

Ruth First respected as a writer

JO SHALLIS, Johannesburg

TO many she was the intellectual power behind the South African liberation movement — to others Ruth First, who was killed when a letter bomb exploded in Maputo, was just a notorious communist, just Joe Slovo's wife.

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, like 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, together with over 100 other South Africans, in December 1956 though the charge against her was dropped in 1958

after the withdrawal of the faulty indictment.

In 1962, while Transvaal editor of *New Age*, which was subsequently banned and also of the banned magazine *Spark*, she was restricted, under the Suppression of Communism Act, to the magisterial area of Johannesburg for five years.

She had just returned from South West Africa, collecting material for a book she was writing, and on her arrival at Jan Smuts Airport, her 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 Wits University library. She was checking library reference cards at the time.

She was subsequently detained, without being brought to trial, for 117 days. Her classic story of solitary confinement "117 Days," was written shortly after her release.

After serving 90 days she was released. Once outside Marshall Square police station she was re-arrested.

Special permission attached to a 1963 banning order on Ruth First and her husband Joe Slovo, was granted so that they would be able 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.

She left South Africa on a one-way exit permit in March 1964.

In 1964 she was deported from Kenya. She had been in Nairobi,

working with Kenyan politician Oginga Odinga, on a book on his political career.

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 well-known Johannesburg furniture manufacturer, had reportedly fled the country while his two children were being detained.

He was alleged by police to be the "No 1 communist treasurer in South Africa." His mother, Mrs Matilda First, also left South Africa on a one-way permit.

Ruth First was re-united with her husband Joe Slovo in London in 1964 after he fled the country the previous year.