Ruth First Papers project

Interview with Hilda Watts and Rusty Bernstein part 1

An interview conducted by **Don Pinnock** c. 1992. Part of a series carried out at Grahamstown University and held at the UWC/Robben Island Mayibuye Archive.

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RB: ... that's right, I saw that term - somebody wrote an article about the when-we's that I was reading recently. Can't remember where.

HW: Yes, there was a wonderful little play about Rhodesians on the television. I can't remember the name of the man who wrote it.

RB: It was called something Road ... **Salisbury Road**.

HW: Salisbury Road, that's right. It was about a white Rhodesian left in his job when the when-we's have gone because he's older and hasn't any real alternatives, and a black boss is appointed above him. He and his - one son has left the country, and the other son was killed or something –

RB: The other son was called up for military service at the end of the play and refused to go.

HW: No, he was the one who left ...

DP: I want to put this together this morning. I wanted to get a feeling of when you were involved in the CP so I know how far back to ask you questions. Before the war, or during?

RB: Before the war. I think Hilda probably earlier than me.

HW: Ja, I joined the Communist Party in 1935 in Britain. I went to South Africa about 1937. I was already a member of the Communist Party but I had to have a talk to Party

people in London before I left. And at that time it was the policy of the communists - British communists, and I suppose it was reflected in South Africa - that you could be a secret member of the Communist Party and then join other political parties, like the Labour Party. I was advised to join the Labour Party in South Africa, which is not the existing coloured Labour Party, it was white. How white it was - it's a fact that a butcher named Light in Johannesburg had stood for the Labour Party in a municipal election, and his slogan was "Vote for Light and Keep Your City White"! So –

DP: That's why you took the whole Labour group over to the Communist Party! [laughter]

HW: So in fact Rusty and I met in the Labour League of Youth. That was our political meeting-point. What happened afterwards was that the Communist Party of South Africa, rightly, I think, decided that it wasn't good to have dual membership. You should either be a member of the Party, an open member, or you should leave the Party and be an open member of the Labour Party. We were given the choice, and all of us chose to become open members of the Communist Party and leave the Labour Party. Except for Alex Hepple. He had been in the Communist Party and he stayed on as a member of the Labour Party but it was done properly, he severed his connections with the Communist Party. But we were in the Labour League of Youth and as always, the youth branch of a political party is so much more militant, and the argument, of course, centred around what was then called "the native question". The policy of the Labour Party in those days was " we will solve the native question when we come to power"! So it's like with a pencil-stroke you put the whole thing to one side; it's not an issue now. We will see to it when we're in power, you see.

DP: We'll never!

HW: That's right.

DP: You're a South African?

RB: I was born in South Africa, yes; in fact I'd never been abroad when I joined the Communist Party which was either 1938 or '39, I'm not sure. But it was certainly pre-war. I can't recall exactly when it was. I'd been in the Labour League of Youth and then I became a member of the Labour Party and then I became a member of the Communist Party. So I moved from the Labour Party to the Communist Party, not the other way around.

DP: So you would have come into the Party just as the whole popular front thing was - ideas were being -

RB: Yes, I came into the Party from the anti-fascist movement. My start in politics was taking part in campaigns of solidarity with the Spanish Civil War, for instance, and the anti-fascist rallies that were being held at that time. That sort of thing. So I started from anti-fascism rather than concern about the black majority and their conditions - that only came much later. So I moved from anti-fascism to socialist thinking, and from socialist thinking into the Communist Party. And gradually my ideas about race problems developed later out of that, rather than the other way around.

DP: When did you finish your university?

RB: I finished university in the middle of the war, round about '41 or '42. They curtailed our course - it was supposed to be a five-year course with a year practical -

DP: At Wits?

RB: - at Wits; and because the year practical couldn't be organised because there weren't any jobs for trainee architects in the middle of the war they shortened our course. I can't recall if I graduated in '41 or early '42. I think it was mid-'41.

HW: No, it was before '42, I'm sure.

RB: Yes, I think it was mid-'42.

HW: Because you were working with the Labour Party when -

RB: Yes, I had a part-time university course. I wasn't a full-time student. I'd been working right through that period.

DP: Was the Communist Youth League operating on campus at that time?

RB: No, I would have thought in the late '45, '46 period. I don't think - I mean, there might have been a Young Communist League, but if there was it was such a tiny splinter thing that - I mean, the Party itself was a tiny little organisation in those days.

HW: I want to tell you when I came to South Africa the Communist Party had just gone though the most tremendous upheaval. I didn't know anything about it. I was

immediately assailed by people from different sides, totally confused about the thing. I'd spoken to a chap named Jimmy Shields, a British Communist member, before I left, and he said they've been having a lot of troubles up there but you've only got one task - build the Party! He was a real working-class Brit - "build the Party"! So I just set out from that thinking it doesn't matter about all these fights and things. It was really impossible for somebody coming - a real greenhorn coming from another place to understand what it had all been about; the black republic and the expulsion of all those people and so on.

DP: But in a sense you were the new generation of the Party. The old generation was rather in tatters after the -

RB/HW: That's right. Yes, absolutely. One hundred percent right, ja.

HW: It was in tatters. Wasn't the Central Committee in Cape Town then?

RB: The Central Committee, when I joined, anyway, had been temporarily moved to Cape Town to try and pick up the pieces. And what was left of the old guard in Johannesburg - which included, incidentally, Willie Kalk, which is why I was interested in the –

DP: Who were they? I mean, who would you - SP, and -

RB: Those people were already out, you see; they'd all expelled each other and dropped out one way or another. Glass and all those people -

HW: There was Issie Wolfson, who was a trade unionist of Kalk's generation; Molly Fleet [name correct?]; trade unionists, mainly.

RB: Yes, Willy Kalk ... practically nobody else that had participated - who had been sort of in the heart of this Party dispute.

DP: Bill Andrews was in -

RB: Bill Andrews was in Cape Town. Moses Kotane had gone to Cape Town because he couldn't stand the situation in Johannesburg. And so there was virtually nobody left. Edwin Mofutsonyana, of course, but I don't think he had been in the forefront of the disputes at all. People who were left were people who had been on the fringes of the faction-fighting. And to some extent, apart from Edwin, they were very much in eclipse. I mean, Kalk and Wolfson's influence was very much in eclipse and there was a new generation of people who hadn't been party to these disputes who came into the Party at that time, '38, '39.

HW: Both whites and blacks. This was the period in which people like Walter were beginning to arise in Johannesburg and getting into the national liberation movement, trailing, also, a lot of young blacks who were joining the Communist Party as well.

DP: I find it amazing that they joined, given the really terrible period in the 'thirties, the early 'thirties. It's extraordinary that that new generation arose at all!

RB: Well, the new generation of whites that arose was one thing. I think they arose from various factors, mainly the international situation - the rise of fascism, the

Spanish civil war, the obvious imminence of a world war brewing, the rise of Hitler and so on - this was the thing that largely sponsored the whites, I think. Largely, not altogether. But as far as the blacks were concerned, you've got to remember that at that time the Communist Party was the only really active organisation that existed on the scene. I mean, the ANC was a shadow. It was an idea that might have had a lot of sympathy, but as an organisation it almost didn't exist.

HW: There were things like the Council for Native and European something-or-other [Joint Councils], and the Institute of Race Relations ... they were kind of liberal in the most patronising kind of way towards the blacks. The Communist Party really was the only party which said these are people, that's all. It brought blacks and whites together.

RB: The ANC was such a shadow that I can remember I was working for the Party full-time in - I suppose it was 1940, it might have been late in 1939. No, I think it must have been 1940. And at that time the secretary of the Transvaal African National Congress used to come into the Party office, beg us to give him a hundred feet of duplicator paper and borrow our duplicator to run off a notice calling - whatever it was, a provincial congress of the ANC. But it was that sort of an organisation. Couldn't even afford its own duplicator paper. So really the Party was the only political body that appeared on the scene. So any african people who got interested in politics gravitated towards the Party, and this was helped a lot by the African night-schools which the Party used to run. It was a very big factor in the development of the membership of the Party. In the Transvaal, anyway. We used to run a number of night-schools in which we were teaching people basic literacy.

DP: Were a lot of people involved in those night-schools?

HW: Yes, practically the whole Party.

RB: Practically all the Party membership was involved one way or another, some more than others.

HW: They were held in garages, mostly -

DP: This was a main arena for recruiting and developing the Party?

HW: I don't know, it just -

RB: That and public meetings. We used to do a lot of soap-box meetings in townships -

HW: - city hall steps, townships - yes, all over the place.

RB: All over the place. Outside beer-halls and compounds and so on.

HW: Everywhere.

DP: Now that's up to the war. You then joined up, did you?

RB: '43, or something like that.

HW: We followed the Party line.

DP: Yes, which was out until it was in! [laughs]

HW: First it was in for a week. There was a Party member - but this is irrelevant, it's wasting your time - in Pretoria. George Findlay, a very clever lawyer, who came and persuaded us that we should support the war, and the next week when the Party line from Britain was we are not supporting the war, he came and explained to us why we shouldn't support the war.

DP: A good lawyer! [laughter]

HW: Yes! So we didn't support the war, you see. And then when the Soviet Union was attacked in 1941 it was legitimate. But that was when you joined up, wasn't it?

RB: Later, because at that time I was working full-time for the Party -

DP: As what? Were you organising?

RB: Well, I was really the propaganda - I might have been district secretary for the Transvaal. I was district secretary for a year in Johannesburg, I can't remember what year that was. Maybe '43 or something like that.

HW: No,it was before then. It must have been before then.

RB: Oh, before. But for a long time, from about 1940, I'd been working full-time really on the propaganda side of the Johannesburg district committee. I'd been their

propaganda department, which was how I got into all this business of newspapers, **Inkululeko** and leaflets, writing propaganda and so on. So that had been my function.

DP: What did that entail? What did you actually do, on the ground?

RB: I can't quite remember, to tell you the truth!

HW: You had to handle the duplicating machine, mainly!

RB: Largely, I think, it was concerned with **Inkululeko**. The bulk of it, the routine would have been producing **Inkululeko**, which became a printed journal - I don't know when, but probably 1940 or '41. Before that it had been duplicated, and I'd been part of the technical team doing the duplicating and collating and so on. But I'd never, that I can recall, actually written anything for it. Probably not, because at that time I was still in the Labour Party, I was a member of the Labour Party. When I came out of the Labour Party and came to work for the Communist Party, I think that was about the time the decision was taken to print **Inkululeko**, which was quite a big step. And then as it grew we turned it into - I think at its peak it was a weekly newspaper and it took a lot of producing. So I was on the production side, I wasn't really doing any editorial stuff because I couldn't read them. Apart from the English page I couldn't read the rest.

DP: There was a lot of vernacular writing in **Inkululeko**.

RB: Yes, there was a lot of it. Basically, it was one page per language, and each page had a language editor with Mofutsonyana being the sort of overall editorial guru of the whole thing. I don't know quite how much he could read and how much he had to get

read to him or explained to him. But I did all the technical side, seeing it through the printing and so on.

DP: When did it start, **Inkululeko**? Or was that - **Umsebenzi**, is it -

RB: Umsebenzi failed; it collapsed because its press was seized by its creditors. That would have been about the 1938 period. When I joined the Party **Umsebenzi** had already failed, its press had been seized and there was nothing. So **Inkululeko** started about 1938/39 as a roneod - I think monthly. We used to go on a Sunday morning - a group of about eight or ten of us used to assemble in the Party office. The stencils had already been typed and we would spend the whole day running an electric duplicator, collating, stapling and all the rest of it. It was an entire day's activity on a Sunday to turn out the entire edition, which I think was four reams of paper. That would have made it about -

DP: Two thousand -

RB: Just under two thousand. Eighteen hundred copies per month. Hilda, I think, used to do all the hand-lettering on the covers.

DP: Who were the people involved in those Sundays?

RB: Michael Harmel - I don't know if he was one of those, but he was certainly doing some of the editorial and writing work; Ashley Lewittan; possibly Rowley Arenstein -

HW: Dan Tloome.

RB: No, I don't think so.

HW: Wasn't Dan - who were the africans?

RB: I don't remember who actually worked. In fact, I don't think any of them actually worked on the production side. They might have been writing. I don't know who was writing.

HW: Well, they obviously were writing all the vernacular.

RB: Well, I don't know. They may have been for **Inkululeko**, I don't know how much vernacular there was before it became printed. I'm not sure, I can't remember.

DP: Who was the audience perceived to be and for what reason?

HW: The working-class, Don! [laughter]

RB: I don't know, I can't answer that. I don't know if anybody had an audience in mind. I mean, you're producing eighteen hundred copies of a monthly newspaper, you can't -

DP: In Johannesburg?

RB: In Johannesburg, you can't have a very big audience in mind. Presumably it was being sold at the night schools and in trade union branches and in places like that. It couldn't have been very much.

DP: And then you turned it into a printed, typeset -

RB: By that time, you see, the Party had already began to recover and it had quite a membership. Well, quite a membership - it probably ran to a hundred, a hundred and fifty people in Johannesburg. And part of the unwritten constitution of the Party at that time was that everybody in the Party went out at least once a week and sold newspapers. We used to spend every weekend either selling newspaper - either selling **New Age**, selling the **Guardian** and selling **Inkululeko**.

HW: Or speaking at meetings.

RB: Or speaking at meetings. Both! I mean, practically everybody was selling newspapers at one time or another each week. That's how we got rid of the printed **Inkululeko**. I remember I used to sell it at that beerhall down the bottom end of Von Weilig Street - I don't know if it's still there. "My-My", it was called.

DP: "My-My" is still there! It's -

RB: It's still there. Is that at the bottom of Von Weilig Street?

DP: It's now got a freeway over the top and people live under the freeway.

RB; Well, there was a beerhall and I think a municipal compound down there. I used to sell **Inkululeko** there every weekend. And everybody else in the Party used to sell **Inkululeko.** Generally knock door-to-door in places like that - bus-stops, or beerhalls,

and places like that.

DP: I find it fascinating that so much of the energy of an organisation goes around the media - I mean the newspaper.

RB: And teaching; teaching was the other thing. I suppose those were the two main activities. We used to hold quite a lot of small public meetings - you know, street corners on soap boxes and that sort of thing.

HW: And we had a lot of people who were members of trade unions, who worked in the trade unions.

RB: But I mean at an office level I think a tremendous amount of the Party's activity was in the propaganda field - producing leaflets just for handing out, handbills to hand out, propaganda stuff; producing newspapers; later on producing pamphlets, particularly during the war we produced an awful lot of pamphlets. I don't know how many of them have survived in the archives. And that took up quite a big part of the office activity. The branch activity was rather different. It was much more a sort of door-to-door type of work. Our branches used to either sell **New Age** or the **Guardian** door-to-door, or they used to do - in the townships they'd be doing house-to-house work on local political problems. Canvassing for an advisory board election, or organising a demonstration or a deputation and so on.

DP: The **Guardian** was running parallel to **Inkululeko**. How was the difference percieved? Was there any difference in the line? Political line?

RB: That I couldn't really say. The difference was perceived that the **Guardian**, particularly, was not the Communist Party's paper, officially. And in fact, I think at the time I'm talking about - '38, '39 -

DP: Betty Radford -

RB: It probably wasn't the Party's paper even unofficially. It merely followed the Party line. I think it was very much Betty Radford and George Sacks' private hobby-horse. But they operated in Cape Town, so I don't know. And I don't know at what time it became unoffical Party property, I really don't. Whereas **Inkululeko** from day one announced itself as the official organ of the - I don't know what, the Transvaal or the Johannesburg Communist Party. So to that extent they were different in their appeal to the population. The one was talking as the organ of the Communist Party, and maybe there are differences in line. One would have to read it to see.

DP: What was the circulation of **Inkululeko** at its height? Or when was its height, I suppose is a better question.

RB: Its height was sometime during the war, like '43, '44, '45. I'm not sure exactly when. When it was being produced weekly and something like twenty - I think our figure was twenty thousand copies a week. So it never quite reached the circulation of the **New Age** at its peak. But the **New Age** was circulating nationally whereas **Inkululeko** virtually was a Transvaal circulation. I mean, it hardly circulated in any other provinces because they didn't have the mix of languages. It wasn't an appropriate paper for anywhere else.

DP: Who was your printer?

RB: It was a distant relation of mine. I can't remember what his firm was called. He was a man called Clark. I mean, the fact that he was a distant relation of mine was accidental. One of the directors of his firm was, strangely enough, a chap who became a Nationalist Party cabinet minister who - I think he was one of those blokes who got involved in the - what scandal was it? The -**DP:** Sanlam?

RB: No, the one with the propaganda department.

DP: Muldergate.

RB: Oh yes, Muldergate. I can't remember him, anyway. He was just somebody who became a Nationalist Party MP who was one of the directors. At that time I don't think he was in the Nationalist Party, he was probably in the Afrikaner party - Herzog's party. So it was just a purely commercial thing and we became very big customers of theirs. After a time I think we were probably their biggest customers. Apart from our weekly newspaper we were printing masses of handbills and printed pamphlets and all sorts of things. It was called Union Printers -was it called? I can't remember. Progress Printers or Union Printers.

DP: "Progress" was Cape Town. That was Lee-Warden.

RB: Yes, that was Lee-Warden. Then it must have been something like Union Printing. But it was a totally commercial thing. They had no political interest in it.

DP: Did you used to get harassed by the police at all?

RB: Not much in the early days. We got harassed a bit at the time when we were opposing the war. We got harassed a bit not so much by the police but by municipal officials -

HW: They used to grab the supplies -

RB: Yes, the local location superintendents and so on. They used to harass us quite a bit. But the police were really not very heavy-handed in those days, as long as you were peaceful. As long as no actual violent demonstrations took place. So I mean it was quite often that we'd go and speak at a meeting somewhere in a black location and get yourself arrested and your name taken and be thrown out of the police station an hour later when they'd got some blokes in to work out what the hell they were holding them for, what have they done. Maybe they'd broken a municipal by-law by holding a meeting without a permit and you paid a five-pound fine subsequently. That sort of harassment. Nothing heavy-handed, or very little.

DP: I suppose you would have gone into fairly concerted handbill and pamphlet circulation when the Party was for joining up, for the war. That would have been when things started accelerating?

RB: Well, I think there were two phases. There was first of all a phase when we were against the war when people were starting to get arrested - like Dadoo and Dawood Seedat in Natal who was an Indian leader and so on. Some of our people were being arrested under war emergency regulations and so on. And we ran big campaigns,

propaganda campaigns against these peoples' arrest and detention and so on. So there was a period when we were doing very intensive handbill distribution in the Transvaal, at any rate, about issues like that. Not directly related to whether we were for or against the war, but related to the way in which the authorities were clamping down on our people. And then the next big period was when we were supporting the war and we began to produce propaganda really on a very wide scale. I mean, some of those pamphlets - I don't know if you've got copies of things like "Arm the People, Away with Passes" - those were, I remember, big ones which we produced in about 1943 or '42.

HW: I remember that, because we used to go around shouting "Arm the passes, away with people"! **[laughter]**

RB: But of those we did literally sell thousands and thousands of copies. I mean, they were being sold for a nominal - whatever it was, one penny, two pennies, I don't remember now. A nominal fee, but they really did go into thousands and thousands of copies. There was great political awareness in those days. Even if they wren't supporting us they were interested to know what was being said.

DP: Street-corner distribution?

RB: Street-corner, all sorts of things. I mean, we did things like - they had a government-sponsored enormous fete in Johannesburg called the "V for Victory fete" or something, at which they took over the whole of the Zoo Lake and other areas. I was all part of a recruiting, a patriotic drive thing. And we - our people were in amongst the crowds with bundles of these things selling "Arm the People"! It sounded like it was

part of the "V for Victory fete" and we sold thousands! [laughs]. Just sort of mingling in the crowds. We were quite imaginative in the propaganda field in those days; you know, we were popular, for one thing, we weren't being heavily harassed. We felt we had support, and it was easy -

HW: We used to go out at night to the townships.

RB: That was with handbills, distributing free of charge. We used to do a lot of that in the townships at night.

DP: Did you say, sold those pamphlets? I mean, how did you raise funds for the Party?

RB: Well, the Party always raised funds basically in two ways. One was from its own members. I mean, membership subscriptions were, by most organisations' standards, fairly substantial. You were expected to pay fairly heavily for the privilege. And then it had quite a large number of sympathisers, people who used to give us monthly or periodic donations. A lot of them were Eastern European immigrants who had come to South Africa and remembered the Party either in Germany during the rise of Hitler (the Party had been an organisation they looked to as their shield in that period), or they were Eastern European refugees who remembered the Party as something that opposed the pogroms and the racism of the Tsarist period. So they were people of that sort who for reasons of their own would give us donations, and we used to go out and canvass them regularly. That was the source of our funds.

HW: When I stood for the city council we collected quite large sums of money from

very respectable people.

DP: When did you stand for the city council?

HW: I was elected in 1943. I can't remember, I think I stood twice - at the beginning of 1943 they had some sort of extra election, and then I stood again later on and got onto the council. But Michael Harmel and myself, we put up quite a number of candidates. We went and collected money from somebody who was at the stock exchange and things like that. This was a man who so much disliked the person who was opposing one of the Communist Party candidates that he was prepared to give money! [laughs] Well, we didn't question peoples' motives!

DP: So you went to the city hall and you went to war?

RB: I was in the army when Hilda stood for election -

HW: Ja, he was away when I -

RB: - but I think I was there when she lost. I probably contributed to her losing. [laughs]

HW: Oh, rubbish!

RB: I didn't contribute to her winning!

RB: You were very excited when I got elected! I got a letter from you saying you were

absolutely thrilled.

DP: Did you go up north?

RB: Yes, I was in Italy.

HW: That was his first time he left South Africa.

RB: First time I'd ever been out of the country.

DP: Did you join the Springbok Legion?

RB: Yes, I was in the Springbok Legion, and that's how I came eventually to be associated with **Fighting Talk**, because -

HW: Now we're coming on to the subject of your visit! [laughs]

DP: No no, we've been on the subject of my visit all along! [laughs].

RB: Just to come on to that: I joined the Springbok Legion when I was in the army, and when I came back **Fighting Talk** was already running. The Springbok Legion started it, it was theirs.

DP: Where did it start? It started in Ethiopia or somewhere?

RB: I can't tell you where it started because I wasn't in on the start of it. I mean, I can't claim to be a founder of it or even a founder of the Springbok Legion, because at the

time the Springbok Legion was founded I was still working for the Communist Party. So I don't know where it started, but it ran quite successfully during the war. It had a number of fairly high-pressure publicists and journalists of different types working for it, particularly cartoonists. It had two of the top South African cartoonists working for it -

DP: Who were they? I've seen some of their cartoons -

RB: Vic Clapham was one of the really marvellous cartoonists, and the other was a chap called Abe Berry, who became probably the best-known political cartoonists in South Africa. I think he was on one of the daily papers, I can't recall exactly his background.

DP: Who was the other chap?

HW: Vic Clapham. He was a very good artist.

DP: Unusual cartooning style.

HW: Yes, a very good graphic artist, and then he went into the advertising industry and did very well. I can't remember what happened to him later on.

HW: Into which he dragged me later on. I became a copy-writer. That's the beginning of my journalistic career! A lot of people who became journalists started as copy-writers, it's a very good training.

RB: And then I don't know who actually the journalistic side of the original **Fighting**

Talk were, but I think it was probably a chap called Arthur Rudolf, who I think subsequently became a journalist on the **Daily Mail** or something like that. He was a full-time journalist afterwards. I don't know if he had been before. He's now living in Britain, if he's still alive. I think he was probably the journalistic skills on the thing, but there were probably others, and then when he came back from the army Cecil Williams became the editor of the paper.

DP: What happened to Cecil Willimans?

RB: He died about five or six years ago in Britain. He left South Africa in the 1960's, round about the same - the Rivonia period, or a bit earlier. He became the editor. He wrote full-time for the Springbok Legion. I think he was doing the editorial side of it together with a few others - possibly Phyllis Altman, I don't know if she was associated, but she was a writer who worked for the Springbok Legion at the time.

DP: And Fred Carneson? Was he -

RB: Well, this was a Johannesburg thing and he would have been in Cape Town. I don't know that he was connected. Brian Bunting. possibly, because he spent a little time in Johannesburg before he emigrated to Cape Town - migrated, I suppose - I can't remember who ran it, but the thing was running quite successfully during the war. And then when the war ended, like the Springbok Legion it began to tail off and droop a bit. I was dragged into the editorial side of it sometime after the war when it was already on its decline, and finally when the Springbok Legion was more or less declined and the Congress of Democrats was about to be formed, I think the Springbok Legion decided it could no longer afford the paper and it decided it was

going to abolish it. We formed an independent editorial board which then took over **Fighting Talk** - the name and whatever remained of its circulation.

DP: Who did you conceive of yourselves as - that board that took it over? COD, or -

RB: Well no, it was probably prior to the formation of COD -

HW: It was a long time before COD.

RB: It was a time when the Springbok Legion was in decline, so it would have been between '46 and - I think COD was formed about '52, something like that. After the Defiance Campaign, '52, '53. So it was between '46 and '53; it was in decline, it was going to go out of existence, so some of us took it over - most of us were, in fact, members of the Springbok Legion, but the Legion itself didn't want to carry on the paper for financial reasons. I know that Jack Hodgson, Cecil Williams and I were still associated with it, but we began to draw in other people - writers or journalists or people who would help keep the thing going.

DP: Why did you want to keep it going?

HW: [laughs] It was propaganda, wasn't it!

RB: Well, I don't know. It was propaganda for a cause. One's whole instinct is to develop your propaganda regardless of any recourse to what you're talking about! I think propaganda's become sort of - we [indistinct] about propaganda, and this is what happened. I think we felt we were talking to some sort of a limited democratic

constituency which didn't have a voice. I think we were talking particularly to the - not to the black masses, we never saw it as that, but to the white population, the intelligentsia perhaps amongst the coloureds and Indians and other people. The literate and literary people who would read a quasi-literary political magazine of some sorts. We felt we had some sort of a constituency that was worth talking to and trying to persuade of our line. And also as a sort of opposition to the Nationalist propaganda which was very powerful at that time and very effective in winning over ex-servicemen and people who formerly had been anti-nationalist and were beginning to change sides. So we gathered together this independent board and we ran the thing for a time, and then when the Congress of Democrats was formed I think we formally or informally transferred the **Fighting Talk** to a joint board, on which the bulk of the people were probably COD people.

DP: Those people on the interim committee - were they mainly Party people?

RB: Probably, you know; I wouldn't like to - I can't recall who they all were. I mean, I remember Jack Hodgson and Cecil Williams ... I can't remember who the others were in the interim period. It was a shifting sort of thing, and then finally one way or another we drew Ruth - well, this was after it had ceased being the Springbok Legion, its association with the Legion had been formally discontinued - Ruth got drawn into the thing and gradually it began to change its character and people outside of the Party and the Springbok Legion circles began to get drawn in - writers, particularly writers. People like Dennis Brutus and Alex La Guma, Alfred Hutchinson who was one of the most talented writers we had around ...

DP: Who was he?

RB: Alfred Hutchinson was an african in Johannesburg who was a really marvellous writer. A literary man with a great imagination; a real talent, in my view. One of the most talented people we produced. He wrote articles and so on, some of which you'll find in **Fighting Talk**, most of which I think are really marvellous literary pieces.

HW: Are you talking about Hutch?

RB: Yes. Then he left South Africa - oh, quite early, I suppose round about '58 or '60, and he wrote a book about his departure.

HW: The Road to Ghana, wasn't it called?

RB: The Road to - something, I think it was Ghana. What he did was he smuggled himself out because he had no travel papers and he had no documents. In those days africans couldn't get passports, it was almost an impossibility. He got on a train with migrant miners who were going back to Malawi or Tanzania or somewhere, he dressed himself up as a miner, and he wrote this story of his travel across Africa in this train with migrant miners, being packed into this sort of cattle truck -

HW: It was a very good book.

RB: A marvellous book, because this was really a literary talent, this man.

HW: But after that he didn't write any more.

RB: No, he came to Britain and he took to -

HW: Yes, I suppose he was drinking, I don't know what. He just couldn't get his life together.

DP: A lot of people had that thing -

RB: Well, he lost his roots. Basically, he was a township black from Johannesburg and his roots were there, and he really had this marvellous literary ability and feeling for what was going on in the township, and he came to Britain and I think he was way out of his depth - there wasn't even at that time a really organised South African exile community in Britain. That was before the big exile population started arriving. So he was out on a limb and lost, and like many writers of that generation, of the literary generation of the early 1960's, he drank a lot and he - he was a bit rootless. He married, he married a British girl eventually, but he never wrote anything worth talking about. And then he died quite young, in his middle 'forties.

HW: It was a really sad story, because there was the talent.

DP: Now you said that when Ruth was the editor and more people were drawn in it changed character a bit. Was that because - in line with the development of the Congress of Democrats and the Congress Allinace, or what would have -

RB: Well, I think the changing of the line, as far as the Congress movement was concerned, was a sort of continous process. It started with the Springbok Legion which was already moving closer to the liberation movement at the time of its decline, and

that continued. And from the time of the Congress of Democrats being formed, it carried on. But what Ruth did was she enlarged its circle from whom it drew its writers, because she had journalistic and other contact with people that we didn't have. And so she drew in people who were writers, like for instance I remember in Cape Town there was a man called Richard Reeve, who was another very good -

HW: He's written a number of books, actually.

RB: Yes. He was drawn in; he used to write - I mean, he didn't participate on the editorial side. Dennis Brutus began to take part as part of the editorial board. And so the circle enlarged in a sort of political but also in a very sort of -

HW: In a more intellectual sort of way.

RB: Yes, a more intellectual and literary sort of direction, and that was Ruth's influence very largely, I think. We were rather more narrowly political, the original people.

HW: Well, we were more propagandists, and this became - it wasn't an intellectual journal, but it veered a little bit that way.

DP: Critical and cultural?

HW: Yes, that's right.

RB: The cultural side was this sort of period when Ruth was running it, more than the

period previously when we had little contact with cultural people.

DP: Did the committee - did the board control - or what was the relationship between the board and the editor, and who was that board?

RB: Well, the editor was really the person who selected - no, proposed ... let me put it this way. The board was actually a real editorial board. It comprised about five or six people, it was a fairly movable board of whom I was probably the longest continuous member because I'd started from the Springbok Legion and I went right through to the time when the paper was banned. So I had the longest continuous association with it. Cecil Williams, Dennis Brutus for some time, Ruth for quite a considerable time, a man called Paul Joseph who used to sit on the editorial board - he's now living in Britain, an Indian from the Transvaal. He really was our circulation manager; he sat on the board not so much on the editorial side as so far as his contribution was on the circulation -

DP: No relation to Helen, was he?

RB: No. No, he was an Indian from the Transvaal. Very active and energetic in that sort of thing, in distribution and organising sales, but not on the editorial side, although he sat on the board. I can't think who else was on the board, but it varied slightly from time to -

DP: What did the board do?

RB: The board decided in advance what sort of articles it was going to try and get and who it was going to try and get to write them for the next issue; what sort of topics it felt

had to be dealt with; what the editorial would deal with - that sort of thing.

DP: So it was fairly democratic editorial policy, it wasn't an editor decided -

RB: Well, except that the meetings would take place - I don't know how often, but in between, obviously, finally the editor had a say - did we cut this piece out or did we put it in, was it good enough or do we send it back to the author and say sorry - that finally rested with the editor. It wasn't that every article was read by the whole committee. But the contents were planned and supervised. I mean, we'd look at the last issue and criticise it and say this was bad and that should have been done a different way and we'd better get a reply to this article and so on. So it was that sort of a board, it was a supervisory board more than anything. The editor more or less edited.

DP: Was she paid by the board? Or was it a voluntary thing?

RB: No. The whole thing. No writers were paid, nobody was paid. The whole thing was a totally voluntary operation.

DP: Do you remember its circulation?

RB: No, not really; I would guess it was something like a few thousand. But I'm just guessing, really. I've got no memory of it at all.

HW: To get paid for writing! Huh! Didn't happen. [laughter]

RB: I have written - I think I must be the most prolific writer in the whole history of

South Africa on politics, and I've never had a single penny for anything I've ever written, I can tell you that! [laughter]

DP: Hilda, why did you decide to stand for council?

HW: I didn't decide, the Party decided they were going to put people up.

DP: Who did you beat when you got in?

HW: A whole lot of people. About three or four other candidates, including one standing for the Labour Party - Liebman, Dr Liebman, who had been a city councillor. I can't remember the others - oh, there was a rate-payer. It was at a time when the Johannesburg City Council had not had openly proclaimed political parties, and there was an organisation called the Ratepayers' Association which was basically the Smuts sort of wing, and the Nationalist Party at that stage came in and put up candidates as a party, and the Labour Party put up candidates. But the council itself was in a state of flux. We had an Eastern European friend who said - I'm always quoting him - [puts on heavy slav accent] "Hilda got elected to the Johannesburg City Council by a series of coincidences surmounted by a fluke". And I think it was! This was one of the coincidences, that the council itself was not very strongly organised and the relationship between the political groupings was changing at that time. It was the height of the Soviet resistance.

RB: Stalingrad, wasn't it?

HW: 1943 - yes. I came in on a wave of pro-Soviet feeling, if you can believe it, among

the white population. That was one of the coincidences.

DP: Well, Russia was busy winning the war at that stage!

HW: That's right, yes. And there were various other factors. The Party decided to put up candidates in a number of constituencies, and I just happened to be one of those, presumably. Molly Fischer was one of them - Bram Fischer's wife, she stood in Braamfontein. And Michael Harmel was standing as a candidate in one constituency. I don't remember who the others were. Danie du Plessis ...

RB: It was a thing the Party used to do in those days in the belief that it was one way of getting to the white population - going door-to-door and talking to them on the doorstep. They had the theory that -

HW: - using orthodox democratic means such as were administered at that time.

DP: So you graduated from the city hall steps to the city hall itself?

HW: That's right! [laughs]

[end of side one]