Ruth First Papers project

Interview with Hilary Kuny and Luli Callinicos part 2

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.

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DP: ... she remembered the book. She mentioned the name. And he was very interested in this book, and that got him going to International Socialist League meetings. And she came in afterwards, is how she put it. But can I ask a slightly psychological question? Given that you know the sort of family Ruth had - a very powerful mother, a very gentle father -

HK: I didn't know them well. I mean, that was my impression.

DP: That's the impression that I've got talking to people also. What sort of problems would Ruth have had, growing up? That's just putting it very crudely. What sort of struggles would she have had to have had? The need to liberate herself from her mother - or is this not a good line of discussion, really?

HK: I'm sure it's something interesting to investigate, if one were writing about her, but I don't have enough information to do more than speculate.

DP: I'm not talking about her in particular. I'm saying, in general - or is there no such "in general" case of that sort of thing?

HK: No, I would say in general - I mean, in a way you and I have similar sort of family set-ups. We both had dominating mothers and more passive fathers.

LC: Passive, mm.

DP: What's the effect of that been on you?

HK: Well, Lu, what do you think?

LC: Well ... on me, personally! I don't - I certainly don't compare myself - I don't think I'm like Ruth. The effect hasn't been the same in a sense. I think I've - there may be a sense of insecurity about intimate personal relationships ...

HK: I think there's some lack of trust of the man to whom -

LC: Some caution, ja -

HK: Some weariness at him rarely being there for one?

LC: A sense of weariness, ja. Mm, interesting.

DP: You mean, not having the father-figure?

LC: To being strong for one, and protective, I suppose.

HK: [indistinct] who will be ...

LC: Strong.

HK: Who will be strong, who will be there. I mean, in a way - I thought that Ruth's mother was much more there for her than her father, and I think in some ways Joe wasn't there for her. She was the one who had to be -

LC: Had to be both.

HK: - both mother and father to the children.

LC: To herself. I don't know about the children. There's a whole other thing about the kids.

HK: ... **[indistinct]** I remember the children telling me.

LC: Because there's this image people have of Ruth that she wasn't all that good at mothering, because she was so involved in the movement and in her work. But then that is partly because people always judged the mother - there were very conventional ideas.

DP: Was she good at fathering them?

LC: I don't know. I didn't see her with the children all that much. I once had a long conversation with her about her teenage children, and her childrens' emerging sexuality. I was quite anxious about my children - this was in England - and she described how - she was a very modern mother, in a sense. Quite supportive of her children. She said well, you know, when you decide, here's the Pill, there are just a few rules ... she sort of sketched them out. And her daughter's boyfriend - she was only fifteen and she had a steady boyfriend, and Ruth actually wasn't all that happy. She felt that she was very young to have a steady relationship, for two years this boy was with her.

HK: Do you know anything about the children?

DP: I know as much as one can know talking to people here. I'm going to talk to them.

HK: Well, what do you know?

DP: They feel as though they sort of bounced around between Tilly and the family, and that they probably had quite a hard upbringing, because the parents were away. They were politically involved. Judging from Shawn's film, one gets the feeling of anger against her parents, although she resolves it in the film, in a way, I understand. So -

HK: And do you know anything about the other girls and their lives?

DP: No, nothing. I'm going to ask them. Whether they'll tell me, I don't know. What should I know about them?

HK: You ask. If you want to write a biography about Ruth I think you'll find interesting material.

DP: There's a sense of that problem all the way along. I think the kids had a damn hard time.

LC: Look, to a certain extent this is possibly true of the children of nearly all the activists of that generation.

HK: Enormous cruelty -

LC: The most together person who's kind of emerged from it that I know - of course, there's a whole range, the Bernsteins, etcetera - is Sheila, funnily enough.

HK: Yes, but she's actually - she's worked through some things in herself.

LC: But anyway, we're not discussing other people. And one feels a bit uneasy talking with the tape about other people's intimate lives, especially when it's semi-speculation on my part. I mean, I never really knew the kids better. I've heard so much about the girls, and some of the problems and issues, but you'll probably get a much better persepctive when you talk to them.

DP: Issie Heymann was saying isn't it strange that white CP members - of all the CP members, so few of the children stayed in the movement.

LC: I think it makes a hell of a lot of sense! In the sense that the children need to create a life that's not normality, because their parents were deprived of it -

HK: I can't think of any.

DP: Ruth and Brian, and Sheila.

LC: Yes, and Dennis Goldberg.

DP: Were his parents -?

HK: Mm, his father. And his mother, come to think of it.

DP: But relatively few is what I'm saying.

LC: Oh, the other children are the Naidoo family. There's four generations of them.

DP: No, that's what he was saying. In black and Indian communities it tends to be a

family affair.

LC: Oh, yes. I suppose there are obvious explanations for that.

HK: But the Ruth First generation were not really active. I mean, the kind of inspirations were more intellectual -

LC: Socialist in an intellectual sense, ja.

DP: People in their 'twenties and 'thirties.

HK: Ja. But the children of Ruth and ... all of that generation. In fact, I think the most -

LC: What about - is it Robin or Gill who's very active in the feminist movement? One of them.

HK: Gill, but that's -

LC: Well, I mean in that sense she's taken up a cause that she fights ...

HK: Ja, but not a South African ...

DP: But of course the 'thirties were a very difficult period, whereas the 'fifties - sort of mid-'forties to 'fifties, the political struggle around them was opening up as well. One gets the feeling it might have been easy to be political. Certainly the Communist Party in the 'thirties was a very dead phase, with repressive Comintern policies being pushed down ...

LC: Well, that's why I think it did get quite intellectual. They had debating societies that taught and discussed theory, and had reading groups, etcetera, in the 'thirties. Of course, it does start to happen in the 'forties, when you get this massive and rapid urbanisation - of course, the 'twenties were quite active, with the ICU and the whole passionate discussion of which direction the Communist Party was going to take. Whether it was going to concentrate on black peasants and workers as opposed to white workers, and the black republic ... but then of course there was the consequence of that decision.

DP: That divided the Party.

LC: The purges and so on. So ja, from the mid-'forties into the 'fifties there were kind of clear-cut struggles, in a sense.

DP: I wonder if - I asked Tilly if she ever talked to the children about politics, and she said not that she could think of, particularly.

LC: She didn't need to!

DP: So I said, what sort of friends did you have? She said I wouldn't have friends unless they were political! I mean, people who are not political are a waste of time. I only have political friends in the house. She didn't have a sense of - talking about the children, she didn't remember what their rooms looked like at all. It might have been Tilly with her memory, but it might have been Tilly as herself. I said, what pictures? She said, pictures? I said, you know, what did the rooms look like? Bed, wardrobe - there was no - she didn't have a strong memory of children. She didn't give me the sense of having spent a lot of

time putting the chilren's rooms together ... it might just be recent memory drop-out, but her memory of other things around that period is quite good. But one also gets the feeling that only politics was - I mean, politics was the major issue in that household all the time.

LC: But was she an activist?

DP: Yes, I think so. She was very active in the womens' - the sort of womens' support group for the Party, which was mainly involved in raising funds. And she was taking up issue politics.

LC: Is this in the 'thirties and 'forties?

DP: Ja. Miriam went on quite a few - to quite a few meetings and on sprees and all sorts of things. They had quite a chat about the fun they'd had at various meetings. Things like support for China in the war, support for the Soviet Union. I think Friends of the Soviet Union - no, that came a bit later.

HK: But I would have thought that her politics were more linked to the Soviet Union than to South African issues. I mean, this is just a feeling that I have of that generation of people.

LC: But it's true. The Party in the 'thirties was, I think, more Soviet-oriented. They'd kind of lost the South African base in the 'thirties -

DP: Well, they'd lost Bunting, they'd lost Roux, they'd lost all the people who were pushing for a South African Party, and they were running for a popular front, support for the Soviet Union -

LC: And many of their members were not South Africans, had spent the formative years of their lives in Eastern Europe. So I think those were factors, ja.

DP: Difficult to find out how somebody grows up.

HK: What school did Ruth go to?

DP: She went to a little primary school which Tilly couldn't remember, and then -

LC: You say Miriam remembers her in Std 5?

DP: No, Esther. She was at the Jewish government school in Std 5 and then she went to ... quite a well-known school.

HK: Didn't she go to Jeppe?

DP: I think so. Jeppe Girls' High? Yes. She matriculated there. I got her records from the university. Two firsts and three seconds for her first degree. She took five years to do her degree.

LC: She kept on going off to youth congresses and things.

DP: Was she going off to Russia at that stage as well?

LC: I think so.

DP: She took about 12 or 14 courses. Extraordinary number. And then after that did a librarianship degree.

LC: But that was much later.

DP: That was in the 'sixties.

LC: Ja, after she was banned.

HK: Ja, trying to figure out something to do.

DP: Her letter to the university is very interesting. She's got three children to support, she's clearly not going to be able to work in any - as a journalist, and she needs to enrol in librarianship so she can support her family. It's a bit of a sad letter, in a way. I don't know if she was pitching it to get the university on her side, but there's certainly a feeling of - there was a strange feeling of desolation about the letter. I think it was written when she was in detention, perhaps, or when Joe was overseas. I'm not sure about the date. I've got to build up - get a chronology of these things together.

HK: I think that Joe wasn't here when she did that.

LC: Ja, if she said she had three children to support, presumably he wasn't around then. But then are you saying that she intended to stay on? I sort of had that impression at the time.

HK: I think that she might have toyed with that idea.

LC: She was saying, I can't work as a journalist and I've got to have a skill. I remember her saying that, because she was at varsity and we were both mature students. She was more mature than I was, but -

HK: What year are you talking about now?

LC: '63. She was doing her - well, it was '63 that I was there and she was there. I don't know when she got her librarianship.

DP: She didn't ever get it.

LC: She didn't get it, because it was interrupted by the detention.

HK: That's when she became friendly with Barney, in '63.

DP: When did she actually leave? At the end of '63? Because there's a letter -

HK: [indistinct]

LC: Really, so she didn't leave all that long beforehand.

HK: No, it was after Joe went.

DP: Barney went to a meeting when he was 16 and he was absolutely overawed by this woman, and she was a phenomenon because she was married to an Indian, as he was told. She wasn't, in fact, she was going out with Ismael. And he sort of knew her then, in a way, he says. But there's this letter - there are several letters really pushing her to get

her degree, to write her exams, and then there's a letter from London saying sorry, I can't write them, I;m in London. So it must have been towards the end of '63.

LC: It's interesting that Barney was in a sense the gentle male, almost sort of mothering her. You know, you're talking about these role reversals ...

DP: Never talking politics, having a lot of fun, going to theatre, getting away from ... mm. I mean, I think he had a very close relationship with her.

LC: He was very protective of her.

DP: Mm, he said he loved her deeply.

[small talk interlude about making tea etc]

Have you ever written **[indistinct]**? The dynamic which is emerging, certainly as a journalist, is the one between which - the relationship between the journalist telling it like it is, and the Party political person, almost a propagandist for the Party, and the relationship - where does the individual stand in that one? That's a terribly difficult problem for a journalist. I sense, but I haven't yet found out the truth yet, that she fell foul of the Party line on occasion by taking a hard-nosed, fairly individualistic position on the basis of what she found out.

LC: I believe so. Again, it's just through hearing ... I mean, that was after she left South Africa, I thought.

DP: She had quite a good relationship with Martin Legassick, who would have been

beyond the pale in Party terms.

LC: No, not at that stage. Remember he was expelled much later, only a few years ago.

DP: Really, mm.

LC: And I don't know if he - he wasn't in the Party.

DP: I'm sure he was a bit -

LC: Ja, I'm sure he always was critical.

DP: And I suspect that she spent time with Baruch Hirson, who's never been -

LC: "Not On". Ja, well, knew him, but he was around. But you'll get more information there about the English period from Gavin Williams and others.

HK: That's going to be easy, that period.

DP: It's not the period I'm doing. I stop at '63.

LC: Oh, because I was going to suggest you speak to Dan O'Meara, but that's much later.

DP: He's in Canada. Ja, I've got his address. I was going to go to Maputo, but I'm not now. It seems a bit of an indulgence to go there, because it's not really located there.

LC: So you - up to the end of the South Africa period?

DP: It's essentially -

HK: I can give you the name of a person who knew her well in those England days, and that was Ruth Vaughan.

LC: Right. But this is England now, you're talking about?

HK: No, here as well.

HK: She was a South African girl who had a relationship with a man in London, whom she later married. He was a - he had a Nigerian father and an English mother, and he was pursuing her. And I think she already had some idea of the relationship **[indistinct]**, and she came back here for about a year.

LC: Oh, didn't she work for the Defence and Aid Fund? And then you took over from Ruth.

DP: When was that?

HK: 1960, and in fact, she was always at those Sunday lunches at the Slovo's. And at all the parties.

DP: What do you mean by " those Sunday lunches"? **[laughter]**

HK: They used to entertain at Sunday lunch.

DP: Was that a standard -

HK: Oh, yes. That's where I met Winnie Mandela, and God knows who else. They were nice, they were lovely, we'd sit in the garden and drink wine ...

DP: Who cooked?

HK: Well, I'm sure Ruth supervised it, but it was that ... the cook! I've forgotten her name now.

DP: Was that not the one that went to Swaziland with her?

HK: I don't know. Joe will remember that. I can't. But she's the same lady who made the cranberry sauce for the turkey!

LC: Were the children in Swaziland with Ruth? I remember visiting Swaziland during the Emergency and Ruth was there, and -

HK: What year was the Emergency?

DP: '60. She was there for three months.

HK: While Joe was inside.

[rest of tape involves discussion about individuals - Joe Openshaw, Bloke Modisane, Barney Simon. No more detail about Ruth at all]