Ruth First Papers project

Interview with Hilda Watts and Rusty Bernstein part 2

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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HW: ... in the first place, I represented the Party and I was the only member. I didn't have anyone to second my motion if I wanted to put forward a motion in the council. I didn't know the procedure - I'm always very bad about those things - and I had to study the procedure of the council in order to find out how you could utilise the council rules in order to get over what you wanted to say. For instance, the first session that I attended at the council, one of the conservative, reactionary people got up and made a very very strong attack on me personally, on my whole election campaign and what I stood for and everything. And when I wanted to get up to reply, I couldn't do it, and if it hadn't have been for one member of the Labour Party who was friendly towards me - the others were hostile - I wouldn't have learned, because the council rules were very difficult. How to utilise the council rules in order to be able to reply to things like that at a different stage, and how you use them.

DP: And they're not going to teach you if they can possibly help it!

HW: They were not going to teach me, no! [laughs] But this man, he was the one who helped me. And later on - oh, let's not talk about councils, they're such a bore!

DP: Well, I wanted to ask a question related to that - were you the only woman on the council?

HW: No, when I got onto the council there had been two elderly ladies. They were like something out of Victoriana, they wore long black dresses and hats and so on. I think there was one of them left on the council. But no - she was no longer on the council. Was she still on when I got elected? I don't - there might have been just one other.

Then a Labour Party woman, Jessie MacPherson, was elected to the Johannesburg Council -

DP: Didn't she become mayor?

HW: Yes, she became mayor. And later on another woman, Joyce - what was her name?

RB: Waring.

HW: Waring, very reactionary. Frank Waring was a reactionary member of Parliament. But they'd never had a young woman. We're talking about 45 years ago!

DP: That would have been in the mid-'forties?

HW: That's right. I was elected in '43, I was on the council from '43 to '46. So you see, I was younger. It was a long time ago!

DP: It must have been quite a surprise for them! Your political position and the fact you're a woman must have been difficult for them.

HW: I utilised the fact that I was a woman shamelessly during the election. I campaigned - we held street-corner meetings and meetings in boarding-houses. There were a lot of boarding-houses in Hillbrow where I stood. I used to go around with Michael Harmel between six and eight in the evenings. We'd go to the proprietor and

say, may we speak to your people? We had a sitting audience in the dining-rooms. We'd just enter the dining-room, we'd say we were talking about the municipal elections and this was the candidate - Michael used to say, this is the candidate of the Cmmmsst Prty [deliberately slurs words], Hilda Watts! We sort of brushed over that, but I mean, I did stand as a communist! [laughs] And then I'd get up and make a blatant speech, playing on the fact that there were no women on the city council and so on and so on. In those days, nobody thought that women had a point of view that was different from men, because this whole feminist idea that women need to be represented not only for the political views that they represent, but because they are women and they have a different outlook upon life to men - that didn't exist. I put it over, all the same. And when we'd finished with the boarding-houses we'd go and hold about five or six street-corner meetings with a loudspeaker, and people would come out on their balconies and so on.

DP: You must have picked up the womens' vote as well!

HW: I hope so, I don't know! Well, you see, it was a coincidence. I don't know what the fluke was. I think the fluke was getting on at all! [laughs]

DP: In '46 [indistinct]

HW: Oh yes, after the miners' strike. I was still on the council then at that time.

DP: That also must have been a surprise to the council to have one of its councillors arrested for -

HW: Yes -

RB: For a non-fraudulent offence! I think they were accustomed to having councillors arrested for fraud, corruption and general skullduggery.

HW: Oh, they did awful things to me on the council, being naive. You have to know how these things work. If you go into parliament and bodies like that you really should study, and I hadn't. Every member of the council had to be on one of the sub-committees, by council rules, so they put me on the Parks, Gardens and Estates Sub-committee! However, most of council had the right to attend, though not to vote, at all the other sub-committees. So I made it my duty particularly to attend what was then called Non-European Affairs. I regarded myself as the Non-European representative on the Non-European Affairs Sub-committee, and also other committees that I was interested in. Subsequently, I was put onto - the following year, or the last year, onto a committee that dealt with public health. I was put on a thing called a slums court. I didn't realise I was an absolute pawn! The whole thing was so corrupt. At the end of the war they had restrictions on building. To get a building permit you had to get a special permit from the council. And one of the ways in which it was done was if a property was declared a slum property, it was pulled down and you'd be able to put up a new building there. And so they had this slums court which used to go around. And other members of the slums court, not me, but the other members, were primed that this building should be declared a slum. I mean, if you think about the number of slums that exist in any city, it's an almost arbitrary choice to decide that one's a slum and one's not. But if the landlord of that particular building had been on to one of the

council members and so on and so on ... I used to go around and look at these slums and agree that yes, that's a pretty awful bulding, it should come down. One day a young Indian lad came to see me, and he told me that his boss wanted to get a building permit and had arranged with one of the councillors on the slums court -

DP: To have it pulled down?

HW: Ja. And after that I just resigned from the slums court, because it was impossible for me to tell which was genuine and which was not. But it was that kind of thing. However, it gave me access to the townships in a way that I hadn't had before. They couldn't - the man in charge of Non-European Affairs, the council official, was a very vicious man. The african name for him - I don't know what it was in the vernacular - but in English it was "the angry fox", and that's what he was like. He tried his best to keep me away. It was the time the squatters' movement blew up, and there was so much going on there.

DP: Mpanza's movement?

HW: That's right, yes. And I had access to the townships, and to people in the townships and so on, and to discussions on the committees about what they were doing about the squatters' movemement.

DP: Why were you - were you voted off? What happened?

HW: Well, they passed a new limitation. They changed my area specifically to get me

off.

DP: Yes, standard South African practice.

HW: They included in it a really reactionary white suburb and chopped off an area were I had supporters. I did stand again, but tere really wasn't any chance of getting back again. And this was a new limitation which was designed specifically to get me off the council. I wasn't sorry. I was not happy in the council.

DP: You were of course the second communist on the council. The council was taken over in the 1930's, or was it earlier? During the bus strike, when a group of International Socialist League people took over -

RB: 1920's, sometime **[1919]**. Yes, when they took over from the Johannesburg Soviet after the tramway or busdrivers' strike. I can't remember who it was; it would have been Driver? Or somebody like that ...

DP: Extraordinary incident! The Council Chambers were taken over!

RB: That's right, they took over the Council Chambers and decided they'd continue to run the trams and collect the funds from the public, which they would - I can't remember, use them for the union or distribute to the populace or something!

DP: No capitulating!

RB: They were running a soviet.

HW: I thought I was the first white, the only white to be elected by a white - the only communist to be elected!

RB: Yes, but it's happened in Cape Town –

HW: But not by a white vote.

RB: No, that's true.

HW: Does anyone want - ? It's probably very strong by this time.

DP: I'd love another cup of tea ... thankyou. How involved was the Party in the '46 strike?

RB/HW: Oh, very much. Very involved, yes.

DP: The state seemed to be trying to prove they were and they didn't manage.

RB: They didn't manage because the state - I mean, the truth of the matter was that there was a big Party involvement in the mineworkers' union, because the people who really started the mineworkers' union included JB Marks, who was a member of the Communist Party - he was the president of the mineworkers' union; Eli Weinberg was some sort of a trade union adviser or consultant to the union; and several of the union

organisers were members of the Party. So although the Party didn't run the union, the Party had enormous - Party people had a really big influence in the union. And likewise because a lot of senior Party people like JB Marks and others were in the union, when the strike was beginning to happen they started pulling in active people they knew they could rely on to do various operations, and they pulled in a lot of Party people to assist in the running of the strike. So the Party did have a considerable involvement in the strike.

DP: You were on propaganda?

RB: I was on propaganda, and if you find that strike bulletin, if it still exists - they produced a sort of daily –

DP: I've seen it.

RB: Nice thing, it was; in fact it was produced between the hours of about eleven pm and three am the next morning –

HW: - and distributed between the hours of three and four am –

RB: - whatever time they changed shifts, when the night shift changed. I think the shift changed between two and four in the morning or something. And the way to get to the miners was to get out to the mine properties when the miners were moving either from the shaft to the compound or from the compound to the shaft at the changing of the shift in dead of night, and having to cross bits of open veld where they couldn't easily

be supervised. And every night our people were going out just taking the daily strike bulletin and trying to distribute it to the still-working miners. And of course our people were being arrested every night. I was running the strike bulletin for them; or producing it, I don't remember who ran it.

DP: Were you still working full-time for - did you have another job?

RB: No, by this time –

HW: No, the Party wanted him back ... no ...

RB: - I didn't, no; after I came back from the army I didn't go to work for the Party again. I went back to my job. I had a full-time job. I used to work practically all night on this bulletin, finish at about five o'clock in the morning, collapse on a settee somewhere, sleep an hour, go into a hairdressers and get myself a shave and go to work! [laughs]. For a whole week! It was the most exhausting time –

HW: - it was a very exciting week –

RB: - yes, but very stimulating.

HW: Oh yes.

RB: And I worked for a firm, I'd been with them for quite a number of years on and off and I was on good terms with them. So if I didn't turn up if there was a meeting during

the day of the district committee or something that I had to attend, I just didn't arrive at work during that week and they sort of closed their eyes to it. So I was able to devote quite a lot of time to the thing.

DP: So were you put up on trial?

RB: Yes, what happened after the strike was that a lot of our members were arrested during the course. Anybody who was found with leaflets in or around the mine property or anywhere like that were arrested and charged. So we had a lot of people who were arrested doing that. But then immediately after the strike - or during the strike, I think - they actually staged some police raids on the Party office and the mineworkers' union office and other places, and on the strength of that immediately after the strike they arrested the entire Johannesburg district committee of the Party, of which we were both members, which is how we came to be arrested. And they charged the whole district committee and all these people who had been caught distributing leaflets and the officials of the mineworkers' union originally with conspiracy to committ sedition. That was the original charge.

HW: Which was a severe charge.

RB: Ja. And then subsequently it was dropped when they saw that the case couldn't be established. I mean, the case was dragging on and it wasn't getting anywhere. They made a deal with the defence that if we pleaded guilty to assisting an illegal strike they'd drop the –

HW: - the sedition charge and we'd get suspended sentences. We wouldn't go to jail. Well, we had a long debate about the rights and wrongs of it, and in the end the majority decided on it, but it was a very bad decision. It should never have been made.

DP: That people plead guilty and –

HW: That's right. Everybody pleaded guilty. But it was wrong, because -

RB: I mean, there were people like Bram Fischer who'd been on holiday during the whole period of that mine strike. He hadn't participated at all! He pleaded guilty. Dadoo had being in jail in Ladysmith or somewhere during the whole period or some passive resistance charge that he was involved in –

HW: There were advocates in the office, and one of the advocates who made this deal, Vernon Berrange', he was a terrifying man to be on the wrong side of - when we had a discussion about whether or not to accept this, one of the africans got up and said but he hadn't assisted in an illegal strike, and Vernon pinned him with his icy cold blue eye and said, well, why didn't you assist in the strike? [laughs] And the bloke just collapsed and crumbled, you see! But politically it was a very bad decision and it taught us a lesson never to do such a thing again.

DP: Mmm. Wasn't Berrange involved in Rivonia?

HW: Yes, he was. Yes, he was a fearsome –

RB: - he was the scourge of policemen. He was one of these chaps who really delighted in pulling the wings off [laughter; speech indistinct]. It was his greatest joy in life. He was a sort of natural anti-policeman.

HW: He also had a very close relationship with the police force, because he - many of his cases were criminal cases in which he and the police had various arrangements –

DP: He wasn't essentially a political lawyer, wasn't he?

RB: No, not really –

HW: He was political in his ideas, he was.

RB: He got involved in the Springbok Legion, somehow. He wasn't in the army, but somehow they formed a thing during the war - the Springbok Legion - called the Home Front League. I can't remember why; it was some sort of an auxiliary body. Perhaps because the soldiers weren't supposed to make public political propaganda, so they used to do it though this Home Front League. And he got involved in this, and he - ja, he had political views. I mean, he was sort of –

HW: - yes, he was left-wing. He was radical –

RB: - but he wasn't really a political figure in court.

DP: Am I asking too many questions?

RB: No, no –

HW: No, but are we - can you get to the meat of what you want to know? That's the question!

DP: It is - this is what I'm talking about. You see, I need to know what the context within which the newspapers operated, and also the context in which the people ... telling me about the propaganda was precisely about media and about publications. So I'm not - if I end up just chatting to you and you still don't know that I've got to the meat, then it's a successful interview! [laughs]

HW/RB: No! Right! [general polite noises]

DP: But the Party was banned **[dissolved]** in 1950. Why did it agree to disband? Surely they'd learned not to acquiesce? You said they'd learned from the –

HW: Well, I'll tell you why the - I wasn't on the Central Committee. I didn't take part in this decision. But I'll tell you why the [indistinct] like myself agreed: because we thought it was a ploy!

DP: By the state?

HW: No, by the Party

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RB: By the Central Committee.

HW: You see, if the Party didn't disband, then every person who'd been a member of the Party was liable to immediate –

RB: - or so the lawyers said. I never believed that story myself.

HW: - yes, to be arrested. We thought that what they intended was officially above-ground to say the Party had been dissolved, whereas actually it would continue. And we all waited.

DP: And it didn't, did it?

HW: No, no! The one who took the decision on the Central Committee intended that it should be disbanded, and we waited to be contacted to be told we're - you're appointed to such-and-such a group and you're going to work with so-and-so. And we sort of innocent or naive or stupid members of the Party - this was why we had a meeting in Johannesburg where this was discussed and we all thought this is nothing but a way of ensuring that we're not all going to be arrested immediately. That's all.

DP: Because I have a sense that the new Party that started up in the late 1930's was a new kind of Party. It lasted until 1950, and then one gets a sense that when the Party finally re-emerges underground it's a completely new thing again.

HW/RB: It was. Ja.

DP: Almost different people - or not different, but much smaller, pruned down.

HW: Well, it had to be, because so many of the others had agreed - generally agreed to the dissolution of the Party. People like Jack Simons, for instance.

DP: Who were the people who really wanted the Party disbanded?

HW: Moses Kotane –

RB: Well, basically the Central Committee consisted of mainly - half of it were Capetonians, or more than half, and there were a couple of Johannesburg people and a couple of Natal people. Basically, it was a Cape Town - because the executive, which consisted of something like half the Central Committee, was Cape Town-based. And what had happened over a period was that in fact political tendencies had developed which began to separate to some extent - I mean, it's too simple to say the Transvaal from the Cape, but it did in fact represent some sort of provincial difference which began to develop. And it was related to the significance to be attached to the national liberation movement. In the period leading up to 1950, in the 'forties and through that period, there began to develop differences in emphasis in which the Transvaal, with the national movement reviving and becoming an important factor, and Natal where the national movement was strong, began to adjust the Party's view of the significance of the national liberation movement. It placed the national liberation movement much more in the forefront than it had done, than the Party had done in the 'thirties. In Cape Town, where the national movement was really not significant in that

way, the same emphasis did not exist and there began to be an emphasis on the Party as the leading element in the whole struggle and the national liberation movement to be somewhat insignificant. So this sort of political difference began to show itself. And I think to some extent the decision to dissolve the Party reflected that, and it also reflected another thing, and that is we'd had a long period of legality and we'd got used to being legal.

DP: Didn't know how to operate –

RB: Yes, and I mean we'd forgotten - although we'd talked vaguely about the underground and so on, nobody really knew how to do it! And a lot of people had developed a life-style where they weren't even prepared to contemplate doing it if it came to that. So that when the crunch came all these factors came together - people saying well, look, if the Party's made illegal then the whole movement collapses and there's no proposition - there's no way you can run a national struggle on an underground basis in this country with our type of people. With our sort of background. They convinced themselves that there was no future for the Party in the new conditions. So the majority of the Central Committee, bulldozed to some extent by this legal opinion which I've never accepted and doubt even to this day, went along with this idea of dissolving the Party and there was only a tiny minority on the Central Committee who opposed it.

HW: One of the most influential people on the Central Committee was Moses Kotane, and Moses Kotane was in favour of the dissolution of the Party.

DP: He subsequently thought –

RB: Yes, he subsequently denied it. But he didn't try to dash it at that meeting. I wasn't at the meeting so I can't tell you what he said or how –

HW: - well, from what I remember from what people said at that time, it was not only that he didn't vote against it but that he was strongly in favour of it. And because he was a senior African in the Party he was an influential person and I'm sure that his views carried a lot of weight.

RB: yes, I'm sure it did, but I think that everybody to some extent was unprepared for that debate in the Central Committee. They hadn't had time to really think through a position before they got there and so when the suggestion was put up that they take the Party underground it sounded like fantasy, you know! Unthinkable, with the sort of people we've got; with our experience and background we can't do it; everybody's on the police list, the police know all our names and addresses and nicknames and habits and everything else - I mean, you can't just disapear into the underground with a body like this! So I think to some extent they got bulldozed into it and - well, they took the decision, and I think the majority of the rank-and-file, certainly in the Transvaal, didn't believe that the thing was serious. That's why at a general meeting in Johannesburg where this decision was explained to us by Kotane, we –

HW: - hardly discussed it.

RB: Nobody! Nobody opposed it! There was no opposition.

DP: It was probably so unthinkable that the Party would disappear.

HW: Quite! That's right. Exactly, ja.

RB: People didn't think it was serious. They thought, this is a con-job. We're going to con the government into thinking we're doing something which we're not doing.

HW: And at this open meeting where there's probably an informer, anyway, we're going to show we're dissolving the Party, ha, ha, ha!

RB: And then everybody waited, thinking, well now –

HW: - and we waited, and we waited, and we waited, and it didn't happen!

DP: A very strange time.

HW: It was a strange time.

DP: There were mass demonstrations against the bill and the Act -**RB:** Well, you see, this was part of the background too. Because we'd concentrated so much on a campaign to oppose the bill and to try and frustrate the bill, we didn't really concentrate our attention on what was going to happen after the thing became law! We almost talked ourselves into thinking we could stop it. So to some extent when it happened, that the thing passed, we weren't prepared for it. And that goes for the Central

Committee like anybody else.

DP: But now during the 1940's the Party had been so central in building the ANC up. I mean, is that right? Because one gets the sense that it was –

HW: Well –

RB: It had been closely associated, but I think the key influence in building the ANC up really had been the Youth League and their action programme. And although there were Party people like Kotane and Marks and others co-operating and involved in it, these were really not communists, most of them, the Youth League people, Sisulu and Tambo and Mandela –

DP: It was anti-communist at one stage.

RB: - at one stage some of them were anti-communist; not all of them. But they certainly weren't communist on the whole. There were a few older, sort of veteran communists like Kotane and Marks of considerable standing in the ANC who went along with them because they were pursuing the militant - they were the militants as against the reformist leadership of the ANC. So the communists went along with the militants. But I don't think you could say that the Party built up the ANC in that period. I think the Youth League sponsored it, the Party lent its weight to it - and in fact, in the ranks of the Party we had some african members who just didn't want to know about joining the ANC. They wouldn't join it. They thought the ANC was rather reformist bourgeois nonsense - that's not for us, we're revolutionaries! And we used to struggle

with a lot of our african members to try and persuade them that the ANC was something they should be in and be active in.

DP: Of course there was a period when the ANC was very revisionist.

RB: Yes, but they couldn't see the prognosis for the future. They couldn't see what the potentialities were of this thing. And they just took this attitude of that's not for us. We're revolutionaries and we're not going into that body. Quite a lot of them.

DP: All these people in the Party who suddenly found that they had no Party. What happened? Did they not just peel off and disappear? Or how did it reform - was COD the thing that pulled them back in?

HW: No. No, no, no.

RB: No. I mean, it happened when the Party was dissolved, a lot of our members were already in either the trade unions or the national movements - the Indian Congress, the African Congress, the Coloured Peoples' Organisation in the Cape and so on. So the majority of our members, leaving aside the whites for the moment, were involved in mass organisations of one sort or another. And they carried on that involvement. In fact, they transferred their Party political activity into the activity of their local ANC or Indian Congress branch. As far as the whites were concerned it was a bit more difficult. But then amongst the whites there were different groups of people, who had been, for instance, in the Springbok Legion and involved in organisations like that. COD was formed shortly afterwards, within a year or two or two years later. So people

carried on various - I think I'm probably right in saying the school education thing, not the night schools but the alternative education thing was starting about that time. Quite a lot of our people were involved in building up alternative schools and so on. There was activity - the Western Areas Removal Campaign where a big ad-hoc committee was formed in which quite a lot of our white members were involved one way or another. So there was a field for their activity. One doesn't feel that it was a complete stop. It didn't feel like that. But for a lot of people, of course, it was an opportunity to –

DP: - to bail out?

RB: Well, perhaps that's putting it too harshly. But they didn't find an immediate niche for themselves, so they stopped activity, and then they found that perhaps it wasn't very easy to get back in, it was more comfortable or safer or whatever it was being out, so they stayed out. But a lot of people –

HW: - you get tired sometimes, too.

RB: But a lot of people did drop out in that period.

HW: After a while when we weren't approached and nothing happened, people tentatively began to speak to others and little groups began forming. It was at that time that others - some people in Johannesburg decided well, it's going to be dangerous. Everybodys' going to be forming little Communist Party groups and things, we'd better get together and establish a proper Party.

DP: So when was the Party re-established? '53?

RB: Well, I don't know ... It must have been '51 or '52 .

HW: It was a couple of years before that. Ja, '51. I think in about two years.

RB: I think it was probably less than two. I mean, it already - a sort of leadership group started getting together and consulting all round the country with a view to seeing whether the basis existed for forming a new Party. And that would have started fairly soon after the - by '51 certainly the beginnings of an organisation were there. And eventually there was a first national conference called - I'm not too good on dates, I think probably '51, '52 –

HW: You're lousy on dates!

RB: I know, I can't remember anything. I'm usually about five years out! But round about '51 or '52 I think the first national conference of small delegations from various places came together and formally resolved to start the Party. And having done it in the dark, in the underground, no announcement - it was decided that no announcement would be made of this fact, but the Party would just go ahead and start reorganising, building up its organisation and so on. And that carried on for some years; in fact, the first announcement, formally, that the Party had been reconstituted was made during the state of emergency in 1960. Up till that time there'd been agreement not to formally announce the existence of the Party because to have done so would have - I mean, there were various arguments. In fact, there were

disagreements about whether it was correct or not; correct to do that. But basically the main consideration for those who decided not to announce the existence of the Party was by that time the majority of the Party members who formed the new Party got invlved in legal political organisations, and to announce the reconstitution of the Party would both prejudice their own position perhaps in those organisations - because after all, we were all known. Everybody knew who the ex-communists were, even if they didn't know who the new communists were! It would have prejudiced our own position and it would have also have prejudiced the legal organisation in which a lot of our people held leading posts. So until 1960 during the midst of the state of emergency, there was never an announcement that the Party had been reformed.

DP: Who was that leadership that started getting together?

RB: Well, they were mainly people from the Central Committee in the Transvaal. It was a Transvaal group; I don't think it's membership has ever been disclosed and I don't know whether it should be at this point or not. I don't think there's ever been any recognition of its membership, but the bulk of them were people either from the district committee or from the Central Committee in the Transvaal. It started with them, and later it was canvassed round the country.

DP: So could one generally say that the new Party formed around the Johannesburg branch - came out of that base?

HW: Yes, I think so.

RB: I think so. It came out of the old Party without any doubt. But even before the Party was dissolved in 1950, from about 1946 onwards there had been consistent pressure from the Transvaal for the Central Committee to be returned to the Transvaal where it obviously should have been. I mean, it was the centre of the country politically, and it should have been there. It was only really this hangover from the past - the fear that the same sort of faction-fighting and disruption might start again, and the fact that some of the members of the Central Committee who were considered key people weren't prepared to move to the Transvaal, prevented that happening. But there had been consistent pressure. And when the Cape Central Committee dissolved the Party, I think the reconstitution took place from the leadership of the old Party but with its Transvaal base rather than the Cape base.

DP: Where did Ruth fit into all this?

RB: Well, Ruth was a member of the Johannesburg district committee. Ruth and Joe Slovo were both members. But they were young, I mean after all, I think they were both still in the youth movement when the - they were still in whatever it was, the student movement or the Young Communist League or something when the Party was dissolved. Joe I think was still at university, I'm not sure if Ruth wasn't still at university.

DP: Ruth was there in '42, '43, '44 - up to about '46 she was at university.

HW: She wasn't at university and Joe had been home from the war for four or five years!

RB: Well, Joe only went to university after he came back from the –

HW: Yes, I know, but he –

RB: He was still at university for sure when the Party was dissolved. That I'm absolutely certain of, because they formed a Marxist students' or communist students' group at the university at that time. But they were both very young. I mean, they were on the sort of youth level; she was on the district committee, so was Joe. But they weren't by any means the sort of leading members. That was an older generation already.

HW: But they were very active. Ruth was a very active person. Whatever she did.

DP: In '48 she was writing for the **New Age**, and as far as I can work out she was writing something like sixteen articles a week, which is a phenomenal amount!

HW: That's quite possible.

RB: I guess that's right, I don't know. I don't remember Ruth being a very prolific writer. I think she was a very good newshound, she got the news; and she was also a good organiser, she got other people to organise and write. But I don't remember her as being a very prolific writer, but ...

DP: Not necessarily big stories, but [indistinct - everyone starts speaking together]

HW: But quite - yes. Well, that's probably [indistinct].

RB: [indistinct] she was working full-time. I mean, she was a full-time employee.

HW: She was a full-time employee. She was very quick at everything, all her life. She built up a network of people who came to her with information, and once somebody came to her with a story she'd go out after it. She was a fantastic newshound. One of the things - I don't know if you know the whole story of the slave-labour on the Bethel farm? Well, that was her story, not Michael Scott's story. But he was attributed to having that story. What happened was that one of the labourers came to her and told her about what conditions were like.

DP: I thought it came to **Drum** first?

HW: No, it was to Ruth. Ruth was the originator of this whole investigation. She decided to take an african who was in the office, I can't remember what his name was –

RB: Joe Xabi.

HW: Oh, was it Joe Xabi? And she also wrote to Michael Scott because she thought this is going to help us and give it a respectable air, you know, having a bit of church cloth there with it. And because the **Guardian** was a weekly paper, Michael Scott was able to break the story to the **Rand Daily Mail** which was a daily paper and it became Michael Scott's story. But it wasn't; it was Ruth's!

DP: She met up with Sibande.

RB/HW: That's right, yes.

DP: He died recently.

HW: Yes; the "lion of the north"!

RB: Yes, he was one of the people who really took her around in that area and showed her all - Joe Kabi was working for **New Age**, he was the photographer, I think, or something.

HW: That's right, yes.

RB: He went with her on these trips and presumably did a lot of interpreting and so on for her. He was also killed in Zimbabwe a few years ago. He was assassinated. Yes, he was in the ANC office. He was associated with her. That was one of his first reporting outings on that Bethel farm thing.

DP: What was the role of **New Age**? How was it seen to be - was it still independent of the Party or was it drawn –

HW: No, it wasn't.

RB: It was generally regarded as being the voice of the Party. As I say, I don't know -

HW: It wasn't controlled by the Party. The Party didn't say "you should" or "you shouldn't" –

DP: Party people tended to run it.

RB: Well, I don't know, in Cape Town it started with this Betty Radford and her husband, and at that stage I don't know if they were in the Party when they started the paper. Subsequently they were in the Party, and to some extent - I don't know what sort of overall control the Party in Cape Town exercised over the **Guardian**. But it certainly ran as an independent paper. As far as the [indistinct] was concerned the Party exercised no control at all over the **Guardian**. What the Party did was it regarded it as its voice, so Party people were active and energetic in selling the paper. We were all out selling it every week. So it was our voice, but it wasn't our paper in that sense. We didn't control it. I don't think Ruth was subject to any sort of control or authority from the Party on any of the stories she followed –

HW: - she just went out and got them.

RB: - she just depended on the Cape Town **New Age** office. Now whether they in turn were being lent on by the Party or reporting back daily or weekly to the Party, I don't know. I don't think so, but I don't know.

DP: That was in the 1950's, or the 'forties?

RB: Well, it's difficult to - the 'fifties, or anytime. I don't know that there was that sort of link. Brian Bunting or Fred Carneson who worked there could tell you what the Cape Town link was, but basically, officially and in practice, in the Transvaal the **Guardian** was our sort of voice but not our property.

DP: You were both in the Congress of Democrats, weren't you?

HW: I was never a member of the Congress of Democrats although I had been banned. Cheryl Walker put me down in her book as a member but I was never in the Congress of Democrats.

RB: I was; I was on its executive. In fact I was one of the founders of it and on its national executive until I was banned, and until after.

DP: When were you banned?

RB: I don't know, I can't remember. But I carried on anyway. It was an irrelevant - a banning only meant that you publicly ceased, you didn't privately cease. So I can't really tell you when –

DP: You got into pseudonyms!

HW: Yes, that's right. Writing articles –

RB: Well, everything's underground and so on. I mean, one didn't take these bans too

seriously, except the public side of it. One couldn't go to a public meeting. I mean, I know I was banned at the time of the Congress of the People because I couldn't attend, but when I was banned exactly I don't know. Quite possibly I was banned before the CoP was even thought of, but that didn't stop me participating in all of it, because that was a private activity. The public activity stopped.

DP: But you were a member of the committee sent up to direct the development of the Congress of the People. You used to meet in Yusuf Cachalia's house.

RB: Well, we used to meet - what happened was there was a joint meeting of the congresses held in Natal which took the decision to convene the Congress of the People, and they set up a working committee or a working group, I don't know what they called it, which was to be in the Transvaal. I was a member of that, Oliver Tambo, probably Yusuf - I can't remember the others, almost certainly Yusuf Cachalia, I think, but I can't say for sure. So there was a sort of working group and I was part of that because I had been at the joint meeting which took the decision. And so I was on the organising side of it all the way through, although I couldn't actually show my face there.

DP: But what I'm interested in is the one committee that was set up to handle the Charter itself.

RB: Oh yes, well, that was now a working group or a sub-committee of the sub-committee! It was a drafting commission of sorts, I suppose is the best thing; a drafting commission. I was a member of that.

DP: Do you remember who else was on that?

RB: No I don't, you know; people have asked me and I really don't recall who else was on it at all. This is where my mind's a blank.

DP: Walter Sisulu, I think was; Ruth First –

RB: Could well have been. Could have been - really, I just cannot recall who was on that drafting commission.

DP: And then you wrote the Call as part of the call for volunteers?

RB: I wrote the Call as part of this working group, this sub-committee that was set up, including - in that book of Cronin and Suttner's, the book about the CoP, they've got a couple of circulars about volunteers. I wrote them or wrote most of those circulars and I also wrote the Call. The Call was definitely my own work. It wasn't a committee job.

DP: How did you get to write the Call? It's an extraordinary bit of political poetry. Did you just sit down and write it, or were there influences, or –

RB: Well, it was quite an inspirational time! The whole business, the decision to form the CoP was in a way very dramatic, although it's not presented that way the history-books. The history-books have got it wrong, I'm afraid, and I'm dedicating myself these days to trying to put it right. What the history books tell you is that Professor Matthews

proposed a convening of the CoP and the Freedom Charter, which is not true. What Professor Matthews proposed was something slightly different. What happened was this meeting of the joint congress committees was held in Natal in somewhere like Tongaat, where - because Chief Lutuli was then under restriction and couldn't leave the area. And he presided at this meeting where - I can't remember, it was the whole of the joint executives or x numbers from each of the five congress bodies that existed at that time. And the issue before us was well, what are we going to do now? The Defiance Campaign had finished, there had been some talk about an anti-pass campaign, it hadn't got off the ground, and we were clearly at a sort of impasse. So the discussion was on what is the movement going to do next. And the usual sort of propositions came up from various people - a petition, an anti-pass campaign, work towards mass demonstrations and that sort of thing. Nothing really imaginative. And then Matthews came up with a suggestion which, looking back on it, I think was one of the most revolutionary proposals ever put before the South African political movement. And what he said was look here, why don't we spend a year or two drawing up a voters' roll of the entire population, the black population who're not on the voters' roll and go out and canvass house-house - draw up a voters' roll and then convene a constituent assembly of the whole population, black and white!

HW: In other words, have a general election.

RB: That was his proposal. Well, then they set up a resolutions subcommittee or something like that to consider all the proposals that had been made. Now, coming from a professor of law, that proposal really was - if you take it seriously, this constituent assembly, he didn't describe what it would do, but a constituent assembly

would presumably draw up a new South African constitution. That really was seditious! And he was a professor of law, so I can only assume that he made it deliberately provocative in order to shape peoples' thinking. I don't know, I don't know what was in his mind. But when this resolutions committee went away and considered the thing we all said look here man, this is fantasy! We haven't got the resources, the capacity, the membership, the organisational skills to do anything like that! This is way ahead of anything we can think of! So we worked it down, his proposal, to the holding of a big Congress of the People. So it wouldn't be on a sort of formal voters' roll constituency registration basis, but out of it would come, not a new constitution, but a vision of the future - a Freedom Charter. So it wasn't quite what he proposed, but he sponsored the - I don't want to take it away from him. I think he fired the spark, you see, and from this came the decision to convene the Congress of the People. And I think what's not understood by most people is that in the forefront of our minds at that time was not the Freedom Charter. That wasn't the big thing, that was the spin-off. The big thing was going to be going out and consulting people and saying to them look here, what do you want in the future. This was the central aim of the campaign. The Freedom Charter was a by-product.

[end of side two]