

Anti-apartheid secret addresses revealed

By MIKE PENTELOW

London's most secret address in the clandestine war against apartheid has been revealed by Ronnie Kasrils, who organised the smuggling of material into South Africa in the 1960s and 70s.

The address was 25 Newman Street, W1 (near the corner of a back alley, Newman Passage, which leads through to Rathbone Street) which he revisited on a guided walk around Goodge Street on July 7.

It was here that he trained anti-apartheid activists how to smuggle in leaflets in false bot-tomed suitcases, and make explosive devices to scatter them into the air in South Africa.

The experiences of several of these activists are recalled in a new book called "London Recruits, The Secret War Against Apartheid", edited by Ken Keable, with an introduction by Ronnie.

"In this book many of the recruits tried to describe where I took them," said Ronnie. "But none of them got it right, because I did not want them to know the address for security reasons.

"So I took them through lots of back alleys, such as Percy Passage, and Newman Passage, after dark."

He pointed to the back entrance to 25 Newman Street, which is in Newman Passage, with an "Ancient Lights" sign on the wall, where the annexe to the office extended.

Recruits to the cause would first be met by him outside such places as the Dominion Theatre at the bottom of Tottenham Court Road, then taken for a drink in pubs such as the Rising Sun, on the corner of Tottenham Court Road and Windmill Street, the Newman Arms, on the corner of Rathbone Street and Newman Passage, or the Prince of Wales Feathers in Warren Street.

Then they would be taken to 25 Newman Street. "The annex was ideal for our purpose as it was very secluded and the area was deserted in the evening," he said.

The office was being used entirely without the knowledge of its occupants, accountants Felton & Partners. Ronnie was able to gain access at night because Barry Feinberg, another South African exile, was working on a different floor in the same building, and was able to supply a key.

"Here was where we prepared them for trips to South Africa," he said. "The false bot-tomed suitcases were very heavy, about 5 kg empty. We

taught them how to take precautions to make sure they were not being followed by various counter surveillance methods, and how to assemble various gadgets such as the leaflet bombs. These were baskets with a small amount of gunpowder and a simple clock device. Once the circuit was completed it would explode and throw the leaflets as high as these buildings.

"We also made miniaturised tape recordings which were put in boxes and then chained to railings for making street broadcasts. We put imitation booby traps on them to stop the police tampering with them.

"One of our recruits, Eddie Adams, placed one above ground on railings by a garage. When it went off a former Rhodesian policeman stopped his car to listen to it. He reported to the Cape press that he had never seen crowds so excited by it in all his career. So it was very successful.

"The recruits did not know it, but we synchronised it so that several went off at the same time in all the main cities and ports. We had tremendous results from this."

Ronnie praised the courage of those who undertook these clandestine missions. "They were prepared to be our secret agents and smugglers knowing how dangerous it was, as they would be tortured and imprisoned if caught," he said.

"Sean Hosey, an Irish comrade, for instance, was smuggling over false identity documents for a freedom fighter who had got into South Africa. Unknown to us this freedom fighter had been captured and tortured to give away addresses. So the police wrote to us pretending to be him asking for assistance. Sean went to a house in a village near Durban and gave the code words. He was met by the barrel of a revolver, was tortured and spent five years in prison.



Several of the London recruits were on the walk and posed with Ronnie in Goodge Street before a pint in the Fitzrovia. They are pictured (left to right): Pete Smith, Daniel Ahern, George Bridges, Mary Chamberlain, Norman Lucas, Ronnie Kasrils, Bob Newland, Bob Allen.

"Alex Moumbaris, a Greek comrade, was also caught. When a ship sent to pick up guerrillas had engine problems he went to pick them up elsewhere. The police captured him and his pregnant wife. She was French so was deported. He got a 12 year prison sentence, but escaped after seven.

"So the people who undertook this work knew the risks but did it in an absolutely committed way. That is why Thabo Mbeki invited the recruits to his 70th birthday in South Africa this year and made them guests of honour."

Another previously unknown address, revealed by Ronnie, was 24 Goodge Street, which was the secret address of the South African Communist Party in exile. "Yasuf Dadoo, the chairman of the party, had his office on the very top floor," said Ronnie. "The stairs were very creaky going up there, but I still recognise the window sill where we had a window box. This was where we prepared literature and recordings for radio broadcasts. Joe Slovo was also in this office [which was above the New Punjab and later the Neel Kamal Indian restaurant in those days].

"Yusuf liked his beer and enjoyed a couple of pints after work in the Valiant Trooper pub [now renamed the Fitzrovia] a couple of doors away. There was a gas explosion in the pub in the 1970s, but it was nothing to do with us. Goodge Street was very mouldy and seedy in those days."

Just across the road at 29 Goodge Street, he continued, was the only public address of the South African Communist Party, which was there for 29 to 30 years, after being banned in 1950. "The office was on the first floor, where Brian Bunting ran the African Communist quarterly journal, which was printed in the German Democratic Republic and distributed from here. We smuggled articles in



Ronnie Kasrils outside 25 Newman Street

minaturised form into South Africa by posting them from different areas in London.

"We had to be very careful of the security because the address was public. Sometimes there were some very strange people around, so we took precautions including physical support, but it was never needed luckily.

"Sonia Bunting ran the office all those years. Joe Matthews, of both the SACP and the ANC, was here as well." [The office was above a paint merchant called Maintenance (Hotels) Supplies Ltd].

Charlotte Place, off Goodge Street, was the next stop. "At number 3 was a little Greek restaurant [Peters and Andrew's]," said Ronnie, "and I had a standing bet with Joe Slovo, who supported Chelsea, over whether they came higher than my team Arsenal, for a meal here. For ten years in a row I sat there for a free lunch of kebabs and red wine."

Further along this alleyway, at 49 Rathbone Street, on the corner was where the African National Congress had an office on the first floor.

The office of the Anti-Apartheid Movement from 1964 to 1982 on two floors at 89 Charlotte Street was the final stop on the walk.

"This was the most successful solidarity movement the world has ever seen," said Ronnie. "It galvanised international solidarity, in a non-sectarian way that built as broad a movement as possible which attracted the support of a whole range of people and organisations, including trade unions and churches. Its work was phenomenal.

"The boycott movement was really outstanding." This included the opposition to rugby and cricket tours, and consumer boycotts of oranges and other South African produce.

"The victory over the seeming granite of apartheid was achieved with the support of the international community, which is something we should bear in mind in our struggles today," he concluded.



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FURTHER READING:

"London Recruits, The Secret War Against Apartheid", edited by Ken Keable (Merlin Press, 2012);

"Armed and Dangerous, From Undercover Struggle to Freedom", by Ronnie Kasrils (Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2004);

"Time to Tell, An Activist's Story", by Barry Feinberg (STE Publishers, 2009).