

## BIOGRAPHY

## A family saga of teddy-bear terrorists



'An ordinary mother, yet extraordinary' ... Ruth First with daughters Gillian and Robyn in 1962

For years the Slovo family were the favourite ogres of the South African media. Then came daughter Shaun's film, *A World Apart*, which gave them human proportions. And now, daughter Gillian has published a fictionalised account of her controversial relatives.

By MOIRA LEVY

GILLIAN SLOVO regards *Ties of Blood* as an attempt to "own my past". Her research taught her to understand people like her parents who faced years abroad in exile.

In her characters we see traces of her parents, Joe Slovo, African National Congress leader, and Ruth First, assassinated by a parcel bomb in Maputo in 1982.

"They managed to hold on to their ideals during times of fear and disillusion. That they have always believed things will change in South Africa was, I believe, far-sighted."

Slovo, who has written a number of steadily-selling thrillers, spent three years researching and writing *Ties of Blood*, reading voraciously, spending months in libraries, listening to South African exiles and expatriates living in England.

The result is a 569-page volume, spanning four generations and taking in more than 80 years. It is a mammoth novel, embracing huge chunks of South African history and filling the gaps that Pretoria's official version of the past has sought to create.

And at the end of it, Slovo fears she hasn't done justice to the people who made that history and fill the pages of her book.

"They were ordinary people who in another society would have led ordinary lives, but who managed to rise up to meet the conditions of South Africa and do extraordinary things."

Slovo says all her characters are amalgams of people she has known — like Evelyn, the matriarch who weaves together the lives of two families, one white, one black.

"I think she is something symbolic for South Africa, she symbolises the strength of black South African women. One of the issues I was trying to think about in the book is the way these women are separated from their own children in order to look after white children."

Evelyn's son Moses is an ANC activist whose incarceration in the notorious prison labour farms of the 1950s jolts him into commitment to the political struggle. He eventually dies at the hands of the security police.

And Julia, who takes her Jewish family from Lithuania at the turn of the century to South Africa in search of a better life, is based on Slovo's grandmother, who lived in exile in London for 20 years before deciding, at the age of 88, to return to South Africa.

That decision, Slovo says, was at the core of her thoughts when she set out to write the book. It is a novel about people who "are struggling to find a home, but who cannot settle because of the circumstances they are in."

"It is a book about the experience of exile; the Jewish family who were forced to leave for an alien place, the black family who had to leave the rural life they knew for a new society ... Although they have choice, there is really

no choice.

"Because I was also exiled, I suppose it is about my experience as well."

Slovo was 12 when the family left South Africa in 1964 on an exit permit, shortly after her mother's release from 117 days' detention in solitary confinement.

He father was not with them. He was away on a short business trip when his colleagues were arrested at Liliesleaf farm in Rivonia and charged with treason; he never came back.

London came as a complete shock. An avid reader as a child, particularly of romantic 19th century English literature, Slovo arrived in a grey, bleak winter.

Her English classmates regarded her as a "country hick. This city seemed so metropolitan and huge. I had a terribly strong South African accent. I desperately tried to be English."

It was a traumatic childhood, and yet Slovo says she was "grateful for it".

"I understood that what my parents were doing was for the greater good. I don't think we ever questioned that." Nevertheless, "as a child it was difficult to negotiate between understanding that, yet feeling that what my parents were doing was not fair to me".

It is something she also finds difficult now, as a mother. Slovo divides her time between a three-year-old daughter, writing and South African political work.

"I do feel guilty that my child might suffer because I go to meetings. Perhaps it's the same guilt my mother felt."

She spent years trying to fit into English life — and then her mother, who was teaching at the Eduardo Mondlane University in Maputo, was assassinated by a parcel bomb.

Writing the book was coming to terms with that: "I felt they cannot do this, they cannot wipe out a person in an attempt to silence other people. And I feel this about the murder, not only of my mother, but about all the others who have been murdered by the South African state."

The book was also a way to come to terms with her South Africanness — and it has made her "ache to see those places again".

Interviewed shortly after the release of her book in London, Slovo describes her father, Pretoria's public enemy number one, as a "teddy bear terrorist". Her childhood memories are of "a lovable man, very fatherly — a Jewish man telling Jewish jokes."

"What Joe believes in is tremendously dangerous to the South African regime, and they have created the terrorist label to try to convince the public that he is a menace."

Her mother, she says, "was ferocious". She did not suffer fools gladly. "In some ways she was an ordinary mother, but of course she was not ordinary; she achieved such a tremendous amount. As a child it was difficult to come to terms with the fact that my mother was an extraordinary woman and at the same time could fight with me about doing the washing up."

"She changed in Mozambique; she softened. I think she belonged to Mozambique in a way that she never belonged to England. It was her home, and she meant something to that society, to those people."

● *Ties of Blood* has been found "undesirable" by a Publications Directorate committee and banned for distribution, but the publishers are appealing against the decision.