

Interview with

Ronald First

Johannesburg January 1992

My dad's name was Julius Ephraim. He was born in Bauske, Courland, Latvia.

Did he come out with his parents or by himself?

His father's name was Moses Reuben and he arrived in South Africa in 1903. Julius arrived with his mother in 1906 with three of the children. Julius' father came first.

What was your grandfather's trade and did you ever know him?

No, he died in 1914 and my grandmother died just after I was born. He was a tailor.

So Julius would have been very young when he came out here?

He was born in 1896. He was ten when he arrived.

I have been able to find very little about Julius.

He was a trustee. He worked for a firm of accountants then.

Was he an accountant by trade?

By profession, you mean? Not a qualified accountant. I don't think they had chartered accountants in those days. He was connected with a firm of auditors but he did

trustee work. In 1923 he and his brother started a mattress company called Union Mattress. In 1921 he was secretary of the Communist Party in South Africa and he was associated with the doyens of the labour movement in those days. There was Bunting, that is Brian Bunting's father and a chap Bill Andrews, both British trade unionists and socialists.

That's the only bit of the history of Julius that I can pick up from where its written into the history of the Communist Party. It's everything else that's difficult to find. What he did with his factory.

He ran the mattress factory until 1936, then they changed it to a furniture factory called Anglo Union and he was connected with that until the time he fled South Africa.

How did Anglo Union do?

Reasonably well.

Where was the factory?

In Industria.

Did you employ a lot of people? Was it a big operation?

Yes. It was average.

Looking through records I cannot find any names spelled First. Was he not originally Ferst.

It was originally spelled Furst. When they came to South Africa, they were asked what their name was, they said First (which is the correct pronunciation), so it was written First. But the correct spelling is Furst with an umlaut on the U.

A lot of names got changed by customs

officials.

It was changed merely by spelling, but the name stayed the same.

What sort of education did Julius have?

He went to school. He went to a Jewish Government School which was in Doornfontein in those days. He matriculated and then went to work. He did a secretarial course, I think, or an accounting course. He was quite a good bookkeeper. That was his field.

In the reports I got of him, everyone said he was a warm guy. What was he like to you? I mean do you remember him as a warm guy?

I worked for him for a long time in the factory. He was a very nice man. Both my parents were very involved in politics but Julius played golf and was interested in sport and had lots of interests. He was a decent man.

Do you know much about Tilly? I've spoken to her, but she didn't remember much.

Sure. What do you want to know about her? She came from the same area. She was born in 1897 and she came here in 1901. She was four.

Do you know why both of them came out? Was it to do with the pogroms and the difficulties.

Yes.

What about Tilly's parents? What did they do?

I don't know much about them but I don't

think she came out with them. I think they were dead. She probably came out with people being only four.

You don't know what her father did for a trade and things like that?

No.

What did Tilly do? Did she work?

She was a secretary and she worked for Julius at one time.

How did they meet?

I have no idea. It might have been through politics. But they must have met out here, obviously.

What was she like?

She was intelligent, but always a bit tough. Tougher than Julius. More single-minded although they were both very steeped in their politics. But she didn't really have any interests outside that. Those were her sole interests.

When I met her she was 91 and tough as anything and gave me quite a hard time during questioning. She would make sure that my questions were absolutely right before she would answer them. What was it like being in a house that was so political? Was it just your normal world or did you notice it as being different?

Well, at times, sure, but if one compared it to homes of ones friends, it was quite different. It was stimulating but one got on with his normal life. We were very involved with sport and school and socialising. They would have interesting people over for political discussion with vehemence at times. I didn't really think it was different as

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a youth. It obviously had a stronger influence on Ruth than it did on me.

Was she older than you?

4 years. She got involved in the politics after she left high school. The influence must have been there, although politically speaking, later on, they didn't agree at all. My parents were strong Stalinists, Soviets, Russian-style Communists. Ruth wasn't at all. She wasn't involved in dogma to the same degree. She was very interested in the South African situation.

Talking to people who were friends of Ruth when she was young, they would sort of arrive at your house and come out two hours later reeling having been completely converted to Tilly's point of view. There have been about three people who have said that to me.

What, young people.

Yes, Ruth's friends. High school people. So Tilly must have had quite an influence.

She was very hard politically.

Do you remember your earlier houses?

Yes, we were born in Kensington in Latona Street and I went to Jeppe High. Ruth went to Jeppe Girls and eventually matriculated at Barnarto Park.

Did you never go the Jewish government school?

No. Yeoville Boys I was at. I don't know if she ever went to it. It could be possible. We lived in a few homes during our youth. We started in Kensington, then we moved from there to a number of homes. My father had tough economic times from time to time.

Then we came back to Kensington.

Is that why you moved, because things would get tough?

Yes.

I have seen a double-storied house which you lived in, but I've forgotten where.

The Kensington house was a double-story and there was a double-storied one in Emmerentia. Maybe you saw that one?

I don't remember.

When did you see that?

I have been working on this thing for some years now. In 88 I went through Ruth's papers in London and got some of these addresses and just went around and looked at some of the houses. But I haven't got details now of exactly where they were.

Are you very involved with the ANC?

Well, yes. But I'm more of an academic. I have been involved in politics. Of course, Grahamstown is one of those kind of places. I'm not a mainline politico really. Why do you ask?

There were certain influences in those times on both my parents, but more particularly on Ruth and Joe Slovo that seem to have been swept under the rug nowadays. I'm thinking specifically of Bram Fischer.

What sort of influences?

The influences are considerable from a man like Fischer on a person like Ruth.

He was quite a powerful guy.

A wonderful man. I'm curious about why his whole contribution has been discounted.

Has it really? I know someone who's writing a biography of him and there has been a biography written already by Naomi Shapiro. I think these things rise and fall.

Well Gillian Slovo wrote something and Fischer's not even ...

He's not, is he in Ties of Blood, there's no mention of him.

I don't understand it at all because he was the most dynamic of all them. Sam Kahn before him and then Fischer.

Do you think he had a lot of influence on Ruth?

Absolutely. A tremendous amount, particularly Fischer.

During her school years, what would have been major influences apart from your parents.

All the YCL people. The Fellers and the Sachs and the Baldwins and the Wolpes. They were all a group. I don't know what the adult influence would have been. I would have said Sam Kahn was a major influence. People like Dadoo was a major influence.

Are these people who came to your house?

Yes. Mandela headed out there a couple of times.

Would they have had an impact on you

people when you were still at school?

No. After school. This was in the early 60s. Treason Trial time.

Do you remember apart from the Communist Party, of course, any particular organisations your parents were involved in? Like the Jewish Workers Club and Paoli Zion.

No, nothing to do with the religious aspect. Nothing to do with Israel. They were anti-Israel.

So Judaism had no influence on your family at all?

No.

Not even as a culture?

They both spoke Yiddish, Julius reasonably well. Tilly not that well. Julius maintained it and maintained the influence, but he was much more rounded in that direction than she. He retained that culture. He was younger anyway. He was ten when he came out here. There would have been a greater influence.

Did he teach you Yiddish?

No. Pity. None of that culture was taught to either Ruth and myself.

So they were anti Zionist and Judaic religion passed you by?

Absolutely, they were anti-religious and anti-Zionist. Strong atheists. Much too intense in their political beliefs. Particularly my mother.

I imagine this was very difficult. When

young people start rebelling against their parents, this is such a big thing to kick against.

Well, it wasn't a rebellion because it wasn't noticeable that it influenced our up-bringing and, of course, Ruth's politics diverged considerably from my mother's in her early adult life from then on. They used to have terrible rows politically.

What would have been the main issues of those rows?

My mother was totally involved in the Soviet Union and every aspect of its society. It was all brilliant, you know. It was the most wonderful thing. It was bread. It was the answer to all problems. Without any acceptance of any form of criticism. I think it was the bravery during the Second World War which just put the lid on the achievement, which was considerable, of course.

And would Ruth argue about that?

No, not about that, but I don't think the unbending attitude was something that she shared. They never sat down and had an argument about it, certainly not in public. But I could see that there was tension over political and general views in behaviour, how children were brought up, etc. Surprisingly enough, Ruth's kids reacted to Tilly with quite a lot of animosity. From my point of view, she saved their whole sanity at times when there was no one else to do it. They didn't give her credit. Shaun didn't in her movie and Gillian doesn't in her books.

The family wouldn't have held together without Tilly.

I thought that it was...well it was coming from children, who have a limited perception.

I suppose they were really angry with their parents not being around when they wanted them and it could have all ended up on Tilly's lap?

But even today they assess the situation as her having been tough. She was not tough with them, she was devoted to them. She was a very intense person. Keen mind but very single-minded.

Just jumping back a bit. In the 1930s it must have been a very tense time for your parents with the whole Party being purged, do you remember that as having any affect on you and Ruth?

Do you mean in the Soviet Union?

No, in South Africa. With the Waltons. You know your parents were never kicked out of the Communist Party but many people were.

I don't know anything about their political activity with the SA Communist Party.

So that was very much a private thing? It wasn't shared with the kids in the house?

No, not at all.

That's interesting because it seems to me that Ruth did exactly the same thing with her kids.

Ruth was an active journalist, she wasn't a politician. She was very involved with the struggle in South Africa. My parents and especially my father did some clerical work. My mother was a theoretical politician. They weren't active in any aspect. They weren't marching in rallies or waving any flags or speaking at meetings. They were reading and holding forth, particularly my mother. So Ruth's role was totally different. I don't think it would have been of any

significance if she was a member of any political movement. I don't even know if she was. I don't think it was important in her life.

I think it was the journalism that was the core of what she was doing.

Absolutely. The journalism got her involved in the struggle in South Africa and that's what swept her along.

By comparison with what was written in those times, she was by far one of the best.

She was very good and she was a good speaker too.

Did you ever hear her speak?

She was an excellent speaker.

What was she like as a sister?

She was nice. We got on well. We didn't share that much in common. She was a girl and older and I was interested in sport, basically, and nothing else. But she was terrific. As adults we got on extremely well. She was a fun person too. It wasn't seen normally. But somebody her saw it more clearly was that great friend of hers, Moira Forajz who is now in Lisbon. They shared great common interests, and she would tell you what a fun person Ruth was.

I got the impression that Ruth was quite shy?

She was, yes.

That's strange because her public appearance is so very forceful.

If she had something to do in a public sense,

she was good, but she was otherwise quite withdrawn.

Why, do you think?

She was an introvert. But she had the ability to speak well and had a very quick mind. She would obviously prepare what she was going to say well and with keen grasp of the subject. She was a very good researcher. She used to talk outside the City Hall. She was a great speaker. She was every bit as good as a man like Sam Kahn. She was better as a public speaker.

I've heard descriptions. People actually describing it as they heard her and they were very interesting descriptions.

She was much better speaker than Hilda Bernstein.

In her book 117 Days, she said she suffered from an over active thyroid complaint. What was that about?

She did have an over-active thyroid. I don't think she handled her detention too well.

Obviously there was severe pressure. Just how did that manifest?

I never saw any indication.

How did she know that. Because it causes a tendency towards plumpness and overweight often. It wasn't an issue at all?

No, it was never mentioned, not to me, anyway.

Gillian's book, "Ties of Blood" is a puzzling book. I mean, its quite a good book in a way, but I just wondered how close it was to the truth. Was it a reflection?

I thought it was a ghastly book.

I thought you might, because you're obviously much closer to it than I was as an outsider. Was it inaccurate? I know its not meant to be accurate, but is it any reflection?

I don't think its of any significance at all. I can't remember it that clearly but the basis of the background of people coming from Latvia, they sounded quite Jewish in their attitude if I can recall it.

That's why I asked you about the Jewish influence.

Not at all. I didn't even have a Bar Mitzvah. I was given the option, you can either go and play your sport or go and study. You have to study for four years and I thought, bummer this, what's this all about. That's the sort of religious background. They were never inside a Schul. When I got married my mother said she's not coming to the Schul and I said, that's alright, then don't come. And she did. I think they only came because my attitude was, look suit yourself, if you don't want to come, then no problem. I threatened to use my aunt as her stand-in and I think that's was galvanised her into changing her mind. But that background was totally false. And another thing. The researchers that she used, people who weren't close to our family at all - a lot of them. There was a strong influence with the black influence, the maid or whatever, that was something that came strictly out of her youth or out of her mind. I don't know anything about that.

And then there was her description of the marriage between Rosa and Joseph, who are obviously Ruth and Joe, very laid back wedding, which didn't sound right somehow.

Laid-back wedding?

I think in the book Rosa becomes pregnant and she is eight months pregnant when she marries Joseph and the wedding is just some sort of very informal party.

Well that probably was the situation. There wasn't any Jewish wedding between Ruth and Joe. In fact just before she got together with Joe, she was living with someone else. There wasn't any Jewish affair then, at the wedding.

She had a long relationship with Ismael Meer, the lawyer, and by all accounts, Tilly broke that up for political rather than racial reasons. Do you have any memories of that?

No, I don't know about that. I know that she was involved with him, but I didn't know the reason for them breaking up. I don't think my mother had sufficient influence to break that up. Nor would she have. Political reasons, why? You mean because he wasn't politically sound?

Well, the description I've heard is that a chap called Cachalia had married a white woman and it had caused major political rifts between the white activists movement and the Indian congress. It just caused all sorts of problems and there was a feeling that they didn't want to repeat that because politically, it was bad news at that point in South African history.

If the influence was there to stop that, it wouldn't have come from my mother. She didn't have that sort of influence at all. It would have come more, I think, from the Indian's family.

What sort of influence did Tilly have on Ruth? Would Ruth have been very independent of Tilly and not consult with

her and do exactly as she wanted to without ...

She was totally independent of her. They were on different wavelengths. Totally different people. My mother was a theoretician. Very dogmatic. Ruth wasn't at all.

Some people thought she was, but those were the one's who had ended up at the wrong end of her tongue, I think. Almost everyone said Ruth didn't suffer fools gladly.

That's not to say she was dogmatic. She had a temper. She wasn't dogmatic in her views. I don't think she would have appreciated people who did nothing but only talked. My mother, under normal circumstances, not being her mother, her political views would have been discounted because they were theoretical views. She wasn't involved in any movements, she wasn't doing anything. That would be my assessment of the situation.

And those would have been the sort of people that Ruth would have discounted?

Absolutely. She had a great friendship with Ivan Schembrucker. Ivan and she never really needed to have a political discussion. They were so involved with what they were doing and they were so at one with what they were doing, they didn't have to sit down and discuss politics and what was taking place elsewhere and so on. The understanding of what needed to be done in South Africa had nothing to do with Marxism or Leninism or what was happening in the Soviet Union. Everything that came out of my parents' mouths was involved with the theory of politics, basically. I mean my father did some practical work...

Your father fled the country around about Rivonia rather abruptly. Why was that?

Because they were looking for him. They detained me while they were looking for him.

What was Ruth's reaction to that. You seemed to have been very victimised because of their politics.

We didn't discuss it. I was actually detained twice. The first time was because they were looking for my father, but I knew where he was, that's why they locked me up.

Wasn't the second time because they thought Wolpe had passed through ...

No, the second time was to do with money being passed on to Bram Fischer, actually not by me. I told my wife, my first wife, to leave the bloody thing alone. She said she'd do it. Anyway, they picked up Lesley Schembrucker and she spilled the beans on the whole situation, so they picked my wife up. My daughter was then about six months old. I said look here, you've got the wrong person. My wife wasn't involved with this.

What was Julius' involvement in Rivonia?

He was very involved with the finances of the whole situation. All the money that was being channelled was coming from Fischer through Julius. Julius was very involved in that. He was involved with the finances of Defense and Aid. I was very involved in that. I was the Treasurer of Defense and Aid for some time in the days when they had some of the Democrats there, like Ellen Hellmann and Joffe; not Communists but they had a few Communists there too.

Was this in the mid-50s?

Yes. In the early days people like Ruth and Joe, they thought this was quite a funny thing, being locked up and Monty Berman taking over the kitchen in Pretoria and running the gaol, sort of thing. But they soon learnt that the government wasn't

playing. By that time, of course, Slovo was out the country and so was Ruth. She went just after she was locked up. My dad was very involved with the finances of the situation.

Was he the treasurer of the Party underground?

Yes. He was laundering money all over the place.

He escaped rather dramatically to Kenya, didn't he.

He went, I think, to Botswana by road. At the time of the treason trial, I smuggled him through to Swaziland. They didn't have any borders in those days so we got through quite easily and then, the second time, when it was serious, he went through Botswana as far as I know. I think he went to Tanzania, to Dar-es-Salaam, not to Kenya. And from there to London.

It would have been in 1960 when he went to Swaziland, wasn't it.

Yes, they were all down there. Ruth and Joe and Bernstein, the whole lot. Goldberg.

What did they do in Swaziland. It's a kind of a blank period. Suddenly everyone is in Swaziland and there's no recalling, no one says what was happening there. Did they just sit and wait for the emergency to pass?

They had to keep their noses pretty clean because the government didn't relish them being there. They were pretty low key.

Did Ruth's children go with her, or not?

No, they stayed but they were taken down there from time to time.

So Tilly again stepped in.

Sure, she had a hell of a burden with Ruth's kids.

It must have been tough on Tilly, all that?

It was.

When people say she was tough, I imagine she would have to be?

She had to be.

To jump back...What was Ruth's living space like. What was her room like? Was it austere, full of things ... when you were at school.

Very good. We lived reasonably well. Always two cars. She has a lot of books, she was an avid reader. She was a good English student. A good language student, as well. She spoke Portuguese fluently, she spoke French quite well. She was a good linguist. Bright girl.

She did well at Varsity as well.

Yes.

Just trying to get Ruth's school years and your parents position is what I have really been asking questions about. The later years I've got quite a lot about from Ruth's friends.

In her early years she was very normal - a normal upbringing. She played sport. She wasn't really involved. She was an all-rounder. Had lots of friends.

Any particular friends you can remember. In her high school years?

Not really.

I mean four years is a huge difference when you're at school.

Yes particularly when she's say fourteen and I'm only ten. And at a different school too. When I go to school and she's leaving, sort of thing. People were in and out the house, young people, all sorts of people, but I didn't really know about her close friendships.

Have you all the information on Ruth when she lectured in America. My cousin said she gave some lectures in the 1970s.
No, what I do stops in 1964. I have talked to Myrtle Berman.

Yes, Myrtle met her when she was at Barnarto Park. They were librarians together at the Public Library. Myrtle came in later.

During her school years, political influence (on Ruth) was minimal. Her activity in that direction was absolutely minimal. I would say she blossomed considerably after school. At university. Because judging from her situation before, I don't see anything that would say she was involved in the political scene. She was, obviously, influenced by all the discussions that took place.

In that sense, I think she was immersed in the political scene, in your home.

There was a very strong influence with some very interesting people. There were people like Sam Kahn and Dadoo and a Prof. Segal who was a real German Marxist. There was a great influence there.

Do you remember anything about her activities at University or were you very removed from that? I am having trouble finding people who were in the YCL with her and the Progressive Students.

What about Harold Wolpe. He features quite strongly in our youth. At one time we lived in an apartment in Yeoville that belonged to his parents. So Harold was around there. They were very friendly. I am surprised that he doesn't contribute anything because he knew Ruth when she was ten/eleven years old. I still remember the building. It was in Yeo Street. It belonged to his parents and we lived in it

I didn't know you lived in an apartment at all?

We lived in some weird places.

How many houses did you live in?

Houses and apartments...must have been five or six in my youth.

And all this had to do with the financial situation?

Economics...I would say so. Fortunately my father never sold Kensington and when things improved, we would go back. We were all over the show.

What size was the factory by the time Julius left?

You mean in compliment.

In number and output.

A couple of acres. It was a good furniture factory. It was one the leading furniture factories in the country and employed a couple of hundred people.

What sort of furniture?

Mainly what they call case goods. That's bedroom suites and hard furniture.

What happened to the factory?

It's still going. When Julius left he was a junior partner with my late uncle, Louis First. So when he fled, it carried on and I think they sold the business to somebody or other. To one of the major groups.

What happened to Louis.

He died a long time ago. He was never actively involved. He was very involved with Lewis and Marks. He was a secretary of Lewis and Marks. He was quite an aggressive businessman. A very good financier. Julius was his junior partner. As a result of that, the animosity amongst the family was enormous, absolutely.

The Louis side of the family just didn't connect with yours?

They did. They used to have political rows on a Sunday which were dramatic.

So Julius brother was not political at all.

No, not at all. None of them.

It's interesting then that Julius got into politics the way he did. Do you know why he did?

No, I don't. It is interesting actually.

He must have got connected with the Jewish Workers Club or some socialist movement. The Bund perhaps?

I would say that after the First World War, he must have been about 16 or 17 or in the early 20s. After school. The Jewish Worker's Club, probably.

The Jewish Bund was very strong, very socialist, too. Most of the people I've talked too, the old people, all trace back to the Bund.

I think this guy Harris, the headmaster of the Jewish Government School had a bit of influence, but I know if he was political because a lot of successful Jewish businessmen went through his hands and they didn't become involved in politics.

Do you know anything about the Jewish Government School because that's another thing I can't find in records. Was it really called the Jewish Government School?

Yes. It was run by a guy called Harris. It was in End Street, which is now a building or something.

Was it not near Park Station?

No. It was End and Bok Street.

Do you have any idea why it was Jewish and Government? It's quite an odd combination. Was it set up especially for Jews?

Yes, rather like Marist Brothers. But I don't think they had any Jewish money going into it. I suppose a lot of Jews were living in that area and going to that school.

Do you know anybody who would know about the Jewish Government School?

No. My aunt would have. My mother should know. But she doesn't know anything.

According to your mom, she was brought up in a house, I think, in Fordsburg.

La Rochelle. That's where Julius parents died. Which is near Turffontein.

Tilly remembered the address of the house in which she was a child.

The address?

I haven't got it here, but I tracked it down and took a photograph of it. It's now a sort of slum pool room with, I think, a brothel upstairs. But its still a very solid building. I don't know if her memory was correct on that. Perhaps I should send you the photograph.

They owned some property in La Rochelle, Turffontein.

Tilly's side?

Yes.

What was her maiden name.

Leveton. Her brother was Steve Leveton from Leveton Barlow, Auditors.

He did quite well, did he? Did Tilly have any formal training?

No. She got matric.

In "Ties of Blood" the Tilly character goes out and works in a shoe shop and get's caught up in re-possessing furniture in the 1922 strike and chucks it up.

She did work. She worked for the Goldbergs who were involved in retail furniture. One branch became Barnetts after that. She used to talk about the money-grabbing aspects of these people who used to re-possess furniture and confiscate payments that people had made and this sort

of stuff. This was before the Hire Purchase Act.

This is reflected in "Ties of Blood"

Yes, but I don't know where she picked this up from. What research ... I think she was getting some research from people involved in the furniture trade.

Did Gillian get people to go out and do research work for her?

She acknowledges that she had discussions with certain people and she acknowledges then in her book. Some of them were involved and knew that period. But it wouldn't have been a specific influence from Tilly to Gillian that she worked for somebody and that they were crooks. I don't think so anyway.

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