Ruth First Papers project

Interview with Hilda Watts and Rusty Bernstein part 3

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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DP: ... what did they possess, then?

HW: I possess - I mean, when I say that, just to go back, I rate Ruth much brighter than I was, but I had some qualities that Ruth didn't have, so that evens up. But what did they possess? I don't know - they were cleverer, they read more, they knew more Marxism, some of them had even read **Das Kapital**! I never got past the first twenty pages, some of them had got past the first forty pages! [laughs] They could spout about dialectical materialism ... I don't know!

DP: It's still like that, you know!

HW: Is it? [laughs]

DP: Oh yes.

HW: And a lack of confidence that women have. Although I had that, I always felt myself to be feminist, and women were as powerful as men, and so on. But underneath you see yourself through mens' eyes. The big influence of the femininst movement was to change one's self-perception, which was a tremendously important thing.

DP: Do you think that Ruth saw herself through men's eyes?

HW: No. I think in that respect she was different.

DP: Do you agree that there was this group? you've been looking out the window! [laughs]

RB: Well, I mean I - there are always some people who come to the top in politics, in political debates and arguments and in writing and so on, either because they've got more self-confidence or more knowledge, or more ability to put their ideas together -

HW: Or they talk louder! [laughs]

RB: Or they talk louder. I mean, there are always such people and there certainly were such people. I can't recall having a particular view of them up there and me down here -

HW: Well, you weren't down here, you were there!

RB: But I wasn't!

HW: Yes you were.

RB: I was never on the Central Committee, for example -

HW: Well, that wasn't - well, that was just a period. I'm talking about afterwards -

RB: It wasn't a period, it was a long time! Well, I don't know, anyway I don't quite

accept that point of view. I mean, I think it's inevitable that there are going to be people whose speciality is different. I, for instance, think that most of the people who Hilda regards as "they", had specialities in the field of theory and theoretical thinking and writing, maybe, but had no particular expertise and speciality in mass work or organisational work. I mean, the people I regard as the great mass workers of the period - people like Dadoo, for instance, who I think probably of all of them was the most outstanding political agitator/organiser of the period, I wouldn't regard as a political thinker -

HW: - as a theoretical leader, no.

RB: No. The same goes for Mandela, if it comes to that. I mean, I wouldn't put him on a par, theoretically and politically, with some of the other people in the ANC and yet he was unquestionably a great public figure. So I think people have different qualities. I don't sort of see "them" and "us" in quite that way.

DP: What would Ruth's specialities have been perceived as?

RB: I think it was the sort of journalistic thing - the ability to put her finger on something that was important at the moment. To see an issue before other people saw it. Not necessarily to dissect it in a theoretical way, but to see it coming and to spot it. I think she had that very much. I think she before any of us saw the importance, for instance, of the coming of Black Consciousness and that trend amongst the young blacks. She saw it ahead of us. She was more aware, more sensitive perhaps to that sort of thing than most of us were.

DP: How did that come out? Did she -

RB: Well, she was very much ...

DP: Sensitive to the youth? The ANC Youth League?

RB: Well, not just to the ANC Youth League but to the people who broke away - the PAC people. I mean, for instance she had much more appreciation, I think, of the realities, of what motivated the PAC people than we had. Most of us I think regarded them as a bunch of people who wanted to bypass the hard struggle and get there quick and so on; they didn't appreciate any of the real motivating things. I think she had probably a better appreciation of that sort of thing than most of us. And she saw the possibilities of the PAC developing into a very serious, important trend which we had failed to cope with and deal with in the South African scene. So she had that sort of ability. It was a sort of analytical ability which I think was -

HW: You know, I never thought Ruth was a great writer, for instance. I thought she was a wonderful journalist in honing in on her stories and rooting them out and in her persistence, in her ability to put them together, but from the point of view of literary style, I never thought she had any. That she wrote books that were worthwhile and good was because of the material she put into them, like the book on South-West Africa, which I thought was one of the best. At that time, of course.

DP: So you would have considered her mainly as a journalist? That's how you -

people would have perceived her?

HW: Well, no - a journalist and an organiser, and a ... I don't know -

RB: She didn't do much organising, but what she did - she did sort of original - she broke original ground not in the field of abstract theory, but in analysis. In practical analysis of practical problems, as for instance **The Barrel of a Gun**. Now what she said in **The Barrel of a Gun** basically wasn't a brand-new thing, but what she did was she organised the material and she produced a thesis about it. So she had that sort of analytical ability which most people haven't got - to be able to take a lot of generally accepted facts about what's going on and put them together to produce a thesis of sorts, which presents you with a new perspective. So I think she had that sort of analytical mind, so to some extent she was an academic in that sense. She could do that sort of thing. I don't think she ever put forward that I can recall really fundamental political propositions for the activity of the political movement. I mean, I don't think she was that sort of a person.

HW: I tell you what I think - if you consider the last job that Ruth had at the Centre for African Studies in Maputo, I think that the work she was doing there brought together all her qualities and abilities. Her understanding as a political person who'd been involved in politics all her life, her academic training, her ability in that respect, her journalistic experience and everything - all the things she was best able to do came together in the research she was doing at that institute. And I think if you want to find out what really was the best of Ruth it was the couple of years that she worked there, and the work that she produced and she had initiated and started doing. That was the

epitome of all her abilities. And I think she was - I saw her in Maputo, and I think she was happier there than I've ever seen her.

DP: Many people have said that in Maputo she was just beginning. That's where she was about to take off into her -

HW: That's right, I had that feeling too. And she was more in tune with her life and happier than I had ever known her. That was shortly before she was asassinated.

DP: It's interesting, her openess to actually talk and look at new ideas - well, not new ideas, political ideas with new people. One gets the feeling it would get her into hot water politically but she wouldn't deviate from that.

HW: Well ... get her into hot water politically - it depends with whom. I mean, she and Joe had the most fearful arguments -

DP: They are legend! [laughter]

HW: They came to our house just to have dinner with us and a friendly evening, and somebody would start them off, and then it would be Joe and Ruth going hammer and tongs politically, and we were - I felt I was sort of on the sidelines! [laughs]

RB: Yes, no, she didn't back off from arguments. She was a very strong-minded girl.

HW: Terribly strong-minded.

RB: She didn't respond very easily to argument either, I don't think. I mean, she didn't back off, but on the other hand she didn't adapt to other peoples' arguments very easily.

HW: You say the arguments are legendary! [laughs] That she had with Joe.

DP: Well, ja, quite a lot of people have talked about them and their battles.

RB: No, well she had a very good mind and so she saw through a shoddy argument. But she didn't - I don't think she had the sort of openess of mind that enabled her to shift her position very easily. She knew her own mind and she was very sure about it.

DP: Well, you are the "them" now - whether you like it or not! [laughs]

HW: No more, no! Once we left South Africa, as I said, henceforth we'll be on the periphery.

DP: It depends on what - of the movement in South Africa, yes; maybe even of the movement here, I don't know. But with the massive re-emergence of the struggles in the 'fifties, people like me come along to ask you people questions that -

HW: Well, we're dinosaurs, aren't we!

RB: We're sort of a history library - archive material! [laughs].

DP: What are you doing with all the papers and things and letters that you might have? I hope you're making sure that they -

RB: Well, we haven't got much, to tell you the truth. Very little, I mean -

HW: Mine date from our time in England, not from South Africa.

RB: Yes, I mean we left South Africa with virtually nothing. We walked across the border with one of these little airways bags, you know? So we came out with nothing, and most of our papers and documents and most of our books and everything just never - I mean, they vanished. I don't know, they disapeared. What happened to them I don't know, we just left it all behind. So we really have very little. I happen to have these things - why, I don't know, these sort of receipts for peace raids, and a notice from the minister saying you've been listed as a member of the Communist Party. That sort of thing. I've got a few such documents. But basically we've got practically nothing else. Such pamphlets and things like that as we discovered amongst the books we did get out of South Africa, finally, I think had been handed over to Brian who's put them into archives. He's got a sort of archives collection -

HW: Ja, most of the stuff - we did have very little.

RB: So we've got very little. What you found the other day was a publication you've probably never heard of - where was that cover you found? **Advance** - the organ of the Berea, the Yeoville Labour Party! [laughs] Now that's a thing! I mean, so many little

publications - have you ever heard of a publication called **Die Ware Republikan**? Has that one ever surfaced?

DP: It rings a bell. I actually - I know where it is, it's in a book about the media in South Africa.

RB: Well, that was a sort of Communist Party-sponsored - I don't remember who actually published, in who's imprint it was, but it was sponsored by the Party, and then there was this little thing that I worked on when I was in the Labour Party. Our branch used to produce this magazine called **Advance**, and I'd forgotten it totally until just the other day Hilda turned it up in a book in a box somewhere - a copy I think just of the cover, not actually of the magazine -

HW: No, that was - it was a copy of **Advance**.

RB: Oh, was it?

HW: Yes. The other thing was a leaflet.

RB: The organ of the Berea Labour Party, which was one of my earliest ventures in the publishing field.
[pause]

HW: Well, I don't know - I think that from the outside, everybody from the outside is not in the heart of things, it just - it's impossible, isn't it!

DP: The heart moves! [laughs]

HW: You mean there are several hearts, you think! Dotted around! Yes, I don't know. We'll see, maybe if we go to Tanzania we'll feel that we're closer.

DP: I think that's what so exciting for Ruth, because she was right back in Africa -

HW: She was in Africa, she was working on African affairs that were connected to South Africa - that whole project of the migrant workers coming from South African mines, and all the things were related in that way.

RB: I mean, during the time she spent in Britain, apart from **The Barrel of a Gun**, which was done largely in Africa not in Britain - I mean, I don't know what her academic work was like, but she really made very little impact on the movement during her years in Britain.

HW: Well, she made an impact on the anti-apartheid movement, on that sort of thing.

RB: Ja, but nothing extraordinary. Her extraordinary impact was made either through her writing or in Maputo.

DP: Well, she wrote **Olive Schreiner**. But that's very far away from -

HW: And also - you see, there's an instance of what I mean by I didn't think she had a

good literary style. I found that a very difficult book to read.

DP: I think she was more of a journalist than a writer.

RB/HW: Yes, she was. Yes.

DP: She could never have written the Call! [laughter]

RB: No, I - my memory of her is that she wrote very little! Even in **Fighting Talk** I think that my memory of her is of writing very little and being the sort of organisational thing and maybe writing the odd thing, but nothing very much. She wasn't that sort of a writer. She was a - in those days she was a journalist. She was a news story writer.

DP: Do you know what pseudonym she used in **Fighting Talk**?

RB: I don't know. She did use one - I could probably identify some of the peoples' writing if I saw it again these days, including my own, but -

DP: What were you called? Didn't you have a pseudonym?

RB: Oh, I had about six. The only one I can remember was Ben Giles. I used to -

HW: The one who used to write funny articles, humorous articles.

RB: Oh, I used to - that's right! Under Ben Giles I wrote stories about the international

movement or something. And then I had a Chumley - Elmer Chumley, something like that, who used to write slightly satirical, sarcastic stuff.

HW: Funny stuff.

RB: Oh, I don't know, I wrote under half-a-dozen names. I used to write a large part of **Fighting Talk** but I can't even remember all the - what all the pseudonyms were. I don't know if Ruth actually ever wrote under a pseudonym.

DP: She wrote quite a few editorials -

RB: Yes, she would have, I would imagine, because she was the editor and I imagine - I can't remember but I imagine she would have written a lot of the editorials. I don't know - I don't know that she ever wrote under a pseudonym. I don't think she wrote a great deal for **Fighting Talk**. I think most of her writing would have been for **Guardian, New Age**, and it would have been that sort of news reporting, not the analytical heavyweight stuff which was done mainly by Capetonians.

DP: What was **Amateur Photographer** all about?

HW: What was what?

DP: Amateur Photographer.

HW: I edited that too! How did you know that?

DP: Julius used to do your books?

HW: That's right. I've got a wonderful memory of Julius First. We worked for Manny Brown -

DP: He was listed as well, wasn't he?

HW: That's right, yes -

RB: He was the proprietor of **Amateur Photographer**. I mean, that was a commercial job, it wasn't a political job -

HW: - and he took over the publication of **Soviet Life** from somebody else who was publishing it, and so that was how I first came to work in his office, and worked on **Amateur Photography** with him. And we worked from an office which was down - Speedcroft House, down Loveday Street, the bottom of Loveday Street. It was next to Tattersall's. Because when there was a big race on we used to have all these strange characters, black and white, coming up into our office -

DP: Placing bets?

HW: No, with stories about how they had to get to a sick mother who was dying in Brakpan and they hadn't got the fare and everything. In fact, I always said there were two places in Johannesburg where there was no racialism whatsoever, and one was

at Tattersall's and one was at the Newtown market, where all blacks and whites just mingled and swore at each other and everything like that. And we moved from there to the top of what had been a big factory or something in - Christ, it wasn't Braamfontein -

RB: Doornfontein.

HW: Doornfontein, yes. It was near town, actually; it was on the way into town. And it was on the top floor, the second floor, and it was a great vast area. And down the bottom end, in the middle, was a desk at which Indries Naidoo sat. He worked for us. And at the bottom end there were three desks, and at one of them I sat, and at one of them Manny Brown sat, and one of them Julius First used to come in - not every day, but from time to time, and do the books. And one day the door at the end opened and we all looked up and two men came walking in, who were Special Branch. You could see it, it was written all over them. And we all of us - Julius was working that day there, and myself and Manny and Indries, and the four of us just watched these men walking all the way across the floor. They glanced at Indries, and they didn't stop there, and they glanced at Julius, and they glanced at me, and they went straight to Manny Brown. And they said, Mr Brown? He said, yes. They said, we'd like to speak to Mr First. Now Manny Brown was one of the quickest thinkers that I have ever worked with. He realised that since they had looked at Julius and had then said they wanted to speak to Mr First that they didn't know him visually. So he said, Oh, I'm sorry, he's not here. At that I sort of blushed, and Julius put his head down over the books and went on scribbling and writing and everything like that, and the following conversation ensued: but doesn't he work here? Manny said, yes he does, but he doesn't come in

every day. He's retired and he just comes in from time to time to do some work for me. They said, oh, when will he be in again? Manny said, well, I shouldn't think he'll be in today but he might be in tomorrow. So they said thank-you very much, and they walked out. And about ten minutes later Julius left and never came back! He hopped over the border, and that Sunday's paper had this story, "the most wanted man in South Africa leaves", or something like that! [laughs]

DP: That would have been in '64?

RB: That was while I was in jail, it was during the Rivonia -

HW: It was so incredible, though! I always felt that if they had come up to me and said, can we speak to Julius First, I would have said oh yes, there he is! You have to think very fast in such circumstances, and Manny was the one who - we've got endless stories about Manny Brown. He was a clown in jail with Rusty.

DP: Liliesleaf Farm was in Julius' name, wasn't it? Or something like that.

RB: No. No, it was -

HW: It was in Arthur Goldreich's name.

RB: Yes, Julius was said to have been the treasurer, or to have signed the cheques or something - I can't remember now if they said he was treasurer of the Communist Party or something, but he was somehow connected with finances. They wanted him

for something to do with finances. I can't remember what it was. No, he wasn't the owner of Lillysleaf Farm.

DP: He was a very mild man, wasn't he?

RB: Yes, he was very quiet. Very quiet, not very aggressive, you know; very sort of sober character. You know, the sort of bloke who wouldn't make any particular impression on you. But he obviously ran quite a big business and he obviously was quite an efficient business manager.

DP: No doubt the family was run by Tilly!

RB: I'm sure; Julius was probably run by Tilly too, I should think! [laughs]

HW: She was a fearsome character.

DP: She still is, and she's ninety-one.

HW: Ja. She and Julius - she was always at Julius, very sharp and very hard and everything, and after Julius died and I went to see her, she said quite softly and pathetically, " I would have thought he'd live a few years yet" - as though she deeply missed him. And so you can never tell in peoples' relationships what really is there behind it all, and how they feel about each other. It's a very complicated thing, it's not simple.

DP: She gave me a dressing-down on an odd subject. I was interviewing her in Jo'burg at Miriam Hepner's place, and I said Ruth was always wonderfully dressed, she was very fashionable, wasn't she? Did she get that from you? And Tilly fixed me with this glare, and she said, "define fashion!" [laughs]

HW: That's Tilly! [laughs] That's exactly -

DP: She really gave me a hard time.

RB: Yes, she was like that; she had this sharp, cutting way -

HW: The last - I mean, she would pick on you in exactly that way, so that you became the one who was sort of trying to find your way out of this discussion. The last set-to I had with her was about JM Coetzee's book, the one he won the Booker Prize for. **The Story of Michael K**. Did you read it?

DP: No, I haven't.

HW: I didn't like it and she thought it was a wonderful book. And I mentioned that I thought **Waiting for the Barbarians** was a brilliant book but I didn't like this particular book - did she attack me! And point out why I was wrong and so on! You sort of give up the argument with somebody like that.

DP: But her memory's getting very bad now. I said to her, you knew Brian Bunting and Sonya, didn't you? Did I? Did I know Brian Bunting? Tell me about it! And she must

have know Brian well.

RB: Yes, she's probably forgetting now. But she used to be very sharp. She always was very sharp. Partly, I think, it was shyness - that sort of way in which she appeared to attack you and she'd say things like "define fashion"! It was partly that she -

DP: She must have been a hard act to follow!

RB: Ja, very difficult. I mean, everybody went in fear and trembling of her, and I don't think it was that she was unfriendly. It was just that she had this sharp sort of tongue and manner, you know -

HW: Very sharp manner. Well, Ruth was a hard act to follow, and that's why it's been difficult for Shawn, yes -

DP: Shawn and the girls -

HW: - and how wondeful it is that Shawn's found her own way of doing things. That really is absolutely wonderful. Would you like some lunch?

DP: A family of powerful women! That's very sweet of you, but I think I ought to go and save Patch.

HW: She's probably had lunch by now.

DP: Well, more than that - I've got to go and get some money and whatever. And I'm sure that you've had enough of me by now!

HW: I don't know - I think we enjoy talking about old times, don't we Rusty? Or don't you? I do. I quite like it!

RB: Yes, what I remember of it.

DP: You remember a lot.

RB: Well, I mean, it's true that this is what brings my memory back, when you start asking me about things I'd forgotten about. It suddenly starts coming back.

HB: It doesn't do that for me.

DP: It must have been hard to leave South Africa. Bram Fischer evidently got very cross with Ruth about wanting to leave.

RB: He got cross with everybody for wanting to leave.

HW: He didn't think that anybody should leave. Yes, he thought everybody who wanted to leave was wrong. And right from the beginning when people started to leave - you see, he felt that it was discipline, Party discipline. If you told them to stay, they must stay! I felt that when it comes to the push, if people feel they can't undertake a certain thing you just can't make them do it, and if they have to go out, go. And he was

very unforgiving about that, he really was.

DP: His daughter, Ruth said - about that question - she said, you know, I think he was wrong. I think he should have gone. He could have done much more –

RB: Well, he should have. In fact we tried to –

HW: We didn't try to persuade him, we didn't.

RB: Well, no. Not when he was in South Africa. But when he came over to Britain –

HW: On that case, when he got –

RB: - when he got permission to come.

DP: He should have stayed.

RB: Well, a lot of us tried to persuade him.

HW: We didn't, Rusty –

RB: I did!

HW: - because we gave the undertaking –

RB: Who gave the undertaking? I didn't give any undertaking! I tried to persuade that he –

HW: No, because - we gave - I gave an undertaking to comrades in South Africa that we wouldn't persuade him to stay, that he would make up his own mind about it.

RB: Well, yes, but we tried to help him make up his mind the right way!

HW: What we said to him was you're no good in jail! Whatever you do, keep out of jail. That was why he went underground.

DP: Well, let me leave you in peace to have lunch, but just give me your address because I want to post you that photograph –

HW: I'll give you my little thing with the address on ...

DP: Do you ever sell any of your etchings, Hilda?

HW: Well, I haven't. Only when I have an exhibition now, and that - oh, you mean to people? Yes, you ...

[end of side three]