But he was a journalist. He did a lot of writing.

He wasn't a journalist. He was a law student. He was a capable draftsman. He wasn't really a journalist. He didn't write much, as far as I know. I know of no special work by Ishmael. He contributed here and there.

Don : He probably writes a lot now and, therefore, writes about then. What was Ruth's main political activity? Young Communist League or Progressive Students Rights?

Well, at university she was apparently, and then again I wasn't there ..., involved in the Student Movement. But I really can't give you details about that. But of course, when the Young Communist League was formed, she was a very prominent member.

Don : She was secretary of that.

I mean, she was part of a group from university then and we were a group of people who were actually workers. I remember there was an enormous sort of worker/intellectual conflict between us.

Don : Between the groups?

Yes, you know, sort of a little feeling of insecurity from those who didn't have the education that these smart-alecs could formulate and speak and so on ... and were just too big for their boots, kind of thing. It wasn't a serious rift of any sorts.

Don : Was this within the Young Communist League?

Within the Young Communist League to a degree and there were a group of us who were actual proletarians as it were. So my life with Ruth started off with quite a degree of political tension based on this nonsense.

Don : Really? How did you solve that?

It wasn't a lifetime. I joined the army and, as a result of that, managed to evade the requirements of matric and, as an ex-serviceman, was given exemption to go to university and I entered the same year sort of thing.

Don : So after university, the 1940's (I'm going by periods. It's sort of easier ...) what were Ruth's major political pre-occupations then? She was probably a member of the Party, wasn't she?

Yes, she was a member of the Party in the mid-40's. I think even in the YCL she was a member of the Party and then, as you know, I think she qualified with a social science degree and worked for a while for the Council, writing speeches for the various heads of departments.

Don : How did she get into that? I mean, that's unusual.

She had a degree and I presume there was an advertisement and she got the job. I don't think there's anything special about it. And then when people were needed to man or to woman "The Guardian" office, she decided to abandon that and, of course it was made possible, because her family had means and she could live without an income which is what she did for most of her life here in South Africa until I became a barrister.

Don : Did she not get paid by "The Guardian"?

I recall that, towards the end, "The Guardian" people were getting paid twenty-five quid a month. So it was just a nominal amount.

Don : Before she joined "The Guardian" was she involved in the '46 strike and passive resistance?

Oh yes. We were involved - all of us - in support groups, leaflets, campaigning and all that in all these events but I can't sort of recall any special incident that she was part of.

Don : And how deeply were you both involved in the CPSA before its dissolution? As key members or as younger members?

First of all, we were both elected eventually. I think I was elected before her, as members of the Johannesburg District Committee of the Party. This, I think, happened in 1946/1947. We were both on the Johannesburg District Committee. We were always at National conferences, elected as delegates and we played a very active role. We were both members of what was known as the Johannesburg-West Branch of the Party which included a number of groups at the university. It didn't mean all the people at the university but there were university students then and they were part of the Johannesburg-West Branch. One of the campaigns I recall all of us being very actively involved in was 1946 Food Raids, you must have come across this. We were all raiding shops and all kinds of things.

Don : The sense I get, but it could be incorrect, is that the Party really changed its character between the 1930's and the 1940's in that it had sort of run itself into a quite a hard place by the end of the '30's and that the '40's was a renewal with new people and new ideas.

Oh yes. The fact is that where the sort of climax of the worst excesses of the Stalinist influences were ... you know, you strengthened the Party by purging, by getting rid of people and by the time we came in, you must remember it was during the period of the sort of broad united front days in support of the war effort of all kinds of things. So in every respect that influenced the breath of conception and thinking of all the people who came in.

Don : But by then comintern had been disbanded.

It had been disbanded in 1943.

Don : I get a sense that, in fact, the Party in the 40's was very much forming its own shape rather than, you know, it had lucitised with Moscow rather than what the State was seeming to suggest.

In fact, in the '40s we had no ties with Moscow accept in the sense we bowed in the direction of Mecca everytime the sun came up. We had no ties because no body went; no body left the country. There were no physical relationships at all. Its not like the 30's when the comintern used to send people to tell us what to do.

Don : What was the effect on the Party? I mean as an assessment from way off in time. Was it debilitating?

Do you mean the 40's?

Don : Yes.

It was the beginning of a broadening out in approach but only a very small beginning because the influence from the baggage from the past was still there in the thinking of a lot of people. But there is also the other aspect to it that the Party attracted very broad elements who, while on the one hand were broad in their thinking but, on the other hand, when it came to the push, were not as deeply prepared for the sacrifice as the committed revolutionaries of the early days. The result, of course was that, when it came to the crunch, and we were now faced with the legality in the 50's, a great portion just fell away because they just weren't ready for that. They weren't the old kind of Bolsheviks, you know. There was the Bolshevik element still there.

Don : I get a sense that the Party by dissolving and then re-emerging in '52 or '53 really relocated also because the influence was up in Johannesburg, underground.

Well, a number of things sort of changed the character of the Party then. One of the most important was that we found ourselves without any public platform. The result was that the relationship between the Party and the broad Movement had to find some other expression. The result of it was that, particularly as far as the black comrades were concerned, the only way they could continue participating in political life, was through the mass organisation; through the ANC and so on and so forth. What really laid the basis which was the Regimes Act which, in a way, laid the basis for the alliance which eventually emerged, whereas before the relationship was sort of between two organisations and relative independence and, although there were duplications of membership, it wasn't as deeply bound up as it eventually became. The illegality changed all that.

Don : I get a sense that the discussions in the Johannesburg Discussion Club were very formative in re-defining the Party. Was that right?

You're not thinking of the Cape Town Discussion Club?

Don : I'm thinking of "Viewpoints and Perspectives" which was a publication which came out of the Johannesburg Discussion Club.

Well, that I think was from Cape Town. I don't recall a discussion club in Johannesburg. I don't know if you're thinking of the New Left Book Clubs. no, not the New Left ... the Left Book Clubs.

Don : No. There were definitely discussion clubs in Durban, Cape Town and Johannesburg. I only know that because

I've got some of their publications. The discussions in there are leading towards CST as a theory.

I think that was more Cape Town than Jo'burg and if you read the proceedings of the last conference of the Party - the report of the Central Committee, you will see the basis of CST emerging there. Where it initially was triggered off, I can't really honestly say.

Don : Well there are various people who claim to have invented it. Eddie Roux, in fact.

In what work? (way?)

Don : There's a quote that I've seen where he says that we need to understand how oppression happens in one country in a colonial situation except the oppressors are within the country.

Well, it's quite possible. I like Eddie Roux very much, by the way. He's a great guy.

Don : His stuff is really nice. His writing But CST re-aligns the Party with the Nationalist movement, that seems to its main theoretical direction.

I think there's a combination of a mutual influence. I think it was a national movement which had an enormous impact, obviously, especially after the 50s on the thinking of the Party and the other way about. We were moving in those directions but, basically, it was articulated in a structured way in a programme in '62 eventually.

Don : To get back to you and Ruth. What part did you play in the re-forming of the underground Party.

I am not sure about the Party. When it was announced that the Party was dissolved, a few of us refused to accept it. I was one of them. There was a group of us who decided that we were going to band together and continue to meet as groups in the hope that others would do it and also to stimulate others to do it so that eventually it would be formed. In the meanwhile, we weren't absolutely certain whether the old central committee - because none of us were on the central committee - had something up its sleeve. In the beginning we thought it might be a ruse in order to avoid legal implications of continuation. It then became clear there wasn't at all - that the people weren't ready to really continue taking any risks at all. So we actually got together. We met other people and we sort of put our foot down and said: "Listen, if you chaps don't do something about it. If we don't all get together and do something about it, we are just going to come out and say 'the Party lives' and this happened with other groups as well and, eventually, we got together.

Quite frankly, at this point, I'm not sure where Ruth was. Maybe she was having kids. It was '52.

Don : When was Shaun (Sean) (Shawn) born?

Shaun was born in 50 and Gillian was born in 52 and Robin in 53. So that was a period in which she was involved in giving birth and she didn't play such a seminal role in that part of it.

Don : To go back to the old central committee. Were none of the members involved in the new Party?

No, no, no. They were. Even those who had voted for the dissolution. Not everybody did it for the same motive. Some did it because they had had enough. They weren't prepared to take any risks. I was with it, because I think there's something in this argument. The old Party consisted of people who weren't really prepared for this kind of life and it might have been dangerous to go on without a break. So there were different motivations. Kedani, Dadu - they all voted for the dissolution and it was, only as we know, Bill Andrews and Michael Hamel on the central committee who voted against the dissolution. Everybody else did it for different motives. Including Braam. Braam did it, basically, for legalistic motives. *Kotane Dadu*

Don : To get back to Ruth's journalism for a moment. On the left in the 1950s, how would she have been regarded? As a politician, as an academic, as a journalist?

As a political activist and as a journalist. As a political activist, her main contribution was through journalism.

Don : Was she also involved in political organisations and discussions and debates.

Oh yes, because she eventually, when the first conference was held, which I think was in 1953, and then the central underground committee was appointed, she wasn't on that. I was elected to that. But at the following conference, I think it was 55, she was elected to the central committee and, from then on, she was involved in every aspect of underground building and work.

Don : Did that cause quite a strain? You people seem to have been doing so much ... and raising kids.

Well, it obviously, looking back on it, I think we were sort of euphoric about prospects and a bit blind as to what would eventually happen. There was some basis for being a little bit "reckless" because you know we had a security apparatus which was pretty poor at that point of time, on the other side, and we just got away with murder. *euphoric*

Don : Why I asked that question is because I lived through the

'80s with kids and it nearly wiped us out. You know, arrests and detentions and hiding ... I had a sort of deja vu about it when I was reading about the '50s.

Yes, that's another side of it. You see worlds apart and that sort of poses a problem pretty well ... the effect on kids. I'm not sure whether that, if we had our lives all over again, we would have behaved in the same way. It's not as if we would have desisted from what we were doing. I think we just kept our kids in ignorance and, therefore, they were bewildered and isolated from their own society. Because it's not like a black kid. In a sense, they suffered more than black kids at some level.

Don : It was multiple world they were in. I'm sure at school they were in a completely different world.

they had no support, you see. A black kid whose parents get arrested becomes a hero in the school. A white kid whose parents get arrested, is a subject of derision and so on ... communist scum.

Don : Just on Ruth's journalism. How did she regard her writing? Was she anxious about writing? Did she do it easily?

Well, she wrote very quickly which, sometimes I think, was a defect in her writing. She had too much on her plate. She had a remarkable flow of language and, I don't know how to put this, but often I felt that she wrote too quickly on topics. I'm not talking about journalism. I'm talking about her stuff which goes beyond journalism. I think her facility for the flow of words often, I think, was an impediment to her more finished work - conceptual structure.

Don : Was she ever anxious about her writing?

Oh yes. Ruth was terribly inhibited about all her talents. She projected the confidence and arrogance and all that, but she was the most inhibited, insecure, in the sense of never feeling that she was on top of things ... that she could do better and all of that.

Don : One gets the sense that she was very shy?

She was very shy but it manifested itself in the kind of thing that people often resented and that is sharpness, and assertiveness and so on.

Don : Why do you think she was so insecure?

Jim I don't want to exaggerate insecurity. She wasn't a completely insecure person. I think she was a very hard task master with others and with herself and I don't know if she was ever satisfied with anything that she finally wrote. But she did and she always felt it could be better and how it was going to be received, and all that kind of thing.

Don : Was Ruth on the drafting committee of the Freedom Charter? *Cathalia*
~~Charlie~~ indicated that she was. I just wondered.

You know, I'm not sure. She might have played a role.

Don : On one of the many committees.

Yes, on one of the many committees. I think eventually, you know, this is a very complicated process drafting the Freedom Charter and, I'm not sure she was one of an actual formal group which finally sort of presented the Draft to the Movement based on the things that had come in.

Don : What was it like when you were arrested for the treason trial? You were both arrested at the same time, weren't you?

In the treason trial, we were both ... no, no, no I was instructed to act, together with the others, on behalf of the accused and then I was arrested myself a week later.

Don : But on the trial, it's amazing to me sitting in the distance of time, it seems that four years were spent finding, simply, two words, Communism and Treason. It's the most extraordinary trial, looked at in that way. Could one say that's so?

The trial was really a propaganda exercise.

Don : Which the Movement won, really.

Absolutely. Hands down. And in fact, although it was intended to disorganise the Movement. You had the spectacle for the first time in South African history of 156 people representing an even proportion of every part of the population being charged with creating hostility between the races. The only group in South Africa ... in one cage.

Don : The failure ... So much was based on language. How words were used. How things were defined.

I think they were really clumsy - unthought out effort and, once it started, it had a momentum of its own. They couldn't very well get out of it and they tried in all kinds of directions to back up their case. You've read about.

Don : Could you say the trial was really between Apartheid and non-racialism? those are the two core themes that seem to run through it.

Well, I think the trial was an attempt to, at a time before they had decided to outlaw the ANC, destroy the ANC through legal means and judicial processes. Had they succeeded and had they succeeded in proving the treason that the Freedom Charter amounted to treason, then the advocacy of that policy would have been illegal and, therefore, it was an attempt that failed miserably. And that it was communism, of course, Don.

Don : What effect did the trial have on your private lives?

It disorganised my practice. It didn't interfere so much with Ruth's journalistic activities because the trial was a part of what we were all doing - those of them who were journalists.

Don : The last few questions Joe. During the 60s, during the Emergency, Ruth and the children went off to Swaziland for 6 months. This is a blank area for me. What did she do there. Just sit and wait. Were their other exiles or temporary exiles there?

Oh yes. What happened was they arrested people in stages and I always assumed, that she would be arrested first. And it happened that I was arrested first and then a decision was taken that the arrests were coming and all those who could evade arrest made tracks, most of them to Swaziland. There was a rather big community there. I don't know exactly what they did there. They were evading the the detentions and the emergency.

Don : And the kids were out of school? They were sort of six months in limbo there.

Let me think. I have the feeling they might of ... I'm not so sure. I'm sure they didn't go to school there.

Don : She must have expected to be arrested when she returned, I guess.

No, no, by the time she returned the emergency was over and we were all being released. I mean, when I was released, she had come back to Jo'burg, but we were living somewhere else because we thought they might still turn the tables.

Don : So you sort of went into hiding in Jo'burg?

For a short while, yes.

Don : And then finally. Rivonia. What was Ruth's involvement in the events which eventually led up to Rivonia? Was she still in the Party?

She was on the Party's central committee.

Don : So she was very involved?

Yes, very. But by some sheer accident was not taken unlike me, because I had been sent out of the country.

Don : No it was Kawinga. Is that why you left?

No, no, no. In my case I was sent out together with JV Marx to carry out a mission and to return within two months and to stay underground. While I was out, Rivonia blew.

Don : In other words, she wasn't at Rivonia for that meeting and that was her luck.

Yes, that was her luck.

Don : Was she involved in the Mobile Radio Station?

No, not at all.

Don : I understood that she was involved in that.

No, she wasn't involved in that.

Don : It would have been nice if she had been involved with the beginning of radio freedom.

Yes, but she wasn't.

Don : Why was Ruth not ^{for} good on trial? They must have known that she was involved.

They didn't have sufficient evidence, I think, and at that time, even though they had already started this ninety day stuff, and so on and so forth, they hand't gone in for the kind of extreme torture. They didn't manage to get as much information as they later got out of people.

Don : Do you think it could be because she was white and a woman that it wouldn't look good on a treason trial where they expected the death penalty?

I don't know what motivated them but I think that had they had some direct evidence, I don't think they would have hesitated.

Don : I'm going to ask Victor that. You know, he is now General Victor. He is in charge of the Ciskeian Police. I am very tempted to go and ask him.

Well, why not.

Don : Ja, I will.
When you saw her again, had she changed much after detention? What effect did it have on her?

Well, first of all, she was obviously she had been effected by the detention in the sense that, although she hadn't given anything away of any substance, as a result of the kind of mental torture they went in for. She did begin to make a statement at some point. You know all that from her book. I think she bore that guilt for a long time even though she knew that she hadn't damaged anyone, but she felt she had let herself down and so on.

Don : It's hard to put together somebody who comes across in history, really, like her and then find that she attempted to take too many sleeping pills. The two don't connect at all in my head.

What do you mean?

Don : In her book she indicates that she attempted to commit suicide, really.

Yes, she had concluded that she would never be released. That they would go on with this. that she may not be strong enough to resist and that she could never live with herself if she didn't resist.

Don : She knew she knew too much.

She knew too much. In fact, she knew everything. Well, most things. She wasn't involved at all in the military side of things.

Don : What was her real role within the underground movement?

We didn't have any military activity. We had districts, we had branches, we had public material, the various campaigns that went on in the '50s, there were committees and structures connected with all that - I can't detail all her involvement. It was a lot of activity.

Don : So it was a lot of work.

A hell of a lot of work.

Don : It's amazing that it was never known from 53 till Rivonia.

What was never known?

Don : That the Party was operating underground. Not known by the authorities. You must have had quite a tight operation.

I think they knew. They knew we were there, at least, they must have known we were there. But we didn't actually publically emerge until 1960. We didn't come out openly and say "here we are".

Don : Joe, this is positively the last question and its just a puzzle. When Ruth and others went to the Soviet Union, her reports were pretty glowing and that was in '55. Was she shown Timkin villages or not shown the Soviet Union in the way, because, later it's clear that had she seen more, she might have been more critical at that point.

None of us saw the real Soviet Union, you know. When you go as officials from one organisation to another, you shop around and you see the cow that has produced more milk than any other cow in the capitalist world and all that kind of thing.

Don : So there's no real way of penetrating the Gulags for the grainaries.

No, we didn't believe they existed, in any case except it was all enemy propaganda.

Don : That's extraordinary for me because I was in Moscow and I'm sure I didn't see the beginning of what the Soviet Union was all about. But isn't it amazing that so many years passed without the ...

Did you suspect the Gulags when you were in Moscow?

Don : You couldn't see that there was any such thing.

Well, that's the point, you see. I mean it all ^{looked like} ~~like~~ it was going very well.

Don : What was the effect of Kruschev's denunciation of Stalin?
Quite a shock?

Well obviously, yes. I mean we were all divided on whether this was so and a lot of people,

even up till 1980, didn't believe it, but I think that this is the crunch point. Both Ruth and I, Ruth perhaps more than me, felt that we'd been had.

Don : Was she quite flexible politically in terms of her left wing believes.

She was committed. She was a committed marxist. I don't think she ever, until towards the end, when we all went to Europe and new strands of Marxism emerged - you know, the New Left, and so on, which came to influence her far more than most of us. Euro-Communist strand and so on and so forth. But until then she, apart from her earlier scepticism about some of the things that were going on in the Soviet Union, she was a committed marxist.

Don : She wasn't in the Party in later years, was she?

No, no. She died in the Party. She was in the Party Unit in Maputo and we had units there right until up to the last moment.

Don : That's good to know and about as much as your ear can take on a telephone. Its been wonderfully helpful.

If you like, I can transcribe this for you and if you have some more thoughts, you can jot them down.

Okay, its up to you. When is this going to see light of day?

Don : Well Z Press want it as a book, but I want to finish writing by the end of this year. That's my goal. But then I want to send it out to various people including yourself, to Brian and to various other people to say is this okay? Please check it. Have I got all my facts straight.

Well, by the way. You must remember that people like Brian and others actually wanted to hurl her out of the Party.

Don : Why?

Well, because during the time ... when we were in ... I'm not sure you can put all this in but I will tell you. About the questions when we were already in England and so on, she, for example, participated in this Italian international organisation which had hearings on various breeches of human rights. I don't remember what it was called, but she was a patron of that and, for example on the issue of eretrea, which we had a very pro-Soviet point of view, she was out on a limb and, in general, she was regarded as a sort of having moved away from the tenets of Marxism by quite a number of people because of her scepticism of the Soviet Union. So there was actually a strong move from among the hardened Stalinists to drop her from the Party and

quite frankly, between you and me, if it hadn't been for my role - not that I intervened, but because of my status and position, she would have been hurled out of the Party quite long ago.

Don : That's most interesting. It shows a fairly tough independent mind there.