

## Writer of rare perception

### 'Writer of Rare Perception'

To many she was the intellectual power behind the South African liberation movement—to others Ruth First was the notorious communist, the wife of Joe Slovo. But the attractive dark haired woman was respected internationally as a writer of rare perception. Her books—including an examination of apartheid 'The Barrel of a Gun' are as was their author, banned in the Republic. She was also one of the first people detained under local security legislation. Professor First, 59, was arrested for high treason in December 1956, together with more than 100 other South Africans. In 1958 the charge was dropped. In 1962 while Transvaal editor of *New Age*, subsequently banned, and also editor of *Spark*, she was restricted to the magisterial district of Johannesburg for five years under the Suppression of Communism Act. She had just returned from South West Africa, collecting material for a book she was writing, and at her arrival at Jan Smuts Airport, the luggage was searched by the police and her documents and notes were confiscated. In 1963 she was arrested by security police in the main hall of the University of the Witwatersrand Library. She was taken to her Roosevelt Park home which was thoroughly searched by six policemen. She was subsequently detained for 117 days. Her classic story of solitary confinement '117 Days' was written shortly after her release. Special permission attached to a 1963 banning order on Ruth First and her husband Joe Slovo, allowed the couple to converse. Later in the year she was refused permission to spend a Christmas holiday in the Cape with two of her three young children. Permission was refused because she made the request to the Security Branch instead of the Chief Magistrate of Johannesburg. She left South Africa on an exit permit in March 1964. Later that year she was deported from Kenya, where she was working on a book on the political career of Odinga Oginga. In 1965 her sister-in-law Clarice

First was released by Security Police and simultaneously Ruth First's brother Ronnie First, was detained under the 180-day law. He was first detained in 1963. Their father Julius First, a Johannesburg furniture manufacturer had reportedly fled the country while his two children were being detained. He was alleged by police to be the 'number one Communist Treasurer in South Africa.' His mother Mrs Matilda First also left South Africa on an exit permit. In 1966 a BBC television programme 'Ninety Days' began a war of words between South Africa House and the BBC. In the TV play Ruth First enacted scenes taken from her book on detention, with other South Africans in London taking the roles of police interrogators. The then Ambassador, Dr Carl De Wet, accused the BBC of favouring communists from South Africa and said that it was harmful to relations between the two countries. He said that the programme encouraged and furthered the objectives of 'conspirators and saboteurs who were plotting to destroy by violence the South African Government.'

Ruth First was re-united with her husband Joe Slovo in London in 1964. Her father died in London in 1980, the year that her book on the life of novelist Olive Schreiner was banned under the Internal Security Act.