

HILDA BERNSTEIN remembers

South African exile Ruth First

# Exile to the 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 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 of 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 wholesale market at Newtown. Out children nagged unsuccessfully for packets of crisps.

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.

She was a beautiful woman; she dressed well, had excellent and elegant taste. 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 and held for 90 days, released and arrested again. She wrote about it in her book *117 Days*, and later in England played herself in a television film made by Jack Gould.

She went to the brink of breakdown and attempted suicide. These depths were reached only when she became convinced that her friends would think she had betrayed them. But she recovered her resilience and her humour. The book, with its revealing incidents, is sparked with her vivacity and courage, yet also betrays the innate shyness and reticence that her forthright manner tended to conceal.

She writes of the ambivalent relations that grew up between her and the interrogator, Viktor, but does not really examine it. "I was practising deceit, but searching myself not to make it self-deception."

Some people found her intimidating; she had a sharp tongue and was impatient of fools, and often seemed short-tempered; but the temper and impatience arose

from her own clarity of thought, an ability to cut through to the heart of any problem.

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: as banned people we were prohibited from communicating with one another, but I went to the airport when she left and we exchanged last hugs in the women's lavatory, the only place where the men of the Special Branch hesitated to come.

Everything came together at 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 a 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. Her life had never been so full, so productive; she was happy; they had to kill her.

Gdn. 21 or 22 Age. 1982