



*Her story*

*Ruth First and the written word as  
an agent for social transformation*

By Joy Watson

---

*Ruth First's key identity was being a researcher and a writer who used her work to give voice to her political beliefs*

On the afternoon of 17 August 1982, Ruth First, a vociferous champion of social and political change, was in a particularly buoyant mood in her office at Eduardo Mondlane University in Maputo, Mozambique where she worked as Director of Research at the Centre for African Studies.

Ruth had just returned from shopping for a celebratory dinner that was to take place later that evening and was immersed in discussions on a conference on Southern Africa, a conference that she had helped organise. The conference had been a success and the dinner planned for later the evening was in honour of this.

Her comrade Pallo Jordan and an American colleague and friend, Bridget O Laughlin, were with her at the time. They were joined by Aquino da Braganza, who was also employed by the university and to whom Ruth reported, who came into the room having collected his mail from his pigeon-hole. Ruth then went to fetch her own mail and engaged in a jovial interchange with Aquino about her popularity and the amount of mail it consequently generated while standing by the window, sifting through her mail.

When she cut open a small parcel, a bomb was detonated and exploded so that the concrete ceiling cracked down the middle, a hole was torn in the wall and Ruth's steel desk was split in two. She was killed instantly. The brutality of this act was so horrific that her remains had to be scraped off the wall afterwards.

One of the motivations for Ruth's assassination by the apartheid regime can be attributed to the threat that she posed in her continuous publication of pieces of writing that subverted the authority and credibility of the apartheid state. Her readership was not just confined to the borders of South Africa, but extended beyond into the African continent and the global arena.

### The legacy of Ruth First

Ruth First was an extraordinary woman, a revolutionary and a

social activist who used the power of the written word to give effect to her agenda of bringing about radical social change to eliminate injustices perpetrated by the state to maintain a system of white privilege and status.

She was an unconventional woman who made the contribution that she did at a time of significant gender imbalances in a society where it was far harder for women to pursue activist agendas. She was an exceptionally strong, intelligent and principled woman. She broke out of the societal mould of her time to be a very non-conformist, unorthodox woman, one who made her mark and vociferously participated in a predominantly male-led liberation movement.

In reflecting on Ruth's legacy and the contribution that she made to the national liberation movement through her written work, Albie Sachs comments that: "The encounter with her voice or with her written word releases in us, sentimentalists and non-sentimentalists alike, not only intense poignancy and anger, but also a sense of great pride and satisfaction of the kind she never permitted herself to feel in her manifold and lasting accomplishments. In the end, it is not the security police or the military, it is Ruth that comes again."

At the Ruth First Memorial Lecture in 2000, her friend and comrade, Jordan, sought to name the contribution that she made to the liberation movement in South Africa. He noted that she was "one of a talented corps of men and women, nationalists and Marxists, who initiated virtually all the major decisions that shaped the destiny of the liberation movement and consequently, our country".

He argued that her incisive, analytical mind would have greatly enriched the national debate both inside and outside the liberation movement and helped define a way forward for the country. He described her as being a militant South African democrat and a Communist who became one of the foremost campaigners for the liberation of South Africa and other African states, both at home and during her years in exile.

In his book on the life of Thabo Mbeki, *The Dream Deferred*, Mark Gevisser writes that at the time that Ruth's daughter, Shawn Slovo, released a film about the life of her mother entitled *A World Apart*, Mbeki, President of South Africa at the time, expressed irritation and is reputed to have commented: "Why a film on Ruth? She spent 117 days in detention, yes, but why not a film about Albertina Sisulu?"

Comments such as these serve to seriously undermine the contribution of a very brave woman who could easily have opted to live a relatively worry-free, privileged life that her whiteness entitled her to at the time. Instead, she opted to take a vociferous stand for social injustice, a stand that constantly brought danger onto the doorstep in the lives of both her and her family and was eventually to lead to her ultimate demise. Her writing was an important tool in her endeavours in pursuit of these ideals.

During the time of her incarceration in 1963, Ruth wrote: "Several times a day I held a clean tissue in each hand to grip the bars in squeamish distaste at the grime thickly coating them, and I strained on my toes on the bedstead to see out of the window high in the wall. The figures rushing past could have been on celluloid film; they were not part of my world. The businessmen hurrying into the Danish restaurant opposite (I had eaten there myself in other times) spared an hour for their hors-d'oeuvre and poached trout, then bolted back to their desks, telephones and ticker tape. I was not hungry; I did not deny the diners their food, but I developed an antagonism towards those men in well-tailored suits who could bustle into the restaurant without turning their heads to the grilles in the grimy building opposite and whose complacency, I told myself, was a clear complicity."

The above extract illustrates how Ruth's sense of social conscience and her need to actively be a part of transforming an unjust social order, resulted in her feeling alienated and estranged from a white middle class social order that was skewed in favour of the interests of white men in particular.

She felt ostracised from this world of unquestioned privilege, power and complicity, where men in business suits could go about their daily routines without questioning how their social privileges came at great expense to the black majority in the country.

### Raised to be an activist writer

**H**eloise Ruth First was born on 4 May 1925 in a Johannesburg maternity home, the daughter of Jewish immigrants, Julius and Mathilda (Tilly) First. Tilly (formerly Mathilda Leveton) had come to South Africa with her parents at the age of four in 1901 from Lithuania. Julius's parents came to South Africa from Latvia. His father, Moses Ruben Furst, had come to South Africa in 1904. Julius, together with his mother and brother, arrived shortly thereafter, in 1907. Ruth's grandparents had come to South Africa to escape the attacks on Jews at the time and living conditions of great poverty. One of the most important legacies that Ruth's parents gave her was their ardent belief and in and pursuit of creating a Communist world order.

Both Julius and Tilly were founding members of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA). Within this context, Ruth's childhood was firmly grounded in a family that exposed her to contemporary left-wing debate and thinking and her political conscientisation therefore started at a relatively early age. Her parents therefore played an instrumental role in raising a young comrade who broke out of the predominant political paradigms of many white families at the time.

Ruth started her formal education at the Jewish Government School in Doornfontein. She then went on to enrol at Barnato Park High School where she stayed until completing standard seven. On 16 January 1939, she started her standard eight at Jeppe High School for Girls in Kensington, a few streets away from where she lived.

Ruth excelled academically. She completed her Junior Certificate by the end of 1939 with English, Afrikaans, Latin, Maths, Biology and History as subjects. She was one of a few students

to pass with a first class. From this early stage, she showed aptitude in her ability to write creatively.

After completing her matric year, Ruth embarked on her tertiary education at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg from 1942 until 1946. Throughout the course of Ruth's education, she maintained an ardent love for books and reading which was to remain with her for the duration of her life. Even in her formative years, there is evidence that Ruth, unlike many young girls at the time, sought to engage with issues of social and political relevance.

As a result of growing up in a household that was politically active and where there was consistent political debate, she developed a keen sense of social consciousness as a girl. At the age of fourteen, she joined the Left Book Club. The club had been founded in 1936 with the aim of fostering a culture of reading and debate on socialist issues. Reading material covered a wide

**“She made the contribution that she did at a time of significant gender imbalances in a society where it was far harder for women to pursue activist agendas.”**

spectrum of left writing from members of the Communist Party.

It was at university that the seeds of political activism that had been planted during her formative years in a politically-aware household began to germinate in a way that far exceeded the confines of being in a whites-only school for girls. Whereas Afrikaans universities at the time did not allow black students to register, the English universities were somewhat more liberal and notwithstanding the racist treatment that black students had to contend with, they were at least allowed to study at places like Wits.

For the first time in her educational context, Ruth's university days brought her into daily contact with people from different cultural and political persuasions and marked the beginning of the forging of very significant relationships. At university, she met and socialised with fellow students

and activists who were later to become leading figures in the liberation movement, including Nelson Mandela, Reverend Michael Scott, JN Singh, Ahmed Kathrada and Ismail Meer.

Within the context of an oppressive political regime hell-bent on eroding even the most basic human rights of the black population and with her upbringing in a family context that encouraged her to challenge this, university life presented Ruth with the ideal opportunity of becoming actively involved in organised politics.

In 1943, she joined the Young Communist League (YCL), the youth component of the CPSA. She was to become very active in the YCL and true to the writer in her, took on the role of editor of its newspaper *Youth For a New South Africa*.

In 1944, she helped found a radical left-wing student organisation, the Federation of Progressive Students and sat on its steering committee, together with Harold Wolpe, Ismael Meer and

Joe Slovo. In 1945, she became secretary of the Progressive Youth Council.

Always one to think strategically and ahead of those around her, in March 1945, Ruth proposed to the ANC Youth League that it should affiliate with the Progressive Youth Council. The Youth League declined, arguing that there was a yawning gulf in the philosophic and policy outlook of the two organisations.

### Early career as a political activist writer

In 1946, while completing her university courses, Ruth took on a job at the Research Division of the Social Welfare Department of the Johannesburg City Council. Working in this context made her realise the class and race implications of working for a state structure that served the needs of the white population only. She lamented that her hopes of doing research had been “dashed” and that

she spent her days writing and editing the section headed “Social Welfare” in a commemorative album for the City’s fiftieth jubilee in 1946, a publication meant to portray the municipality in a positive light. Her work entailed reporting on the number of play supervisors for white children in white parks, the numbers of beggars on the streets and the work of the Council to stop the public from encouraging this, as well as the number of work centres for white persons with disabilities.

When the Director of the Department was invited to be involved in a public broadcasting of the plans of the Department, Ruth had to prepare an account of the work of the Department. She describes the process of doing this as having the effect of both “boring and disgusting” her. Unlike many contemporary civil servants at the time, she came to see the injustice of the system and could not align herself with its purposes and methods of operating and took the brave decision to leave this comfort zone with its secure remuneration to do political work aimed at subverting and transforming the South African state.

When the mineworkers strike of 1946 broke out, Ruth asked to see the Director of the Department and without serving the customary notice required by the municipality, informed him that she would be resigning with immediate effect. He indicated that this would not be possible and enquired whether she had another job lined up and what she would do when she left the service of the Department. She replied by saying that she had a “political” job to do. She was granted permission to terminate her employment with immediate effect on the following day.

Following her resignation, Ruth went to work at the *Guardian*, a left-wing newspaper committed to defending justice, equality and non-racialism. While the *Guardian* was not controlled by the Communist Party, which was critical to the newspaper’s ability to be in circulation after the Party was banned in 1950, the newspaper was, in fact, a Party newspaper in terms of its ideological stance. Ruth’s tenure at

the paper was to become an important stepping stone in her development as a writer willing to deal with stories that transcended the boundaries of what was “safe” and profitable to write about. This was the beginning of her path of using her writing as agency for social transformation.

### First written work that receives international attention

In 1947, at the tender age of twenty-two, while at the *Guardian* for only five months, Ruth worked on an initiative that became an important milestone in the beginning of her career as an investigative journalist prepared to challenge difficult issues in society that so many others were prepared to turn a blind eye to.

In June 1947, Ruth together with the Anglican priest, Reverend Michael Scott, went to Bethal, a town in the then Eastern Transvaal, characterised by potato, bean and maize farming and heavily dependent on access to seasonal labourers at little cost to farmers. They found that a system had been set up whereby the police were giving black people caught defying the pass laws the option of a jail sentence or a contract on a Bethal farm.

Most opted to work on the farm, but came to regret this choice. They found that black farm labourers were living in the most appalling living conditions. They were made to start work at 4 a.m. in the morning and worked a long, gruelling day until about 6 p.m. or until midnight when there was a full moon. Farm workers were incentivised to work harder with the use of a sjambok, which was used to whip them while they worked. At the end of the work day, workers were taken to overcrowded farm compounds where they had to remain until going back to work. They were locked into the compound and not allowed out unless accompanied by an induna. They moved entirely at the will of the *induna* (overseer), from Mondays to Sundays. It was estimated that approximately fourteen thousand black farm workers were working and living in such conditions in Bethal alone.

The Bethal workers were living

in conditions of slavery of the worst kind. When Ruth and Scott visited the farms, they inspected the compounds and found that many of the workers were squatting on heaps of sacks. There were about three or four mattresses and about fifty men, none of whom had any blankets. The men at one compound were huddled together eating a meal of mielie meal and pumpkin which they were served three times a day. All the men that they spoke to complained about working in oppressive conditions and being constantly abused, cursed at and beaten. In some instances, workers had tried to escape from the farms. Those who were caught were beaten to death, their bodies disposed of and the word would be put out that they had indeed escaped. Ruth was so affected by this experience that she wrote:

It is not every day that the Johannesburg reporter for the *Guardian* meets an African farm worker who, when asked to describe conditions on the farm on which he works, silently takes off his shirt to show large weals and scars on his back, shoulders and arms. Together, Ruth and Michael worked on writing up the situation on the Bethal farms. The weekly deadline for the *Guardian* had been missed by the time they returned from Bethal and so they handed over their story to the editor of the *Rand Daily Mail*, who rather reluctantly agreed to publish it. The story appeared in the newspaper on 28 June 1947 under Scott’s name and was followed by a piece by Ruth in the *Guardian* in the following week. This prompted all the South African newspapers to follow suit and the Bethal story became the focus of many front-page newspaper articles.

Ruth’s work on the Bethal scandal served to catapult her into a position where her writing on social injustices was being put into the public domain and used to start asking difficult questions about some of the things being condoned at the time.

### Writing as an agency for social transformation

Ruth continued to do a number of significant things. As a formidable



opponent of the apartheid regime, she played a prominent role in the Passive Resistance Campaign of 1946-7, helped lead the Defiance Campaign of 1952 and the campaign for the Congress of the People in 1955 and was part of the decision-making process to launch the armed struggle in 1961. Her achievements include the fact that a year after the Federation of South African Women was formed in 1955; she was instrumental in planning the march to the Union Buildings to demand an end to the pass laws. She wrote about the march in *New Age* and subsequently assisted with the women's pass campaign, using her writing as a tool to promote it. Later on in her life, she came to engage in feminist theory and taught courses on gender studies during her time at the University of Durham. She also co-authored the first biography of one of South Africa's greatest feminist icons, Olive Schreiner. Notwithstanding this, her work and contribution have not been viewed in terms of their gendered implications.

Ruth became a part of the inner circle of the key decision-makers in the liberation struggle and managed to stake her claim as an equal in a man's world and in a male-led liberation movement. As an internationalist, she was also deeply involved in the liberation struggles of other African countries, especially the former Portuguese colonies, Mozambique, Angola and Guinea-Bissau and used her writing to give voice to these struggles, to critically analyse the impact of the colonial legacy on the African continent and to critique the violence and despotism in some of the post-colonial states. This is evidenced by the number of books she produced in this regard, such as *Power in Africa, South West Africa, Libya: The Elusive Revolution* and *The Barrel of a Gun*.

An integral part of Ruth's identity was that of being a researcher and a writer, one who used her work to give voice to her political beliefs. Throughout the course of her life, Ruth used her writing to pursue a transformative social agenda. Her writing was very directly linked to a social movement pursuing

political change. She had a great affinity for the written word, for people and their stories, for societies and their collective narratives. Underpinning all of this was a quest to uncover facts, through the processes of research and investigative journalism, to expose hidden narratives and experiences; the unspoken stories and the injustices that were indelibly woven into the thread of these stories. During the course of her imprisonment, she consistently pined for books and her narrative on this experience, *117 Days*, is rife with references to the effect that this deprivation had on her. The only reading material that she was allowed access to, was the Bible. She writes: "I read the Book from the first page to the last, first the Old Testament, then the New. When I reached the last page, I started again with the first .... When my imagination faltered, I turned again to the Bible. I was ravenous for reading matter. One day during the early part of my stay in Pretoria I was in the yard during exercise hour and saw a scrap of paper in the dustbin for cinders from the kitchen high combustion stoves. I fished it out and held it between my thumb and forefinger to devour the words. It was a prison card and recorded prisoner's name, number, crime and sentence. Perhaps a dozen words in all but to me they were like an archaeological find, proof that some people in this society recognized the value of written language and were able to use it. Even better than this find was the ration of brown sugar that started to arrive every few days, for the six or seven ounces were rolled in a cone of paper, printed paper, torn from old magazines. This way I feasted on a few torn paragraphs from the *War Cry*, organ of the Salvation Army and once, only tantalizingly, I got a short jagged piece from the *Evening Post*."

Not only was reading an important constituent part of Ruth's life, but as an intellectualist, Ruth was also an analytical thinker and a theorist and she used this to question, critique and inform her understanding of the world around her. In reflecting on her reading of the Bible, she ponders on the

following: "I wondered how comfort could be found, by those who use the Book for refuge, in the baleful and avenging God of the Old Testament."

As a theorist and a writer, Ruth was always actively engaged in using her reading and writing to inform her cognitive view of the world. She worked and wrote in a manner that linked research and the production of transformative knowledge to activist agendas to pursue social change. She used her writing as a conduit for pursuing political agendas.

Her writing therefore sought to create a synergy between her investigative journalism, her consciousness-raising initiatives and her political action and advocacy. There are a number of ways in which research can be activist. It can, for example, be a call to action or seek to inform action. Ruth's writing sought to do both these things and was firmly grounded in the social movement out of which it emerged. There was, therefore, very little dichotomy between her thoughts and actions and her writing and her politics. Her legacy and her commitment to using her writing as an agent for social change are a rich source of inspiration for other writers who have lost their sense of calling and who want to write as part of an attempt to create a more equitable, just and sane social order.

### References:

- Benson, M (1966) *The Struggle for a Birthright*, Penguin African Library, London  
 First, R (1965) *117 Days*, Penguin Books, London  
 Gevisser, M (2009) *Thabo Mbeki: A Dream Deferred*, Johnathan Ball Publishers, Johannesburg.  
 Pinnock, D (1995) *They Fought for Freedom: Ruth First*, Maskew Miller Longman, Cape Town  
 Sachs, A in First, R (2006) *117 Days*, Penguin Books, Johannesburg.  
 Scott, M (1958) *A Time to Speak*, Faber and Faber, London  
 Slovo, J (1995) *The Unfinished Autobiography*, Ravan Press, Randburg  
 Zug, J (2007) *The Guardian: A History of South Africa's Extraordinary Anti-Apartheid Newspaper*, UNISA Press, Pretoria