

## 2—War, Wits, Politics, and Ruth Meets Joe

JOE'S FIRST IMPRESSION of Ruth was that she and her intellectual friends at the University of the Witwatersrand were “just too big for their boots.”<sup>29</sup> It was 1946, Joe was just returning from the army and the Second World War, and Ruth was in the midst of her social science studies at the university. They were both engaged in political protests and actions through the Communist Party of South Africa, already committed militants and engaged intellectuals, each looking toward a life of struggle for justice and equality. Joe brought the grit and experience of the streets and the war; Ruth evoked the style and sensibility of the brilliant researcher and writer she would become. “So my life with Ruth,” Joe said later, “started off with quite a degree of political tension based on this nonsense.”<sup>30</sup>

When Ruth First enrolled at the University of the Witwatersrand, Joe Slovo was sent to Italy by the South African Army to fight against Nazi Germany and fascist Italy. In June of 1941, Germany attacked the Soviet Union and the CPSA changed its policy of opposition to the Second World War, announcing that it would now support South African involvement in fighting against the Nazis. In addition, white members were encouraged to volunteer for military service. Because of the importance of South Africa's corporate and imperialist connections to the Allies, the country officially supported the war effort. Some Afrikaners felt a much greater sympathy for Germany and viewed Great Britain as the enemy. Some future leaders of the apartheid regime, most notably John Vorster, who went on to be prime

minister (1966–78) and then president (1978–79), were imprisoned as enemy sympathizers during the war as a result of their overt support of Nazi Germany. In spite of the schism, over half of the South Africans who served in the Second World War were rural Afrikaners.

Joe Slovo's motivation for enlisting in the South African Army is not entirely clear. He was underage at eighteen, unemployed, and concerned about serving in a segregated army representing a segregated and racist country. However, he opted to join the cause. Quite possibly his strong allegiance to the Communist Party, and thus the Soviet Union, was the key factor. As part of the CPSA he had participated in Party recruiting efforts for white communists to fight the Nazis, but his analysis of harsh racism cuts to the core of the South African dilemma.

To the average member of the voteless majority, the regime's exhortation to "save civilization and democracy" must have sounded like a cruel parody. And fight with what? At no stage was a black man allowed to bear arms; if he wanted to serve democracy he could do so wielding only a knobkierie (fighting stick, club), as a uniformed manservant of a white soldier.<sup>31</sup>

Since he was only eighteen, and legal adult age was twenty-one in South Africa, Joe had to ask his father to give him permission to join the service. When Wolfus refused, Joe took it upon himself to declare himself twenty-two and scribble his name on the form. He was accepted without question, which he was sure was a common practice in South African recruiting offices. Assigned to the Signal Corps, he spent the next couple of months training. He was schooled in communications before traveling by train with other troops, all white men, to Durban. From Durban, Slovo departed by boat to Egypt before he was deployed to the front lines near Florence, Italy.

The exploits of the South African Army in the Second World War raised the country's standing in the world. The army was a prominent force in freeing Ethiopia from Italian rule, beating the Vichy French forces in Madagascar, and fighting bravely in both North Africa and Italy. In addition, the war provided a tremendous boost for the South African economy. Joe Slovo's tour of duty, however, saw none of this fighting. As a communications soldier, he was part of what has come to be known as the "chair corps." He was assigned to the Signal Corps with his young activist friends Mike Feldman and Barney Fehler, the

latter from the family of the well-known Johannesburg Jewish delicatessen, Fehler and Flax. When the war ended in 1945, Joe celebrated on the streets, or more accurately, in the bars of Turin. His return to South Africa took a rather circuitous path as he spent six months vacationing by the sea in Italy before departing for Egypt. While in Italy, he was able to obtain Trotsky's writings at a Catholic mission library. From Cairo, Joe and some other returning soldiers decided to take a detour and visit Palestine, not an easy journey at the time, as travel was restricted because of Zionist resistance to British occupation. Slovo and his companions were able to hitch rides with military vehicles and hop buses, landing in Tel Aviv after a two-day trip. Joe briefly described the Palestine experience, but there is no mention of the return to Cairo or the final trek back to Johannesburg. From Tel Aviv, they landed on a kibbutz, and Joe later reflected on both Zionism and definitions of socialism:

Looked at in isolation, the kibbutz seemed to be the very epitome of socialist lifestyle. . . . Social theory aside, the dominating doctrine on this kibbutz, as well as on the others, was the biblical injunction that the land of Palestine must be claimed and fought for by every Jew. And this meant (as it did eventually mean) the uprooting and scattering of millions whose people had occupied this land for over 5,000 years, more's the pity.<sup>32</sup>

Issue can be taken with Joe's assertion that all people in kibbutzim are Zionists, but his theoretical probing of socialism is consistent with his lifelong political journey.

When Joe returned to South Africa, Ruth was in her final year as a student at the University of the Witwatersrand. In her prison diary, *117 Days*, she refers to her college years:

My university years were cluttered with student societies, debates, mock trials, general meetings, and the hundred and one issues of wartime and postwar Johannesburg that returning ex-service students made so alive. On a South African campus, the student issues that matter are national issues.<sup>33</sup>

Majoring in Social Studies, Ruth received a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1946. The bulk of her classes were in the social sciences—Sociology, Social Economics, Social Anthropology, Social Legislation,



Mike Feldman, Barney Fehler, and Joe—Second World War  
(courtesy of Mike Feldman)

Democracy and Society, Theory and Practice of Social Work, Native Law, Native Administration. She spent five years at Wits, possibly as an outgrowth of her formal education being a secondary priority to both her political and social awakening. Before sharing a flat with Patsy Gilbert and Winnie Kramer, Ruth lived at home, totally involved in leftist political work—both at the university and in the community. She attended political meetings, the Left Book Club, and the weekly orations at Johannesburg City Hall. Norman Levy recalls the City Hall meetings where conflicts arose. “They were a spirited group of Party protagonists. . . . Mike Feldman, Monty Berman and Joe Slovo, to name only the most prominent of the frontline defenders. . . . ready to move into action as soon as the heckling from the ‘street fighters’ became too disruptive.”<sup>34</sup>

Like Joe and other political activists, Ruth spent time at Salmon’s Bookshop, People’s Bookshop, and Vanguard Bookshop where she could access Left Book Club publications as well as communist sources. Ruth and Joe visited and debated with their friends at Florian’s Cafe, a Johannesburg coffee shop that was opened during

their Wits years by German Jewish immigrants. In 1943, she formally became a member of the Young Communist League and edited the organization's paper, *Youth for a New South Africa*. Norman Levy cites a particular debate in which Ruth proposed, "All South African politics are native affairs."<sup>35</sup> Levy described Ruth in his memoir, *The Final Prize*: "I still see her image as she was at that first meeting: eighteen, curly-haired, short and ill at ease, pursuing her points at breakneck speed. She was earnest, self-conscious, and miserable with caring, but it was her energy and directness that marked her out from others."<sup>36</sup> As a precursor to the many letters she would pen two decades later as she was writing articles, books, and United Nation reports on Southern Africa, and in her position as the secretary of the Young Communist League, Ruth wrote to the director of the Institute of Race Relations, John Rheinallt-Jones, concerning government proposals on black farm labor. "The proposals are fascist in character and reminiscent of Nazi forced labour. Should they be adopted they will virtually reduce Africans to conditions of serfdom by restricting their freedom to seek more remunerative employment."<sup>37</sup> Although the Institute's research challenged the government, Rheinallt-Jones warned against anti-government protests.

Spurred by the war, membership in the Communist Party had grown exponentially; from 1941 to 1943 the growth was fourfold. Correspondingly, there was a greater call to action in the African National Congress. Although there were still years of debate ahead regarding a CPSA-ANC alliance, some of the black leaders of the CPSA—Moses Kotane, J. B. Marks, and Edwin Mofutsanyana for example—were making their mark in the ANC. In addition, the youth movement of the African National Congress, including Nelson Mandela whom Ruth knew at the University of the Witwatersrand, was calling for political action despite the fact that they were distrustful of the CPSA. Ruth participated in one of the first joint CPSA-ANC movements, the Anti-Pass Campaign of 1944–45. She was one of 540 delegates at the conference that was chaired by Dr. A. B. Xuma, then president of the African National Congress. The conference elected a National Anti-Pass Council and collected tens of thousands of signatures for Yusuf Dadoo to present to the "liberal," Jan Hofmeyr, acting in the absence of Prime Minister Smuts. Hofmeyr, however, refused to meet with the delegation.

The Anti-Pass Conference was one of many acts of Ruth First's political defiance during her university years. Harold Wolpe recalled

that most of Ruth's political work was off campus. Conversely, she was involved in Wits' Students Representative Council and was one of the founders, along with her companion, partner, and lover at university, Ismail Meer, of the Federation of Progressive Students (FOPS). During Ruth and Joe's time at Wits, it was one of two South African universities, the other being the University of Cape Town, that were designated as "open" universities. "Open" is a loaded phrase, since nonwhite students were permitted to do their coursework but were excluded from all social, political, cultural, and athletic activities.

Some students at the university did challenge the racism that existed, while other students protested the presence of black students on campus. An example of the latter was the Afrikaanse Nasionale Studentebond (ANS), an affiliation of the fascist Ossewabrandwag that served as the political base for racist students. Not only did ANS hold protests against black students, the organization petitioned the university to remove black students as well as their fellow travelers, specifically communists and Jews, whom they viewed as one and the same. However, other students demanded an end to social segregation on campus—dining halls, sports, medical laboratories, and more. Medical students were successful in ending some discrimination, including the elimination of segregated anatomy dissecting halls. There were symbolic demonstrations of integrated sports, a tennis match for example, but both the administration and the majority of white athletes kept the fields, pools, and locker rooms segregated. Clearly, there was a fear of black and white students mixing socially. One parliamentarian spoke of the relationship of Ruth First and Ismail Meer: "He said that he had been told that 'there was a very painful love affair between a European girl and one of the non-European students at Witwatersrand . . . 'This state of affairs,' he declared, 'can no longer continue.'"<sup>38</sup>

The student left was an eclectic group with liberals, Trotskyists, socialists, and communists represented when Ruth First enrolled at the university. The glue that kept the activism flowing was a general belief in non-racialism, the goal being South Africa as a democratic society. There was reason for some hope with South Africa's entry into the Second World War, ostensibly, a battle between democracy and fascism. In spite of the bolstering of already existing racist laws by the South African government in 1936, there were those who believed that through institutions like the Institute of Race Relations and politicians such as Jan Hofmeyr, a liberal, non-racial society might soon be a reality in South Africa.

## Notes

1. Author's interview with Gavin Williams, 2011.
2. Author's interview with Albie Sachs, 2011.
3. Author's interview with Danny Schechter, 2010.
4. Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) was the military wing of the African National Congress, launched in 1961. The literal translation is "Spear of the Nation."
5. Author's interview with Jaya Josie, 2011.
6. Author's interview with Helena Dolny, 2011.
7. Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1976), 12.
8. Author's interview with Ronald First, 2011.
9. Donald Pinnock, *Writing Left*. (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2005), 6.
10. Joe Slovo, *Slovo: The Unfinished Autobiography of an ANC Leader* (Melbourne: Ocean Press, 1997), 18.
11. *Ibid.*, 24.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Pinnock, *Writing Left*, 8.
14. Pinnock, *Writing Left*, 8.
15. Author's interview with Myrtle Berman, 2010.
16. Pinnock, *Writing Left*, 8.
17. *Ibid.*, 8, 9.
18. Donald Pinnock interview with Brian Bunting, 1993.
19. Dan O'Meara, correspondence with author, 2012.
20. Author's interview with Myrtle Berman, 2010.
21. Ruth First, *The Magazine of the Jeppe High School for Girls*, December 1941, 13, 14.
22. Author's interview with Ronald First, 2011.
23. Slovo, *Slovo*, 32.
24. *Ibid.*, 37, 38.
25. *Ibid.*, 39.
26. *Ibid.*, 42.
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.*
29. Donald Pinnock interview with Joe Slovo, 1992.
30. *Ibid.*
31. Slovo, *Joe Slovo*, 43.
32. *Ibid.*, 47.
33. Ruth First, *117 Days* (London: Penguin Books, 1965), 116.
34. Norman Levy, *The Final Prize: My Life in the Anti-Apartheid Struggle* (Cape Town: South African History Online, 2011), 27.
35. *Ibid.*, 43.
36. *Ibid.*, 14.
37. Ruth First to John Rheinallt-Jones, August 17, 1944.

38. Bruce Murray, *Wits: The "Open" Years* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1997), 48, 49.
39. *Ibid.*, 96.
40. *Ibid.*, 100.
41. Pinnock, *Writing Left*, 14, 15.
42. *Ibid.*, 15.
43. Anthony Sampson, *Mandela: The Authorized Biography* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 47.
44. Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1994), 91.
45. Anthony Sampson, *Mandela*, 36.
46. *Ibid.*
47. Slovo, *Slovo*, 50.
48. Joshua Lazerson, *Against the Tide: Whites in the Struggle Against Apartheid* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), 55.
49. Slovo, *Joe Slovo*, 48.
50. *Ibid.*
51. *Ibid.*, 49.
52. Donald Pinnock interview with Wolfie Kodesh, 1992.
53. Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, 99.
54. Ruth First, *117 Days*, 117.
55. Dan O'Meara, "The 1946 African Mineworkers' Strike and the Political Economy of South Africa," *Journal of Commonwealth & Contemporary Politics* 13/2 (1975): 146.
56. A. Lerumo (Michael Harmel), *Fifty Fighting Years* (London: Inkululeko Publications, 1971), 86.
57. Gillian Slovo, *Every Secret Thing: My Family, My Country* (London: Abacus, 1997), 32.
58. Author's interview with Myrtle Berman, 2010.
59. Donald Pinnock interview with Wolfie Kodesh, 1992.
60. Stephen Mufson, *Fighting Years: Black Resistance and the Struggle for a New South Africa* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), 222.
61. Slovo, *Joe Slovo*, 55.
62. *Ibid.*, 63.
63. Author's interview with Zena Stein/Mervyn Susser, 2010.
64. Gillian Slovo, *Ties of Blood* (New York: Avon Books, 1990), 253.
65. A. Lerumo, *Fifty Fighting Years*, 88.
66. Donald Pinnock interview with Joe Slovo, 1992.
67. John Heilpern, "Bye-Bye, Blue Sky," *Nova*, January, 1967, 31–33.
68. Author's interview with Myrtle Berman, 2010.
69. Immanuel Suttner, *Cutting through the Mountain* (London: Viking, 1997), 448.
70. *Ibid.*, 449.
71. Author's interview with Myrtle Berman, 2010.
72. Gillian Slovo, *Every Secret Thing*, 38.
73. Stephen Clingman, *Bram Fischer* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 221.
74. Donald Pinnock interview with Joe Slovo.
75. Slovo, *Slovo*, 62.
76. A. Lerumo, *Fifty Fighting Years*, 88.
77. *Ibid.*, 91.
78. Slovo, *Slovo*, 66, 67.
79. *Ibid.*, 103.
80. Stephen Clingman, *Bram Fischer*, 194.
81. Luli Callinicos, *Oliver Tambo: Beyond the Engeli Mountains* (Claremont: David Philip Publishers, 2004), 193.
82. Elinor Sisulu, *Walter and Albertina Sisulu* (London: Abacus, 2003), 93.
83. Mary Benson, *The Struggle for a Birthright* (London: Penguin, 1966), 11.
84. Glenn Frankel, *Rivonia's Children* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), 49.
85. *Ibid.*, 48.
86. James Zug, *The Guardian* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2007), 90, 91.
87. Gavin Williams, Walter Rodney Lecture, Boston University, November 8, 1982.
88. *Ibid.*