

RUTH FIRST - REMEMBERED

'A Full Productive Life'

A sensational journalistic expose of 30 years ago links the name of Ruth First, murdered last week in Maputo by a letter bomb, with that of Joe Gqabi, murdered last year in Harare: both exiled South Africans, both leading members of the African National Congress. Ruth was the 'Johannesburg' of the radical Weekly Guardian when Joe Gqabi joined the staff; together they made headlines with stories of the Bethal potato fields.

Bethal is a prosperous farming area in the eastern Transvaal. The rich white farmers, perennially short of black labour, had come to a rewarding arrangement with the authorities; they brought their lorries fitted with wire cages to the magistrate's court in Johannesburg and then loaded them up with 'short-term' black prisoners convicted of minor pass or tax offences. Once on the farms, stripped of clothes, flogged in the fields during the day, imprisoned in hovel compounds at night, there was no escape. Often the short-termer became a permanent slave labourer. The articles on the Bethal potato farms led directly to a month long boycott of potatoes organised by the Congress Alliance, headed by the ANC. Sacks of potatoes piled up and rotted at the market in Newtown.

Crusading journalism? It was more than that. It was part of the continuous political struggle in which Ruth was involved from her student days, and which took her into the Communist Party and a leading part in the liberatory movement. Politics, work, all aspects of life, were inextricably woven together. How odd it sounds to South Africans to hear people say, 'Keep politics out of sport.' In South Africa everything is political: home life, work, school, holidays, recreation. I met Ruth secretly in 1960 during the five-month state of emergency after the Sharpeville shootings. With many others I had been in gaol, but Ruth and a handful of people had escaped over the border into Swaziland. Before the emergency ended she returned to work underground. For a while South Africa allowed white radicals to lead such double lives. It came to an end in 1961, after the passing of a 90-day law permitting indefinite gaoling without charge.

Ruth had been associated with Nelson Mandela since their student days; she was deeply involved with the group arrested at Rivonia; she was not there when the arrests took place but was subsequently arrested again. She wrote about it in her book *117 Days*, and later in England played herself in the television film made by Jack Gould.

Ruth went into exile when it was obvious she

would be arrested again: the Rivonia trial was proceeding, Mandela and the others would receive life imprisonment. The next batch would soon be rounded up.

Everything came together in Maputo. She headed an international team as research director at the Centre for African studies, and drew on all her rich past to help initiate plans for the new country's needs, projects that would be viable both from an economic and social/political standpoint. Her first study on the Mozambique miner is due for publication. She worked and lectured, part of a team with others, never simply as an outstanding individual. She continued to participate in ANC and anti-apartheid activities, both locally and internationally. Such a combination of high intellect and rich practical achievement is rare in our world.