

"117 DAYS"

By Ruth First
Foreword by Albie Sachs
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By MARGARET RANDALL

Ruth First's powerful prison diary, an early journal of resistance against the machinery of apartheid, is important for understanding one of our most heroic battlefields. It is a white person's memoir in a black movement, and as such holds questions and answers for those of us who work against racism, in and outside of ourselves.

Ruth First and her husband, Joe Slovo, were central members of South Africa's liberation struggle before whites were allowed into the African National Congress (ANC). First was a petit bourgeois intellectual in a movement of working poor.

She was also a woman in a movement largely dominated by men. Although Tom Lodge, in his afterword, is careful to point out that these pages "were written when feminist culture was not as intellectually pervasive as it is today," I found First's perceptions and stance profoundly feminist. Furthermore, she is an excellent journalist who moves deftly between political analysis and the more emotional issues of isolation, invasion, separation, psychological torture and resistance one must deal with when one is in the hands of the enemy.

First's opening sentence beats a rhythmic movement between intimate personal detail and global recognition: "For the first 56 days of my detention in solitary I changed from a mainly vertical to a mainly horizontal creature." Later on, she writes, "While time was passing it crawled. Yet when it had passed it had flown out of all remembrance." Explorations of time, space and memory are a leit motif throughout the work.

Lodge, whose afterword provides an excellent synopsis of South Africa's freedom movement, points out that in the early 1960s imprisonment, torture and the treatment of women prisoners were more moderate than they are today—at least for whites. First was able to keep her confinement in perspective: "I, a prisoner held under top security conditions, was forbidden books, visitors, contact with any other prisoner; but like any white South African madam I sat in bed each morning, and Africans did the cleaning for the 'missus.'"

In his useful foreword, First's contemporary and comrade Albie Sachs sums up First's successful bridging of race and class: "... She was not a white fighting for the

Ruth First's potent words from prison



Cover illustration from '117 Days,' by Teresa Kurgan.

blacks, but a person fighting for her own right to live in a just society, which in the South African context meant destroying the whole system of white domination." (Sachs, another white member of the ANC, also speaks from painful personal experience. Long a target of the apartheid authorities, Sachs was nearly killed by a bomb planted in his car in Mozambique last year.)

"117 Days" is interestingly structured. The first person narrative enables the reader to enter, insofar as is possible, the experience of a woman arrested on suspicion of *something*—she must wait for months before she is sure of what, held for 90 days, then released, only to be taken again just outside the prison gate. Interspersed throughout the book are italicized passages, providing more "detached" accounts of the events.

First uses the full power of her perceptive talents in describing other inmates, jailers, techniques and places, as well as her own feelings about being separated from her

children, being confined—after the first 90 days are up—without knowing when she will be released. She also captures the long and torturous aggressions of the proverbial "good guy" official whose job it is to break her through constant offers of instant freedom in exchange for the most "insignificant" information.

DAUGHTERS' PERSPECTIVES

It is in writing about this final experience of subjugation, that First most powerfully conveys the subtleties of internalized repression: "I was appalled at the events of the last three days. They had beaten me. I had allowed myself to be beaten. I had pulled back from the brink just in time, but had it been in time? I was wide open to emotional blackmail, and the blackmailer was myself. They had tried for three months to find cracks in my armor and had found some. The search was still on..." Many readers of "117 Days" will have seen the extraordinary film "A World Apart." One of Ruth

First's daughters, Shawn Slovo, wrote the screenplay for the 1988 release. Another daughter, Gillian Slovo, produced the novel "Ties of Blood" a year later, which also deals with the theme of heroic parents and their effect on their children's identity. Having seen the film before reading First's prison memoir, I was struck by a sort of reverse recognition in several scenes; most notably the woman's inevitable recapture as she attempts to call home from a pay phone outside the prison gates, and the note she leaves in the fly leaf of a book when she attempts suicide at a particularly hopeless moment.

PRISON MIND GAMES

As memory informs both an accurate rendering of history and a people's full cultural identity, I am most interested in the effects of imprisonment and torture on the human power to recall and retain. First's observations are complex: "Unlike the Zweig character in the 'The Royal Game,' I chanced upon no chess manual in a visit to Gestapo headquarters and even if I had I doubt if I could have summoned the powers of concentration to learn the game without board or pieces. I played child-like games in my head: going through the letters of the alphabet for names of writers, composers, scientists, countries, cities, animals, fruit, flowers, and vegetables. As the days went on I seemed to grow less, not more proficient at this game. This was the time I should have been able to feed on the fat of my memory, but I had always had a bad memory (the Security Branch did not believe that one!) and had relied all my life on pencil, notebook, press clipping, the marking in the margin of a book to recall a source, a fact, a reference. Poetry that I had learned at school fled from me; French verbs were elusive. I lived again through things that had happened to me in the past: conversations and involvements with people, glowing again at a few successes, recoiling with embarrassment at frequent awkwardnesses. I put myself through a concentrated self-scrutiny but in a scattered, disorganized fashion and I found myself not with a clearer insight into myself in this abnormal situation, but with a diffused world of the past diverting me from the poverty of the present."

This is the fifth in Monthly Review's Voices of Resistance series. It's an exciting publishing effort, producing to date some fine "forgotten" texts, always offered, as in this case, with useful forewords and afterwords. In this time when our history is trivialized or erased on the nightly news, these reissues fill an important need.