

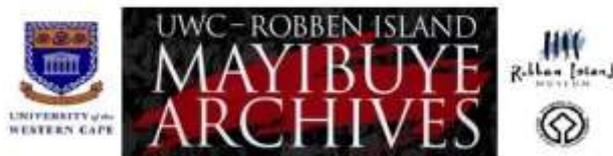
Ruth First Papers project

Interview with Mary Benson

An interview conducted by **Don Pinnock** c. 1992. Part of a series carried out at Grahamstown University and held at the UWC/Robben Island Mayibuye Archive.

Republished in 2012 by the Ruth First Papers Project

www.ruthfirstpapers.org.uk



MB: ... more coffee?

DP: No, I'm fine.

MB: It looks enormous!

DP: Oh, it's a good friend of mine. Just terribly efficient.

MB: Oh goodness, yes.

DP: I managed to convince the University of Cape Town to buy it for me at one stage.
[pause] So you knew Scott?

MB: I worked for him for seven years, yes.

DP: Really? Oh, I'm way behind. I should have known that. What were you doing?

MB: No, you shouldn't have. I was his assistant. After I read **Cry, the Beloved Country** and was searching around for something to do - I was in America at the time - I heard of his work at the UN for the tribes in South West Africa in 1950. And I had just been given five hundred dollars, so I could afford to do anything for nothing. So I offered to type for him at first, and gradually became his secretary and his assistant, and then we set up the Africa Bureau. And I meanwhile was going back to South Africa and to South West Africa, because he wasn't allowed in.

DP: Was that after he'd been kicked out?

MB: Yes. He wasn't actually chucked out, but he came out in 1949 to get to the UN, and then in 1950 they made him a prohibited immigrant, so he couldn't go back. So that's when I went there, and I suppose saw Ruth but didn't meet her in 1951. No, it was the very beginning, January '52, when I was back in Pretoria, and I went over to Johannesburg. I'd already met Sisulu, and he and Yusuf Cahalia invited me to a meeting where they were going to discuss the Defiance Campaign plans, and there was just one other white there, who I realised in retrospect was Ruth. But we never met then. Then when I met her in '53, I suppose, briefly, I was very suspicious of her because she was a communist. It wasn't till I worked in the treason trial defence fund in '57 under Bishop Reeves that she became a great friend, and I sort of dropped my suspiciousness.

DP: What was the committee that you first mentioned? Or was it just a meeting? With Cachalia and -

MB: No, it was a public meeting in a small hall of the Johannesburg City Hall to discuss plans for it, and it was organised by the Indian Congress.

DP: Was she a speaker?

MB: No, Ruth was just a - I suppose, a journalist. She didn't take any part at all. The speakers were all - there was Dr Molema, and Cachalia, and Dr Naicker was the chairman, and Sisulu. And that was a meeting which Malival Gandhi got up and said he didn't think the africans were capable of non-violence! There was quite a cross debate about that.

DP: You knew Yusuf?

MB: I'd met him - you see, working for Michael Scott, everyone automatically trusted one, because they just thought the world of him. It was long before Huddlestone ever did anything. So I had gone along to see Sisulu in this very decrepit little ANC office down on Commissioner Street, and he had then taken me along to meet Cachalia and Dadoo in the Indian Congress office. And then they told me how they were planning the Defiance Campaign.

DP: No, I know Yusuf quite well. He's still going strong.

MB: Well, when I saw him in London a few years ago when he finally - when his house arrest was lifted, he said that he'd been really very badly hit by that, psychologically. But I gather he's a very successful businessman.

DP: Yes, he is. Amina is tremendous as well.

MB: Terrific! She's wonderful. So beautiful!

DP: Michael Scott - I've always found him extraordinary, because everywhere I look he seems to have touched in there. He's influenced people, he's done things that -

MB: And yet he's almost forgotten for most people, so I'm hoping that my biography will -

DP: Oh really? Have you written -

MB: An enormous thing on him, ja.

DP: A sort of biography was written about him, which -

MB: His autobiography.

DP: No, it was written by a woman ...

MB: Oh, you mean Frieda Troope's book on the Herero? He also wrote an autobiography. Faber's published it here. But - Ann Welsh and ... um ... oh, he used to lecture in economics at Wits, he's working on a biography of him.

DP: That sounds wonderful. I have a sense that he would have influenced Ruth quite a lot, although I've never been able to substantiate that.

MB: Well, I think he got too suspicious. Something happened to that campaign for rights and justice which he more or less initiated in Johannesburg. In fact, it wasn't the communists, I think, who undermined it, I think it was partly Ruth Heymann's ex-husband, who now lives in Israel. But anyway, I think Michael really ... I know he did make quite a big contribution to the Ruth First Trust, so I think he had a great respect for her. But they didn't really - before she died he didn't really see her much after those years, the early years.

DP: He was the one who went to Bethel with her.

MB: Yes, and the interesting thing was - I don't know who drove, I hope it was her and not him, because he was the most terrible driver -

DP: He had a little Anglia, which was donated by the Congress Movement!

MB: Really? Anyway, Ruth and he and Henry Nxumalo were taken round by Sibande. I knew him in the treason trial, he was a great man. A lovely man. The interesting thing was, though, was that it was Michael, in the **Rand Daily Mail** who scooped the whole story. Ruth - would it have been the **Guardian** or **New Age** at that time? '48? '47?

DP: **Guardian.**

MB: Her story came out later. And I think Michaels' story in the **Rand Daily Mail** was one of the elements that finally undermined Smuts in the rural constituencies, because the farmers were so outraged at this attack on them.

DP: How did that link with Smuts?

MB: Because Smuts was around Standerton. It was all that Transvaal area that the outrage was expressed. And then Michael went back to Bethel to confront the farmers, and the police said they were afraid he would be lynched. So they got him out quickly.

DP: I'm sure he might have been! He seemed to be wonderfully unaware of -

MB: Hostility. **[laughs]** Yes, there's a very touching photograph of him, trying to speak to them through a microphone, and the bearded Boers glaring at him!

DP: What was the importance of the Bethel exposure? It comes up again and again.

MB: Well, every time there was an exposure and it was a great scandal, and then a few months later it was all happening again, because then Henry went again as "Mr Drum" about two or three years later. Then again one heard of it cropping up in later years.

DP: But politically, did it cause any - you said it might have undermined Smuts?

MB: Yes, well, it was that sort of ... what would it be? Was that the platteland? No, no, anyway, it just turned them against the United Party, and I suppose the **Rand Daily Mail** might have been a factor in that.

DP: The feeling that the government wasn't there to support the farmers and their needs for labour? Which the Tomlinson Commission would have underlined further.

MB: Yes. Yes. But it was slave conditions, I mean, simply appalling.

DP: So Nxumalo and **Drum** published that stuff later? The first was **Rand Daily Mail** and then the **Guardian**, and then -

MB: Yes, and that was a totally separate visit that he made, you see, for **Drum**. Yes. Yes. He's the one who introduced me to Mandela. I went to the **Drum** office in '53, and Henry and I walked across Johannesburg together for him to introduce me to

Mandela. It was very tragic, his being killed. He really was terrific.

DP: So uselessly, one felt. Almost -

MB: Ja. Terrible.

DP: Did you see that film last night on television?

MB: I had seen it before, yes.

DP: There was an incident in there rather like that, that -

MB: I've forgotten the detail, now. I think I've got it on cassette.

DP: When did you leave South Africa?

MB: Well, I used to go backwards and forwards, because I was working with Scott here at the UN, and I used to go back. And then I left him and went back in - end of '56, I guess, and then worked for the treason trial fund in Johannesburg until I got quite ill.

DP: Reeves set that up?

MB: Yes, Reeves and Alec Hepple. Paton was involved, and Hurley to some extent. Julius Lewin, I think, too. Then I came away again in '58, and after that - that's when I wrote a book about [sounds like Sekede Khama], who I'd worked for. And then I went back and forth until - I used to go back for a year at a time and then come back here and write, or go to the UN and Washington to lobby.

DP: How many books have you written?

MB: Oh, not many. They're up there, but a lot of them are ... **Sekede and the African Patriots**, which then was updated and paperbacked as **The Struggle for Birthright**, and the novel, which has just been republished as a classic, and the Mandela book. And then I've been involved with parts of books for editing - Fugard's Notebooks, things like that.

DP: My problem about writing about a person is how one actually casts ** How did you decide to structure the book on Mandela, for instance? You know, the problem of

chronologically or thematically, or ...

MB: Yes. It was difficult doing the book on him because of the great gaps in the material and not being able to talk to him. So in a way the American title was more appropriate - **The Man and the Movement**. I mean, it's easier to talk about the Sekede book. But there his whole life took on such a pattern - his great conflicts with the British government over the years - that it took its own shape. The important thing, I always found, was that one needed to have a point at which to end the chapter that had you feeling that something quite dramatic had happened and you wanted to know what was going to happen next. And for Mandela ... well, again, it was the material which more or less directed how it would be. I mean, with Ruth, if you were doing - I think events, and her role within the events, because - you could do her as the - this frightfully brave journalist who went out into the rural areas and exposed certain things. There's her work on the mine labour, and her work in the rural areas, and you could do an earlier thing on Bethel ... you could do the thing of her as a student trying to persuade the youth leaders to come in to join the Young Communist League and being totally turned down, and why that was.

DP: I know very little about that. Do you -

MB: Well, all I know, really, is what is in **The Struggle for Birthright**, I suppose. But Kathrada had this flat which became this terrific centre of activity, and I found that - I don't know, do you remember the chapter about that?

DP: I do, yes.

MB: There was Scott, and there was Ruth, and they had Mandela staying there on occasion ...

DP: And Ismael Meer?

MB: Yes, Meer doesn't remember all that much now, but when I interviewed him years ago, he gave a very vivid description. But somebody who went to see him more recently didn't get much out of him.

DP: I interviewed him, and he referred me on that point to your book!

MB: Yes, I think what I put there was more interesting. You should talk to Paul Joseph, I think, who has a wonderful memory.

DP: Where is he?

MB: He's in London, and he's ... he was very close - he and Kathrada were schoolboys working on the passive resistance campaign. Paul was a flower-seller, he came from the real working-class in the Indian community. He's a marvellous man and very thoughtful. He was a close friend of Mandela's. He was quite badly tortured, and came away in about '63 or 4. So his home number is 345 5850. He's working, but you can get him in the evenings.

DP: Was he part of that group around that flat?

MB: Well, he would have known all about it. I don't know how much - he's not spoken of as being part of it, because the others were more the intellectuals, but certainly ... he has a very nice story of how - I think I've got it in the Mandela book, of how he and Kathrada were praised by Mandela and Sisulu for all they did as schoolboys, and how impressed these africans were, at a time when they were very against joining the Indians. But I think the discussions there - I mean, that was - and Ruth, in fact, and Meer were in love.

DP: They had a four-year relationship, in fact.

MB: Yes. I didn't know how long it lasted, but he later married his cousin and Ruth met up with Joe, and so ... who did you learn that from? That's -

DP: Um ... who? Barney Simon.

MB: Barney! Barney's my dear friend.

DP: Barney's one of the nicest people I've ever met! I think he's wonderful!

MB: [laughs] Did you meet Barney.

DP: I was working in Jo'burg and he lived round the corner. He's such a nice person.

MB: He's fabulous.

DP: And Amina Cachalia [**indistinct**] and in fact Miriam Hepner, who I know very well and who I see a lot of. But I get the sense that the kind of discussions that were going

on at that flat were terribly important for their later political development, in a way.

MB: I imagine a lot of it was to do with immediate events, what was happening in the townships - fluctuating. I mean, Mandela seemed to stay there more because it was difficult for him to get home. And there were great debates, I think, about Gandhi. And of course, Meer and JN Singh, who at that time was very active and who has since dropped out totally, had been tremendously influenced by that woman who Shula Marks has written a book about - Mabel Shaw? **[Mabel Palmer - see interview with Ismael Meer]** No, the one that Shaw had been a friend of. You know, Shula wrote the book about the black girl who was so brilliant, and this academic -

DP: I haven't seen it, actually. That's the trouble about South Africa, you -

MB: Well, she behaved very patronisingly towards this girl, and yet this same woman had been this extraordinary political influence as a lecturer on these young Indians in the 'forties.

DP: Was this the woman who was in Natal during the time? Oh, well, then I do know her. I can't remember her name.

MB: Anyway ... and Shula's little paperback, something about a doll, which has had quite a success, is the other side of this woman. Obviously she could cope with bright young intellectuals, but she felt that this girl was imposing on her too much, and really behaved quite sharply with her in the end.

DP: Yusuf told me **[it was Ismael, actually!]** about how Mandela was arrested on the bus, he was actually charged with bringing a black man onto a bus!

MB: Oh, really? Aha ... I wonder if he told me that.

DP: While they were living at that flat. But many of those people went on to become part of the congress movement. One gets the sense that the discussions in that flat might have helped in that process of -

MB: Yes, well, they took four years. It wasn't really until the May Day shooting and the support that the Indians and the communists got for that May Day strike, which so impressed Mandela, for instance, that they began - I think Sisulu changed sooner than Mandela did, on that. But Mandela still had his traditional roots and the whole thing about the chiefly - and the suspicion. And then, I think, the Defiance Campaign ...

certainly, the day - that meeting I went to in '51, in early January '52, the Indians were very suspicious of what the africans could do, and the africans were suspicious that the Indians would want to take them over.

DP: That gives rise to another kind of level of question. You know, I'm fascinated by these - you know, communism, or african nationalism - they're all human belief-structures. There're things that keep some people within the belief-structure, and other people are not of that belief-structure. What fascinates me so much is how somebody within, say, the belief-structure which is clearly a communist belief-structure - and the ANC and the whole of the nationalist movement which then takes over the ANC - how those do not connect, and how they do connect. That whole sense of belief-structures fascinates me.

MB: Yes. Well, also the way in which some of the people within a belief become so dogmatic, and can't - I mean, the great thing, I think, with Ruth was that she was open to - she was very sophisticated and very brilliant, and open to much wider influences than many people within the CP. But also I think she could be very very sharp with people who opposed her, I gather, and therefore had quite a lot of conflict. And I think she could be quite critical of the ANC, but I don't know the details of all that. But one of the things I always found when I went back, I would always be shocked at the divisions between the various divisions of apartheid, and because I had friends who were both communists and liberals, I was very aware of the conflict between them. How the liberals wouldn't join in some protest demonstration ... **[interruption]** and I remember in Cape Town at the time of Lutuli getting the Nobel prize, we were going to have a great big meeting at the Parade, and Albie Sachs was going to speak, and that made a couple of women who were in the Progressive Party and the Black Sash very antagonistic to the whole event. I think the worst thing the communists did was in the **New Age** and the various papers to totally put across the Soviet line in foreign affairs. It was the biggest waste of energy and ... it just antagonised us.

DP: Who read it? Did they only read it?

MB: No, I think a great many blacks read it, because it was the one newspaper they really trusted and read a great deal, I think. As far as I would know.

DP: Why did it interest them?

MB: Well, because it was the one that absolutely fearlessly exposed all the things that were being done to them, be it in the Eastern Cape, where Govan Mbeki was then

working for it - it was the **New Age** that exposed the police activities around New Brighton back in '62, when the police were pretending to be tsotsis and were catching people and becoming agent provocateurs. You would never find - at that time the **Evening Post** was pretty brave, and then it later became intimidated and dropped out, but it had been awfully good, as the **Rand Daily Mail**, briefly - I mean, the **Rand Daily Mail's** behaviour during the African mine strike was absolutely atrocious!

DP: '46?

MB: Yes. Dreadful, dreadful stuff they printed. It really wasn't until Gandar came into it that it changed.

DP: Why did *** seem to have a newspaper?

MB: Money. I think the sheer expertise of organising. They had one for a few years and then it would fizzle out, and then try again, it would fizzle out.

DP: The africanists had quite a number that -

MB: - of little ones. Well, the ANC had - I forget, over the years, but they would never last for very long. I forget what **[sounds like Manny Skote's]** role in all that was. But the poverty was really extraordinary. The way it ran over the years, in spite of the Indians bringing money in - at the time of the Defiance Campaign and later being very good fund-raisers, going round their merchants and getting them, and in the treason trial, the shop-keepers who were persuaded to give things free to the defendants, etcetera. But when Mandela was underground, and at the same time I was seeing Sisulu - both of them had these appalling cars, Sisulu's car went at about thirty miles an hour! And Mandela's kept breaking down the night he drove me home, when he was underground. So there was very little accusation ever of corruption, but somehow there were never - I mean, also the communists seem to me not to have been very efficient in organising. When you hear of the early sabotage arrangements they were sort of very amateurish.

DP: Yet they kept the newspapers together, their newspapers.

MB: Yes, that was true, yes. So over the years, I suppose, their newspapers became regarded almost as the paper for the congresses. Well, for the congress movement.

DP: It's surprising that some of them didn't help to organise newspapers for the ANC.

MB: No, well, they had their own, and they were wanting to propagate their policies. Their politics.

DP: What were the tensions between those two - how can I put it? Belief-structures, systems of belief, during the 'fifties? They worked together, yet they were separate. There were many antagonisms, yet -

MB: Oh, I'm sure there were, but I think that even the ANC Christians on the whole greatly respected Kotane, who was the main ANC Communist through those years. But I'm sure there were suspicions. I said to Lutuli once that if I lived in South Africa - I was a total non-joiner, but if I was living there full-time what should I join? And he said the Liberals in Natal and the Congress of Democrats in Johannesburg! **[laughs]** Because it depended on who was prepared to stick their neck out and be identified with the ANC. But I don't know on the belief-structures, I suppose the Communist Party had more success within the trade union movement, because it gave so much training and expertise. People like Ray Simons, in Johannesburg some of them, and also there were the trips for the very few to conferences in Russia and East Germany. Lilian Ngoyi and others went and were treated with such respect and really had a terrific time, whereas the West simply never did a thing like that. There was no way. It was very, very short-sighted.

DP: What sort of questions should I ask about a person like Ruth? Bit of a tricky question, this. What sort of questions would you ask if you were writing something about her?

MB: Um ... well, I mean, you're seeing Brian tomorrow. Start off, I think, by asking about his experience of her as a journalist, as the editor of the Transvaal edition, and how she set about her investigations. You know, she had complete autonomy to just follow up whatever stories, how they worked as a team. And whether he - I mean, I think he's fairly doctrinaire, I imagine. I've never talked politics with him. And I think Ruth would have been much more open - and of course Brian has worked for many years for the Soviet news agency - and within the CP there were rivalries and - between Hilda Bernstein and Ruth, for instance.

DP: I've talked to Hilda. She mentioned not at all that they were rivals.

MB: Aha, you mean she was totally in praise of Ruth?

DP: Yes, but I do know that they were, from other sources.

MB: Yes, well Hilda has a very strong ego. She's a woman of marvellous energy and creativity, and hers is an extraordinary life. I suppose ... are you also going to go into how Ruth came to write the various books she wrote, or is it going to be concentrated on her role in the **New Age**?

DP: The two books that seem to be ... or three books, are South-West Africa, **117 Days** and **The Barrel of a Gun**, which were very much part of her African, or Southern African experience. Beyond that -

MB: Ja, the other two books she was really ghosting.

DP: Yes, I think so. And you know, her later work is part of a later period. I'm honing in to see how those lines have changed.

MB: Yes. She was a very good writer.

DP: She was writing about sixteen stories a week for **New Age** at one period, which is much higher than journalists write usually. Some of them were small, but each one needed investigation.

MB: Yes ... staggering, yes ... and what have you thought of the film?

DP: I haven't seen it yet. I want to. I'd like to get it on video, because a lot of people in South Africa want to see it.

MB: Oh, I see ... a fairly one-dimensional view of her, of course.

DP: What did you think of the film? That?

MB: Well, yes. I think the film should have concentrated, I think, entirely on the child's viewpoint. And its weakness is where it breaks away from that, because for me the portrait of Ruth in the interrogations is very inadequate. And of course, she is seen very much through Shawns' eyes, so one doesn't get her brilliance and her fantastic laughter and humour. Her sort of ironic humour. But my main thing really was that they took two very important elements straight out of 1985 and stuck it in 1963, which I found very irritating. The young black guy speaking to people in Soweto, calling on them to join MK at a time when nobody would even have dared breathe the word

ANC, and then the funeral - straight out of the 1980's. But you could see how they used it for it's dramatic content.

DP: Attenborough funeral!

MB: Yes, absolutely! And a marvelous mispronunciation which hit me was - what was it? For "asinamali", a woman playing roofs is "asinimile"! I don't know why the black - Lionel Mfecane, who is a Zulu, didn't latch onto - anyway, it doesn't matter. But it's really very powerful and very moving, and obviously going to have even more impact, I think, than the Attenborough one. And sometimes she really is very like Ruth in appearance.

DP: Ja, the photographs certainly show that. Did you know Tilly?

MB: Yes. Now that's a total misrepresentation. Tilly was quite terrifying. She used to come - when the defence, when the treason trial office - I wasn't well, I used to get in at around ten in the morning. Tilly would be there on the doorstep with all the money she'd raised! But in her old age in London I used to see her quite a lot and became very fond of her. She was always trying to get me interested in this very hard-line Soviet journal. I think even the **Morning Star** - is that what it's called now, in London? Anyway, even that was breaking away. And she had this one particular journal that she pushed to the very end. But isn't she - hasn't she lost her memory now?

DP: She's lost huge chunks of it. It's very sad. I mean, I saw her two years too late.

MB: Well, I saw her two years before last, but I didn't take a tape-recorder because I always thought they ought to have been doing it themselves. I always thought they were such a story to be told, all the Jews who left Lithuania and Russia and went to South Africa, and what became of them.

DP: Tiily told me about where she was born. I found out her house she grew up in in Fordsburg is now a brothel!

MB: God!

DP: I walked in and I was offered various things! I said, well, I just want to take photographs. They thought I was mad.

MB: Gosh, pity you haven't go them, though. I would have loved to have seen them.

DP: I've put them in Ruth First's Trust collection at the ICS.

MB: Oh, have you? Terrific.

DP: But I can send you a set of the photo's.

MB: No, I'll ask Shula if I can go and look sometime. Has she told you about how she had to walk miles every morning to work when she was about thirteen?

DP: She didn't really. No, she said she had to - but she starts getting Ruth and herself mixed up. It's interesting.

MB: Really? That's rather fascinating. How does it come out, then?

DP: Well, she starts relating something which clearly is Ruth, and then she starts relating it as though it's her, and then I get a time-sequence problem and I start questioning her about, you know, is this you? And she'll say, yes, it's me. And then she'll start talking about - her own childhood and Ruth's are starting to merge.

MB: Oh gosh. How strange! That would make an amazing movie. Did you - what was the place like? Is she still living in the flat that her son found her? With the one servant looking after her?

DP: She's living in an absolutely beautiful place. Yes, it's very beautiful and she's well-cared for. The doctor comes every day to check her. She's ninety-one, and so she needs that. Her friends rally round. There're a lot of old Party people in Jo'burg who are part of a friendship group, and they rally round and take her out on weekends and things. Miriam and Bill are very good for her.

MB: It was very lonely for her in London. She was in a basement, and it was quite a thing to get around there, and oh, god, it was so depressing and dark, at the bottom of Ruth and Joe's house. So that's something.

DP: Her son won't see me, he won't talk to me.

MB: No, he was totally unpolitical, and very rich.

DP: Yes. Oh, very rich. Tilly said to me: "what's happened to Ronnie?" So I said, well,

he's here. So she said "where did he go wrong? Why did he go wrong?" She really feels that he's done very wrong becoming a capitalist and -

MB: Yes. Well, I suppose either you do or you don't, if you're a child. But in the film she's portrayed very softly. She has a breakdown at one point. I can't imagine Tilly ever had a breakdown, but anyway. I don't know.

DP: Ruth had the breakdown.

MB: Yes, well, that comes though. But the relationship with the interrogator doesn't really come through.

DP: With Victor. What do you know about that? That's very strange. I was talking to Hilary Kuny -

MB: Yes, well, Hilary would probably know more.

DP: - and you know, sort of off-the-record, really, she was saying that that was a problem of Ruth's relationship to her father, that ended up being a **[indistinct]** relation to a very powerful interrogator putting her in a submissive position. Very psycho-therapeutic.

MB: Probably Hilary speaking from her experience, yes. Well, I thought it was more the classic thing that often can happen within an interrogation - that this is the only person with whom you have a human relationship, and he obviously was a man of some sophistication. And he obviously was very attracted to her, and I think that she became very disconcerted by finding herself relating to him as a human being.

DP: Or more.

MB: Yes, well, as far as - because she had very, very high standards. But Hilary - I wouldn't have thought of it in psycho-analytical terms. I thought of it more within the classic thing of that form of interrogation. But in the film it's very one-sided, you don't have any sense that she might have had a ... **[interruption]** ... family - well, my father was 1820 Settlers, and my family have strong roots there, and then I stayed with Fugard, and I covered all the political trials there in '65, or a number of them. So that's what the novel was about. And then I did a radio play about it and a pamphlet. I got very - I just feel it isn't written about enough, the Eastern Cape.

DP: My parents are also 1820.

MB: Are they? What was their name?

DP: Pinnock.

MB: Your mother as well, though?

MB: My mother's Wilson, **[indistinct]**. In fact, there was a Reverend Pinnock who was part of the defence fund, the treason trial support group.

MB: Really? Aha ... let's see, where's the Reverend ... **[small talk]** ... I first came across Govan in '57, when he was a very impressive speaker at that multi-racial conference at Wits, and then when I was doing research for the ANC history, and I was staying in PE I went to see him in the **New Age** office. I met Raymond Mhlaba at the same time. And then Govan was brought in one of the Eastern Cape trials ... and then in '64, when he was in prison at the time of the Rivonia trial, before they were sentenced, we had a bit of a correspondence and he asked me to help over his son. And then he was brought from Robben Island in '65 to Humansdorp when Silvia Neem was on trial, David Soggett was defending her, and we had a very funny encounter. Well, he is the basis, as I explain in the afterword to the novel, he is the basis for a character in the novel which most people might have thought was Mandela, but it was Govan. Yes, he's got - well, I mean, he's really quite doctrinaire, but he's got a wonderful ironic sense of humour.

DP: He's very involved again.

MB: Is he? I wondered how he was functioning, or how he - he spsss! spsss! round there! **[laughs]**

DP: Another thing I'm particularly interested in, or about, really, is the number of Lithuanian Jews who formed the background to the Communist Party or who were so central to it. Do you have any thoughts on that connection?

MB: No, because ... I mean, what fascinated me was that the Jews who came out of those areas either became communists or liberals, but then some, like Anthony Sher's now writing about, went right the other way and gave the gold medal to Malan. So no, I just feel cross that they themselves ... Dan Jacobson wrote a novel, didn't he, about some of the Jews who came out, and then Michael Harmel's wife Ray kept telling me

she was going to write an autobiography and could I help, but then I never heard any more. To my relief, somewhat!

DP: Did she never write it?

MB: I don't think so. I don't know what - no, only they themselves could tell you about that, because I never went into it deeply. I mean, Joe Slovo went back to the actual village he came from, at one point, and found people who I think remembered his family. Some came from Russia, not just from Lithuania, didn't they?

DP: Mm. But Lithuania seems to be the main source of - it is extraordinary.

MB: Yes. But then - Brian isn't Jewish at all, is he?

DP: No, he's part of the English -

MB: But Sonya would be, you see. His wife.

DP: I just wonder how the ideas that they brought over might have given rise to the - connected with **[indistinct]** the Party, or whether they were communists when they came out.

MB: Well, Tilly said she learned it all when she was thirteen or fourteen and was educated in Johannesburg, because of the terrible labour conditions that she was working under, I think. Yes. In a factory. But now Ray Simons, she went out in about 1929, so there were these various flows. I didn't know why anyone was leaving in 1929. Why would that have been?

DP: I can't imagine. There wasn't any particular outpouring at that stage ...

[end of side one]

