ALBIE SACHS

Albie Sachs is a writer, academic and lawyer by training. He is currently serving as a Justice on the Constitutional Court. In 1963 he was detained without trial for 168 days, which he later described in *The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs*. He wrote of a subsequent imprisonment in *Stephanie on Trial* concerning Stephanie Kemp, whom he later married. After his own detention and Stephanie's imprisonment, they went to England where he completed a PhD and wrote *Justice in South Africa*. In 1977 he went to live in Mozambique. There he worked both as a lecturer in the School of Law, and for the Department of Justice. He and Gita Honwana Welch together wrote *Liberating the Law: Creating Popular Justice in Mozambique*. On 7 April 1988, Albie was blown up by a car bomb placed by agents of the South African government. He survived, and described his survival and process of recovery in *The Soft Vengeance of a Freedom Fighter*. After the ANC's unbanning, he returned to South Africa, where he wrote *Protecting Human Rights in a New South Africa*.

Early on in the interview Albie expressed the importance of recognising the full spectrum of the Jewish contribution to democratic politics:

> I've been pushing the Kaplan Centre at the University of Cape Town to use the wonderful photographic material they have to put on an exhibition about Jews who contributed to freedom in South Africa. I was a bit irritated when I walked around an elegant exhibition they had which dealt with many facets of the life of Jews in South Africa and the contribution Jews have made, with a subtle emphasis on Jews in the rural areas and how friendly they are with Afrikaners. But I didn't see Solly Sachs, my dad. I didn't see Sam Kahn, I didn't see Eli Weinberg. I didn't see any reference to what is a rich part of South African history. And I thought it's a kind of a censorship that's a bit shameful. I only wish that a new inclusive exhibition could have been put on some time ago so that it won't look as though it's a result of the elections and accommodating to the new way things are going in South Africa. I'm told that the photographs are there, that they've been put in a basement somewhere. So let's bring out those photos, and I look forward to an exhibition being opened in a way in which trade unionists, ANC people and others, Jews and non-Jews, can all be there and just see this as one of the ingredients of the achievement of democracy in South Africa.

Interviewed by Fran Buntman
23 and 24 October 1994
Cape Town

Please tell me a little bit about your life — growing up, your childhood, your background and important influences you felt in the first years of your life.

Can I take it the focus is on being a Jew?

Yes and no. I would like to know whether you felt in a natural, spontaneous way that being Jewish was a relevant issue.

Well, let me put it another way. As a child, I used to go twice a year for holidays to Johannesburg. My mother was in Cape Town and my dad lived in Johannesburg. And then I would visit my grandparents in Pretoria. And my Bobba [grandmother] in the last years of her life became extremely religious, and she would walk around the house in Pretoria with a shawl and she would be muttering a lot. One year I was told that she'd had a stroke, was very ill, and would be in hospital for some time. She wasn't expected to survive and I should go to the hospital to see her; effectively they were saying before she died. I remember walking down the long corridor, I'd never been to a hospital before, and people were gloomy. That special air you have when you're dealing with someone who is almost dead but isn't dead. I was told not to be shocked by her appearance, and that she recognised nobody except one daughter. I came into the hospital room and I saw an absolutely shrunken figure, with the whole side of her face contorted, and really not recognising what was going on around her. I was brought forward to her and suddenly she spoke and said: 'Albie.' Everybody was quite startled. She recognised me and she said: 'Are you a communist and are your friends Jews?'

Now I'd never thought about whether I was a communist or not. My father was E S 'Solly' Sachs, trade unionist. He was often in the news. He belonged to the Labour Party of South Africa, and had in fact been expelled from the Communist Party in the early 1930s, before I was born. My mother was a member of the Communist Party. One of the loyal, hard-working typists — in fact, the typist for Moses Kotane who was the general secretary of the party. Uncle Moses, as we called him, used to come round to visit my mom quite often, I suppose to bring typing. And he lived here in Clifton with Eddie Roux. Although Eddie Roux had also been expelled from the party, I think they kept up a kind of a friendship. And then there was old Bill Andrews, Uncle Bill, who was a British engineer. He'd become the

Left:
Albie Sachs (Photograph: Gisèle Wulfsohn)

chairman of the Communist Party of South Africa and he used to come around quite often to my mom. So I grew up in that kind of milieu. It was during the Second World War. Somebody else I remember was H A Naidoo, who married a friend of my mother's, Pauline Podbrey. He too would come around. So through the people who would come as friends and as political associates or to bring typing to my mother, the atmosphere was non-racial in a very natural way. And I would see in my mother's great appreciation that she felt honoured if they came to her house. Of course, that was the most wonderful thing for a young white growing up: to see, not the non-racism per se, but the general respect and the affection and the way people related. There was real equality there. If anything, the seniority and respect was to Uncle Moses and to HA, so it wasn't a question of forcing or breaking through the taboos or the barriers of race. Equality and socialism went together. I remember the great excitement after the battle of Stalingrad in the Soviet Union. It was a victory not just against Hitler, but against the colour bar in South Africa. It was all part of one big world-wide thing. But at the same time I wanted to be me. And I didn't want to feel that I was an extension of my mother or my father or their views of the world.

So all this leads up to the question that my Bobba asked me. At school, I was at SACS, about half the kids were Jews. SACS at that stage was in what is now called the City Bowl. The school building is now used as the Cape Town high school. A lot of Jews had, when they immigrated, first lived in Salt River, Woodstock, and were now moving into Vredehoek and Oranjezicht: better homes as their standard of life improved, so SACS was their neighbourhood school.

And certainly amongst the boarders there were a lot of Jews. I remember we had a Mr Kuperman who had a little *cheyder* directly across the way from the school. He obviously saw us as a good source of recruitment for his classes. And the Gardens Synagogue wasn't very far away. Now this posed a number of problems for me: my mother was a Jew, Rachel Ginsberg. My father was a Jew, Solly Sachs. They'd both come from Eastern Europe, my mother when she was eighteen months old, so effectively she only knew South Africa. But, as I discovered afterwards, she used to take her parents to the Yiddish theatre — she grew up in that kind of ambience. I had an Auntie Gertie, Auntie Freda, an Uncle Elie and Uncle Natie. We used to go for Paysach and Rosh Hashanah to my Auntie Rosie in Cape Town and meet all the cousins and have all the traditional foods.

What's Rosie's surname?

She was Rosie Dick. She had been a Levin. There was a very large Levin family — my father's mother was a Levin. I enjoyed the contact. I enjoyed the sense of family and I enjoyed some of the food. I loved the chopped liver and I didn't like the chopped herring, don't ask me why. I loved the chicken soup

and not so much the *Tsimmes*. I liked the regularity, the encounter, the sense of fun, the meeting up with my cousins whom I'd see twice a year but hardly ever else. So that part was completely unproblematic.

The problematic part was the identification in religious terms. My parents had fought their parents in relation to religion, and it had been violent. When my Bobba was informed that I was not going to be circumcised, she had a stroke, I believe. And I'm sure that's one of the reasons she asked me this question years afterwards. I think my mother was her favourite child, the first-born, and for some reason they were very close and loved each other and fought quite a lot. My mother told me recently that when she and my Dad married, my Dad's brother Bennie [the writer Bernard Sachs] tried to arrange a Jewish wedding in a garden somewhere. They wouldn't go to shul, but at least they got the *chuppah*. And at the last minute, when it came to stamping on the glass or whatever, my Dad said: 'Oh to hell with all this. It's a total charade, it's nonsense!' and just stormed out. So they fought. In terms of who they were, what they stood for, their internationalism as they saw it. I grew up in a home where there was no ritual at all. There was no identification with belief. There was no going to synagogue, there was no keeping of holy days, there were no candles, there was no Friday night Shabbes or anything of that kind. But if I went to my uncles or aunties and they had candles for Friday night, it wasn't seen as a betrayal or anything wrong. It was for each to do what they believed in.

Where it became harsh for me was at school. I don't know quite what it meant being a Jew. In the boarding school every now and then some new kids would come along, and they'd be very insistent on [Jewish] dietary rules. You couldn't eat milk and meat together. So we used to argue about whether you can't eat within half an hour, or forty-five minutes, or one hour... you know, what was the rule? But what I found again and again is often that the kids who were the most frum and the most concerned about not eating milk and meat together, were the meanest. They would steal, they would lie, they would tell tales. I don't know how it came about. Later in life I might have said that it was the authoritarian personality that relies on rules that gives rise to that coldness. But it distressed me very much at the time. I felt: what's the point of having these controls over what you do and what you don't do — if the idea is to prepare you for some kind of Heaven or some kind of a good life — if it doesn't connect up with your actual behaviour in moral terms in your day-to-day conduct? I'm not saying that the frummers were all bad, they weren't. But they weren't significantly better than the others. I'd say that if anything they were significantly worse, by and large, in terms of sensitivity and warmth and kindness and human respect for others. By and large.

And to this day I haven't solved that question. That was a very real thing for me, more important than conforming just to be part of the crowd.

I used to worry a lot about whether or not a God existed. It seemed to be the most important question in the whole world. And if God existed,

everything flowed from that. If God didn't exist another whole set of world views flowed from that. I remember once asking my mother, I suppose I must've been about nine: 'Mommy, if you don't believe in God, what do you believe in?' She said, 'We believe in doing good.' It was the most wonderful answer. It was enough for a nine-year-old child. The idea that you don't believe in anything was untenable. You had to believe in something. You had to have something that held everything together, you had to have a moral foundation to exist. And OK, philosophically her answer doesn't stand up but at that moment, and the confidence with which she expressed it, it meant quite a lot. When I was blown up by the bomb — was it forty years later? anyway a hell of a lot later — I was close to death. As I came to, as my consciousness came out again, I started wondering in an amused way as a social scientist and a philosopher, if there was anything that had actually happened to me that had proved or disproved the existence of God in the universe. In fact, the experience didn't shift the balance one way or the other. But what was interesting was that suddenly the answer seemed far less important to me, whereas as a child the existence or non-existence of God was everything. As an adult I find that people who believe that God exists will interpret it in a certain way, it impinges on their lives in a certain way; people who don't believe have a set of values and beliefs, and a belief in belief, that is often not very dissimilar. It's just wrapped up in a different vocabulary and has a different verbal format. Other than maybe the significance we give to prayer or intercession, I don't think it makes all that much difference. And it was rather astonishing for me now, as a grown-up who was almost killed, to discover that maybe it's not so important after all. One way or the other. You can have a non-belief that's very religious and you can also have a belief that's actually not religious at all. And everything is blurred at the boundaries. Maybe one has a kind of, I can't call it agnosticism because that sounds like disrespect, but a kind of a fluid approach that says well, anything's possible. And maybe it detracts from the grandeur of God to say that He or She is possible. For the believer, that might be totally unacceptable. But for a convinced atheist it's also totally unacceptable. What matters is how you live, not how you describe it.

In any event, the idea of having religion imposed on you, the idea of being forced to believe something you didn't believe, I found absolutely horrific. I couldn't bear the idea of going through rituals and pretending simply for the sake of acceptance. So when it came to my thirteenth birthday and my bar mitzvah date got closer and closer, all the other Jews in class one by one, even the least religious, would have a two-week course, a quick kind of barmie. And mine got closer and closer and, 'Albie, when are you going to start your lessons?' I would try and change the subject. It was the cause of acute tension for me. Because I couldn't do it if I didn't believe. At the same time I didn't want to break away from the peer group. So it wasn't a concession to the non-Jews at school, it had nothing to do with that at all. It wasn't anything to do

with being uncomfortable about being a Jew, ashamed about being a Jew, anything like that. I had no problems about the fact that I was a Jew. It had to do with going through the ritual, going to the synagogue, saying certain things, uttering certain prayers, if I could not believe in them.

And I'm sure that a lot of my philosophical formation came about on that issue. Not the issue of apartheid, the issue of conscience. And I'm sure that's one reason why, later in life, I've been in a strange way extremely sensitive to the wishes of religious people. I've worked closely with all sorts of religious groups. Oliver Tambo would sometimes ask me to help prepare his speeches. Once, when he had to speak at an international ecumenical conference in London he sought me out.

And I sort of joked and said: 'OR [as Tambo was known — it stood for Oliver Reginald], you know I think we haven't got many holy people in the ANC.' He was a very religious Anglican Christian and yet he sought me out, a non-religious Jew. Later, when I came back to South Africa the very first public meeting I addressed was of Muslims. It was at the University of the Western Cape; I was staying with Dullah Omar. He brought me there. There were seven hundred from all over South Africa. And I said: 'Wouldn't it be wonderful if you could initiate a movement together with other religious groups, to project the kind of clauses you would like to see in a Bill of Rights protecting religious freedoms.' And they later worked together with Christians, Jews and Hindus in order to achieve something that was actually very nice: The World Council of Religion and Peace.

So the fundamental importance of conscience and of belief, of nobody being required to pretend a belief that they don't really have, and at the same time of standing by your beliefs and living out your life not for the sake of popularity or acceptance, but according to certain fundamental values, came to me in that particular context. It was hard. It was painful. The whole period, particularly up to the bar mitzvah time, was one of acute embarrassment and discomfort for me. Because it set me apart from the other Jews and singled me out as a rather odd kind of person. My parents said to me very clearly and well in advance that if I wanted a bar mitzvah they would make all the arrangements. They said it was completely up to me... They didn't encourage me to have one and didn't discourage me either... It was a genuine choice; they would've paid for the lessons and so on. And I said, 'No, if I don't believe in it, I can't do it.' They gave me a watch for my thirteenth birthday and that was the watch I was wearing when I was blown up. It was on my arm. It was finally destroyed by that. And when my friend Henry Brown visited me in hospital in London and asked could he get me something, I said: 'Can you please get me a beautiful watch.' It's the one I'm wearing now, on my left arm, and I love it. You know it was like replacing something that was very special. I don't think it was such a fabulous watch: it used to gain time and lose time but it was my watch, that belonged to my arm, you know, and it all went up in the bomb, and I'd had it for a long time.

How did you answer your grandmother's question in hospital?

Answering that question was quite hard because it was probably the first moment where I had to choose between, if you like, the hard, cold, factual truth and a kindly answer. I grew up in a world where telling the truth was really very important. And you should never be afraid of telling the truth and standing by your convictions and fighting for what you believe in. And now there was this shrunken little bit of spirit that was left in a frail, diminutive body; asking that question which obviously meant so much to her. In fact I didn't even know if I was a communist. I must have been about twelve. Certainly my general worldview was very much of the left. And I grew up in a home during the Second World War where the pro-Soviet feeling was very strong. But we certainly weren't a rah-rah-rah kind of family with posters up declaring our allegiance. And then: were my friends Jews? My friends were my friends. If I had to think about it, at that stage . . . Probably most of them were Jews . . . But I would play rugby with others, and those I sat next to in school were quite a mix. Probably in pure numbers, bearing in mind the school I was at, a great number of my ordinary classmates were probably Jews. But I never saw them as Jews. But even if I'd delayed to think about the answer it would've been unkind to her, and so that was one of the first times in my life where I made a choice based more on kindness than on strict honesty. The answer wasn't for me, it wasn't for my convenience, it was for her. And I said: 'Most of my friends are Jews and I'm not a communist', and there was a sense of wonder from all the other visitors.

She couldn't recognise her own children and here was her grandchild who she would see twice a year on short visits, and she recognised him.

What were one or two other important influences on your childhood?

I loved reading and it would be a mixture of Jules Verne, Biggles the Fighter Pilot shooting down planes, and many comics. And then Jane Austen, Thackeray I loved very much. Dickens I never really got into. At an earlier stage, fairy stories, legends, myths, where the hero would go through the trial of ice and the trial of heat, and climbing and things like that. I think they were important to me later on in life when I went through many trials that were of the courage kind. These primitive identifications with the extremities of endurance actually turned out to be quite important for me. I'm glad that I had that mythological backing fairly early on in establishing certain kinds of mythical ideas. And then there were always war adventures. There was one character I remember called Rockfist Rogan. He was in the RAF and he would fly fighter planes and shoot down Nazi planes, and he was also a boxer. I can still remember when he was forced down in Germany, he pretended he was German, knocked out the German heavyweight champion and escaped just in time to fly the plane back to England, shooting down messerschmitts

on the way. So we grew up in this world of fantasy and heroism — it was very much male heroism — based on physical courage. It's an interesting change that's come about in the world. The emphasis now is not so much on courage. In those days it was very much on courage, and courage was a military, physical thing. The emphasis has moved now to success. And even the male attributes have moved away from courage in the face of danger towards power, and expressing power through accumulating money and being successful as a powerful entrepreneur.

You talked about your parents' rejection of religion. To what extent did you have any knowledge of Jewish culture, Jewish history, Jewish religion? Was there any place that you might've learned about that kind of tradition?

No. Certainly not in a formal way. We didn't have books like Five Thousand Years or Three Thousand Years or whatever they were called. I think I only read a couple of books like that when I went into exile in England as part of general knowledge, filling in gaps. You pick up a certain amount from the other kids at school, as well as from other sources. But very little in terms of the actual tradition, in that sense. We were Jewish, there was no doubt about it, it was never an issue. As it happened my mother married Norman Edwards, who was English, not a Jew. My father's second marriage was to Dulcie Hartwell. So they both married non-Jews. It was just never an issue one way or the other. There was never a repudiation of the Jewish culture or heritage: it was never seen as something one wants to distance oneself from or get away from. Our Jewishness, to the extent that it existed, had much more to do with temperament, broad values, enjoying a good argument, humour, a certain kind of vitality, having expectations of life. My uncle used to write for the old *Jewish Chronicle* or the *Zionist Record.* I remember reading 'Jew reaches the North Pole' and I laughed. I just found this kind of pride ridiculous. But I could understand where it comes from.

I can remember seeing a film in Johannesburg in 1946. When I used to visit my Dad, he'd be busy and I would go to movies. I saw lots of movies, I still love movies. And this movie in '46 or '47 showed Jews being harassed and persecuted and escaping from Europe and ending up in Palestine. It also showed Jews in a tank, and that was something absolutely astonishing because until then Jews were seen as the most pacific people in the world. People who never carried guns, who were not warlike, who were not militaristic at all. If you were sympathetic to Jews, you saw them as people who were sensitive, who were musical, who were cultured and cultivated. But meek rather than aggressive.

Looking back now, it's painful for me because there's a kind of tough, almost universal Jewish aggressiveness that's emerged. An identification with the State of Israel, and a physical aggressiveness that's very pronounced. It's often hard to explain to non-Jews that, in fact, the history of Jews has been

different in many ways. For many people now, looking at Jews in relation to the State that calls itself the Jewish State, it's seen as based on tanks, and based on the gun, and based on a command of physical capacity and force. In any event, at that time, simply to see Jews on a tank was something quite astonishing and extraordinary. And from that point of view a number of friends of mine, Jews and non-Jews, have often taken up strong anti-Zionist positions. But I understand where the love and affection and feeling and dedication to Israel for most Jews comes from. I understand what it means for people who felt themselves oppressed and have been oppressed – historically and in our own lifetimes, and subject to all sorts of persecution – how much it means to have the capacity not simply to turn the other cheek; not simply to be humiliated every time. To have a place that you can feel is your own. Where you can express yourself as a Jew, in national terms and so on. And so from that point of view I've never identified with the militant anti-Zionist positions, and certainly not with calls for the destruction of Israel. If only more Jews could understand that Palestinians have also suffered and also want a national home.

At university, I discovered a youth group I identified with – me as Albie, not as Solly's son or Ray's son. I met up with this youth group, the Modern Youth Society. I felt at home, I felt happy. Because this was the crowd who had that same romanticism, the same philosophical quest, the same enthusiasm for doing things as I did: we would climb the mountain, we would walk home from parties, we would argue all night about whether God existed or not, about philosophical questions. The large issues of life were very important. I identified straight away and that brought me into politics and the Defiance Campaign, and everything else followed from that. At that time I can remember someone coming from the United States on a fact-finding tour, from the Zionist movement, to discover why so many Jews at university were involved in the South African freedom struggle instead of being in the Zionist movement. It was seen as a choice and it was seen as a loss. Instead of feeling proud of us because we were Jews and we were fighting for freedom and fighting for equality, they asked what had happened to divert us from where we should've been. And it wasn't done subtly – meetings were arranged for us to get together. I can remember someone who went on to become quite a well-known lawyer in England afterwards saying 'And I eat bacon with relish'. And Bennie Sacks, who was part of our Modern Youth Society group, said: [puts on a yiddishe accent] 'Tell me what's this relish you eat the bacon with?' You know, making a joke out of it. But I resented the fact that people wanted to impose an identity upon me, and to tell me that as a Jew 'you ought to belong to –'. Many good friends of mine belonged to Habonim, or to Hashomeyr Hatzair, which was more of a left crowd. Afterwards, a few of the Hashomeyr people joined the Modern Youth Society. Then they started to identify more with South Africa. There was a chap, I think his name was Willy Greenberg, who had actually gone to fight

in '48 when Israel was founded. I remember saying to him something or other about war bringing out the best in 'men'. And he was this short guy and soft and quiet, and he just looked at me and he half smiled and shook his head, and said that he didn't agree. That was one of the most important little conversations I've had in my life. Because until then I'd grown up in that heroic mould: as a kid in the Second World War, fighting Hitler, the fairy princess who rewarded virtue or the princes in the legends who fought bravely, you know, and so it was always a test of courage and it brought out the best in you and the most noble. For the first time I was made to feel by someone whom I respected, in a very gentle and a soft way, that maybe war actually brought out the worst in people. Or the best and the worst. And I thought about it for a long time afterwards — a long, long time. I still remember that answer and I still find it important.

Last year I went to a Habonim camp. Lawyers for Human Rights invited me and I was quite amused that it was Lawyers for Human Rights that got me there. I went this year twice to the Marais Road Synagogue in Sea Point, Cape Town. Somebody even gave me a little yamekah which they'd stitched in black, green, and gold,[1] to make it a little easier for me. I went once when the Mayor had a Mayoral Sunday — I consider her a friend — and I was happy to go. The other time was when Mandela spoke there. And it was a wonderful occasion. In a curious way now, forty years later, it's equality, democracy, non-racism that is bringing me to shul, bringing me to Habonim. Now I'm very comfortable to go and be with the people there rather than suffer the imposed identification that people wanted to force one into in that early period.

Friends of mine went to Israel. I respected their reasons for going there. One friend went in '56 when we finished our law degree. His name is Leon Shaskolsky. He now calls himself Leon Shelev. We carry on arguing like we used to argue, very emotionally. But he was disappointed in many ways. He stayed in Israel, he's part of Israeli society and culture, but he felt the promise was betrayed quite profoundly. Instead of being a new society with special values it became another country, defending itself, but using all the stratagems and the excuses and pretexts that any state uses to defend itself. But he's part of the debate there. He supports the Peace Movement and he supports an accommodation with the Palestinians, and I'm sure he supports the idea of an independent Palestinian State being a neighbour, hopefully a good neighbour, of the independent Jewish State.

At one stage when the Gulf War was on I was staying in Johannesburg with Arthur Chaskalson who was an adviser to the Constitutional Committee of the ANC. He has a brother in Israel and he was worried when he saw the scuds flying on to Tel Aviv. And then I moved down to stay with Dullah Omar in Cape Town. He was responding emotionally to the bombing of Baghdad.

1 The colours of the African National Congress.

And I just felt, here am I, moving between the two and respecting very much the genuine emotion that each had. I felt in a way it symbolised my position. I have in my own way, where possible, worked to at least diminish tension between the Jewish community and the Muslim community in South Africa. Not through forcing people together at tea-parties and so on, but just by trying to get points of common ground and trying to diminish the tensions that can be often provoked by demagogic people on both sides.

Please tell me about the Modern Youth Society.

The Modern Youth Society was an outgrowth of the Modern World Society. The Modern World Society was a student body that already existed. There had been a student socialist society, which now felt it couldn't carry on, because to propagate the values they believed in could've been in conflict with the Suppression of Communism Act of 1950. I suspect it was people who belonged to that who set up the Modern World Society. Its main focus was really on apartheid. Apartheid was now becoming the official policy of the new government. It was a new word. That is what we had to fight against: the Group Areas Act and Population Classification. There were also threats to the university, the Pass Laws were being intensified. It was also in a Cold War setting. Far away up there was the Soviet Union. The Chinese Revolution was successful in 1949. I didn't know the date of my own birthday but I knew the date of the Russian Revolution. I knew the Chinese National Day. In '51 I went to university. The Chinese Revolution was our big revolution. You'll find lots of lefties all over the world have had their revolution. For some it was Cuba: Che, Fidel. For others it was Nicaragua. For others it was Vietnam. It's the kind of issue on which you take a stand in terms of where you line up on the world scene; who you identify with, who the heroes are, and what you protest against. For us, it was identifying with China. It was a Third World nation, although we didn't use the term Third World at that stage. It was a heroic thing. We learned about the Long March, we learned about the emancipation of women.

That was a big theme in China and it was immensely inspirational to us. Looking back now, one of the huge areas of disappointment was to see what happened with the Cultural Revolution and the destruction of people who'd given their lives to this wonderful heroic struggle — the manipulation, the demagogy, the chaos that emerged afterwards, the injustices, the cruelties. And the sadness that goes with it because it was so heroic and there was so much nobility involved: in the thirties the resistance to Japan, the bringing a nation together, overcoming corruption. In fact I went to China in 1954 and it was quite, quite wonderful. It was just after peace in Vietnam, the first time in Indo-China. The people who took us around and who were our interpreters were the children of the old bourgeois class, who could speak English and French and Spanish and so on. They were so proud to be Chinese. They took

us to the old Forbidden City and to the Peking Opera. They said that previously these things were forbidden to ordinary people and now they are open to everybody. And that's why, when the Cultural Revolution destroyed the Peking Opera I knew it was wrong. Because I'd been there and I'd seen ordinary people watching the opera. It was one of the glories of the past that had to be preserved and thrown open to everybody . . . But our real concern was South Africa. We got involved in the Chinese-Soviet split. Most of us loved China, but supported the Khrushchev position on that because we were against nuclear war and we wanted peaceful coexistence. In my case, I had passed through Moscow and been rather disappointed with what I saw. It didn't correspond to the beautiful magazines we got with twenty combine harvesters in a row going down the line. I just saw women with black *doeks* [scarves] and scythes, cutting the corn by hand. There were muddy streets in Moscow, and things got lost, and organisation was bad. People read a lot. There was a sense of basic equality which was very nice. But it certainly wasn't paradise. Then the Khrushchev report on Stalin's crimes came out in 1956.[2] I believed it was true. We split into groups . . .

Within the Modern Youth Society?

Well, now the Modern Youth was getting a little bit older, the Older Youth Society. By the way, the Modern World Society felt it was too campus-based so we needed something off the campus. And that was the Modern Youth Society. Mainly university people. Some people didn't go to university. Some trade unionists. And so we worked mainly off campus. We were never involved very much in Nusas [National Union of South African Students] and campus politics. We had a different resonance, that lasted for the rest of our lives. I can spot most ex-Nusas people. Nusas played a good role at that stage and an even better one afterwards, but it involved a lot of politics and student politics: positions . . . having a public profile. We had none of that. We were on the margin. We were in the shadows. We were facing torture, death, banishment, imprisonment, maybe joining the armed struggle. You know, it was a big divide: between even the most conservative people in our groups and even the most radical in Nusas. To a certain extent in the seventies and eighties that gap diminished and there were people who went straight from Nusas into armed struggle and underground work. But in the early fifties it was a totally different kind of a thing. You could be very comfortably, safely anti-apartheid within the structures of Nusas. And do good work: I'm not downplaying that at all. But it wasn't that total, existential thing which it was for us in the Modern Youth Society. We were prepared to die. We were prepared to give everything. And we did. Denis Goldberg was the only one who knew how to do anything with his hands. We could all debate like nobody, but when he came in he used to say: 'OK,

2 See interview with Denis Goldberg, p 474.

you do all the political talking, let me fix the lights for the party. I'll do something useful.' In the end his skills were more useful than ours. We then didn't need debaters, we needed people who could contribute something to MK [Umkhonto we Sizwe].

Our lives were intense. We worked hard. In a sense the drama of South Africa and our role within it more than occupied our whole lives. There was a lot of passion and identification, danger, solidarity. We used to fight and argue and shout at each other, baring our souls to get it right. When you start moralising about all the tiny little details of organisation and administration, it can get a little bit absurd. But we certainly did all that. From that point of view, Israel was far away.

With regard to the Jewish community as an organised community, if people wanted to organise their own schools and their own cultural activities, fine. We had no problem with that. But we were more than engaged in what we were doing. The other night I was at a dinner party with a few friends. They were all Jews except one person with an Afrikaans background who was married to a Jew, and half the evening they were talking about Israel. Not about the politics or anything like that, but it was quite clear that what was central for them was the wonderful architecture of the Israeli Supreme Court building, and the wonderful this and the wonderful that. They got their excitement from Israel, identifying with Israel, even if I imagine most of them would've supported the Peace Movement. Maybe not severe critics of the previous policies of the Israeli government but more on the left rather than the right, in terms of their outlook. But Israel was the centre of their imagination, their vision of the world. And again I could understand where it came from . . . but I just couldn't share it. I haven't been to Israel yet. I would've found it too painful to go there until recently. Now that the peace process is under way it becomes something that is much easier for me to imagine. And when the moment is right I'll go there and I'm sure I'll have interesting conversations and contacts with different people. I'll probably find quite a few friends from the old days, and I've got some family there. But it's not something I feel that's pressing.

When I came back in 1990, I was eager to have the widest possible contact with the widest range of people and places and movements. I was invited to speak by the various Jewish groups: the Union of Jewish Women . . . Jewish ex-servicemen, Jewish dentists.

I asked the guy who took me out there, 'Are you a Jew who is a dentist, or a dentist who is a Jew?' And he was really worried about that question. I was just joking. I've also spoken to Jewish sheltered employment, Jewish seniors, and several other Jewish groups. I've been to speak at the Herzlia [Jewish day] school several times. I enjoy it. I enjoy helping Jews feel comfortable in South Africa and part of the South African nation. To feel that their values and their culture and their sense of community will be respected, not as some kind of little protected minority, but as part and parcel of the nature of South African

life and society. And encouraging them to feel that they can stay here and make a home here. And telling them that, hopefully, many of their children will come back.

That's been pleasurable for me. What I found a bit sharp at many of the early meetings, was that the only question that would be asked was: Why did Mandela hug Yasser Arafat? This could be on a panel on culture, where there were Jews and non-Jews on the panel. We wanted to deal with cultural policy in South Africa and the future of religiously based schools, or anything, and all you got was that question. But fortunately that question isn't asked any more. It's partly that Arafat is shaking hands with Israeli leaders and partly because people are getting to know Mandela better, and to appreciate the way he's tried to make all South Africans feel South African and at home here. But I speak to many groups, you know, not only or specifically to Jewish groups.

You'd laughed at the article you'd read as a child about 'Jew reaches North Pole'. To what extent do you feel you are being treated as the Jew who, if not having reached the North Pole, is the Jew who is in the ANC?

Well, I've formally resigned from the ANC now that I'm a judge, as it's not appropriate to belong to a political party. But when I was a member I had no problems about being a Jew in the ANC. On a couple of occasions I addressed the Jewish Board of Deputies. I attended the annual conference in 1993 in Johannesburg where Mandela spoke. I took part in the panel discussion afterwards. And I was happy to fulfil that role. I made it plain that I wasn't a representative of the Jewish community in the ANC. I didn't see myself as that and didn't want to be that. I wasn't 'their person', as it were, in high ANC circles or vice versa; I wasn't an ANC person in the Jewish community. I was Albie who'd been with the ANC for many decades and who was a Jew. And if the fact that I was a Jew made it easier for me to establish communication and a two-way flow of ideas, so much the better.

I want to ask you a bit about your prison experience, especially your understanding of courage and heroism, and the way you have written about these issues.

Jail Diary became known and had a certain initial success as literature. I was thrilled when it was made into a setwork for schoolkids in England. I was flattered by that. When the Royal Shakespeare Company asked David Edgar to dramatise it he actually used bits of *Stephanie on Trial* as well, and gave the ending a rather downbeat character that was taken from *Stephanie on Trial*. In a way, both books deal with heroism and the limits of heroism and the dangers of heroism. That crops up a little again in *The Soft Vengeance*. I think these ideas of role models and pushing yourself to an extreme in terms of how you ought to behave, and how you expect others to behave can actually be damaging to a person and to a movement. The fact is in *Jail Diary* I held out, but only barely, in

the sense of not ever making a statement. I was close to it. In *Stephanie on Trial* I was subjected to sleep deprivation. And I felt myself going, going, going, so I made a statement. It was a controlled statement. It protected others. It gave very little away, but morally it was a terrible defeat. And then I was saved by a court action that was brought where I had managed to smuggle a note out, so they were restrained from further interrogation of myself and others. When I got to England I tried to explain to people in the Movement that you can't expect detainees to hold out forever. It's dangerous and it may be better to tell them: Hold out for seventy-two hours or something that's achievable and then if necessary talk. Everybody must work on that assumption. Rather than just say: No statement ever to anybody under any circumstances. That was an extremely painful, humiliating, crushing kind of experience. And the attempt was to win back a little bit of dignity and a little bit of succour and strength, which in a way was done through the personal story of Stephanie and myself and the love that we had for each other. But it was just like hanging on to the raft, you know, it wasn't a real revival of courage.

In* Jail Diary *at a couple of points you describe yourself and your situation in quite Christian terms or metaphors. You talk about yourself 'carrying a cross' and you talk about yourself 'turning the other cheek' and I noticed you used that phrase earlier. I wonder if you could comment on that. Is it about Christian hegemony in our society, or are these metaphors that appeal to or resonate with you?

When I was in solitary confinement it was pretty severe. The only book I was allowed was the Bible, and that was for the first twenty-seven days. I'd never read the Bible as a book before. I'd read bits and pieces here and there. Now I read it from page one all the way through the Old Testament and I read the Gospels, and then I was able to get other literature so I kept it in reserve in case that was taken away from me. I was shocked by much of the Old Testament, by the basic tenor of it. I found it tribalistic. I found it filled with concepts of vengeance, and of a chosen race.

I didn't get much comfort from it. I found the passages in the Prophets very beautiful, and there were some very wonderful passages in the Song of Songs... And as a story it was immensely powerful and strong. I realised how much of the culture that we get through Western Europe has been influenced by the Bible in all sorts of ways. I did find, however, that the New Testament in philosophical terms was internationalist: it recognised everybody, 'neither Jew nor Gentile neither man nor woman', I forget the exact phrase. The whole philosophy and approach, the all-embracing one — even to a certain extent loving your enemy — was something that I found appealed to me as a person. I didn't accept the resurrection and the mystical aspects of Christ and the figure of Christ, that didn't get through to me at all. But I found the Sermon on the Mount very beautiful and appealing, in terms of its philosophy and approach. I don't know whether that affected my

subsequent writing all that much. I think it was more based on temperament and general outlook and what I'd already absorbed through general literature.

What was interesting was the dialogue that I had with Warrant Officer Snyman, where he felt that Providence had sent me to his jail so he could convert me to Christianity. I was only too happy to have someone to talk to. But he kept quoting from the Old Testament all the time.

Even the story of the Samaritan, you know, was given a harsh and unforgiving character. I thought it should be the story of the good Samaritan and he kept saying: 'The Samaritans were terrible people. They were like the Coloureds, a mixed breed, and look at all the problems they are creating. That's why the good Samaritan was an exception, you know, because we wouldn't speak about the good Samaritan if all the Samaritans were good.' That's all he could see, whereas to me the story was about the goodness that's to be found in everybody, amongst all people.

So I, the Jew, tended to rely much more on the philosophy of the Sermon on the Mount and he, the Christian, relied very much on the wanderings of the Jews in the desert with God blessing them and watching them, enabling them to wipe out their enemies. I didn't find all that attractive.

If one looks back, one wonders who wrote those stories and maybe there's another story to be told, about Solomon and this wonderful kingdom that was created that actually did embrace many nations and many cultures and many people. Maybe it was the zealots who attacked him for a kind of peaceful coexistence and loving their neighbours, who wanted this hard, tight 'We are the chosen race and to hell with the rest of the world' kind of thing to come through. I don't know.

One can see in the whole history of the Jews this double stream all the time. Instead of seeing the association with other cultures and peoples as assimilation and repudiation, one can see it as a broadening-out of the interchange, and an enrichment of world culture and Jewish culture.

It was a very curious relationship. He was the Warrant Officer in command or the Station Commander. He actually got on badly with the other police. He shouted at them all the time and he swore a hell of a lot. He even said to me once 'You'll never hear swearing in my prison', but I heard it all the time. And they didn't like him.

At one stage some of them even came to me to get me to be an informer against him. It was weird. So I think he enjoyed the chance to have someone he could speak to. I was literally, in every sense of the word, a captive audience. It was a very strange relationship ... I was very respectful to him and courteous.

I was only allowed to read the Bible, so he extended it by giving me a dictionary on the Bible. I think I got about as far as D. So he had stretched the rules a little bit. It was wonderful; it was an extra book. Maybe that was his justification for speaking to me. He definitely felt Providence had sent me to his prison.

Was your being Jewish an issue in prison at all? A number of people have reported anti-Semitic slurs as part of interrogation.

No, it never came out directly. I was treated with a funny kind of respect as an advocate — even when they were torturing me with sleep deprivation. I managed to maintain a certain dignity, fighting for respect all the way through. So there was none of that crude anti-Semitism, not even from [Theuns 'Rooi Rus'] Swanepoel[3] who was very crude and often violent. Where I did hear something of that kind was indirectly from Stephanie.

She was in prison in Barberton with five other white women and the warders there kept saying, 'It's so nice, Stephanie, having you here. At least one of the prisoners is not a Jew.' Stephanie didn't know if she should tell them that Esther Barsel was a Jew but the other four, none of them were Jews. And Stephanie said she didn't want to say, 'Look, they're not Jews', as if it's something terrible if they were Jews. But there was that simple assumption that if a white opposes apartheid he or she has to be a Jew. That equation was made in the minds of the warders.

You make mention of the value the writings of Julius Fucik, who was tortured and killed by the Nazis, had for you in prison. Something that has struck me in reading quite a lot of prison literature from all over the world including South Africa, is that the whole experience of Nazism in general, and the Holocaust in particular, often 'hangs' over any kind of expression of a desire for liberation. Very often one finds Jews used metaphorically to symbolise the prisoner because of that. Was Nazism something you remember thinking about in prison, or is it something that has informed your thinking?

Julius Fucik wrote a record, *Notes from the Gallows*. He was executed after terrible tortures. It's a very beautiful book. It meant so much to us at that stage and if I read it now I'm scared I'd find it full of platitudes. We don't accept full-blooded heroes any more. Everything has about ten sides. This was a case of very individualised resistance by a person, writing in his own name, subjectively, about the experience. So one would identify with that. The Holocaust was a whole different sort of thing: people being wiped out. It wasn't resistance. One might identify with the resignation of people who didn't have a chance and who were gassed and who died. But that would be a terrible form of identification when you're trying to hold out. This point came to me at a much later stage in life. In 1968 Stephanie and I went on our first holiday together. We drove down to Yugoslavia and on the way back we

3 Swanepoel is a notorious former security policeman. Allister Sparks, in *The Mind of South Africa* (New York, Ballantine Books, 1990), notes that he is more recently overtly identified with the far right wing in the form of the Conservative Party and the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging. Mac Maharaj and other prominent one-time ANC detainees were tortured by Swanepoel.

came through Prague. It was just before the Russian invasion. And one of the things that Stephanie and I did was to visit the Jewish cemetery. I remember going in there and being quite struck because it's physically higher than the surrounding land. Because to bury the Jews over the centuries they'd had to create almost a little hill of the bodies.

The walk was quaint and a little poignant. Then we came to two tiny synagogues. One was filled with embroidered hangings. The other just had names. The names were of, I think, seventy thousand Prague Jews slaughtered in the gas chambers. They're just there in alphabetical order: born this year, died that year. We saw the names of children: born '39, died '44; born '41, died '44; and so on. And that was very affecting. But more affecting for me was the other little one with all the hangings.

The guide had said: 'This was a museum that the Nazis put up intended to show the relics of an extinct race.' And I just broke down.

I went back to where we were staying and I cried and cried and cried. Stephanie was distressed. She'd never seen me quite like that. She said: 'Well it's not special for you. Anybody feels the horror of it.' And I said, 'No, Stephanie, I feel it. Not only did I lose large sections of my family, but I was also part of those destined for that. I belonged to that group that was destined for permanent extinction. And I feel it in that kind of a way.' I don't know if she fully accepted my argument, and it came out in a very emotional way at that particular moment, in that particular context.

At the same time, I get distressed when I see the Holocaust brought into every kind of debate about everything, all the time. I see it being used as a pretext or reason or justification for not taking a stand against apartheid; not taking a stand against injustice elsewhere in the world, and as a justification for state actions that are totally unacceptable. To me that diminishes the Holocaust. And this idea of the uniqueness: suffering was never unique. It maybe takes on dimensions that are really special, it can have a unique intensity. But suffering is suffering, persecution is persecution, racism is racism, injustice is injustice. It's happened elsewhere in the world. It's happening in the world that there are other exterminations. I find myself unhappy at the attempt to appropriate the Holocaust, and to convert it into a weapon that's used in a way that doesn't increase sensitivity, and increase a sense of destiny: why we are on this earth and what does it mean. Rather it is used to narrow the imagination, and to justify intolerance rather than tolerance. It's not respectful for those who died; it diminishes the ghastliness of their experience.

Did any of that history of Jewish oppression affect your family background or culture?

I think it contributed to the feeling that you didn't belong to the master race, you weren't part of a natural establishment. There was a sensitivity to

suffering, to discrimination, an ability to understand what it's like for people who are having assumptions made about their patterns of behaviour, about their life styles, and about who they are. I'm sure that was all facilitated by the Jewish background. So, yes, from that point of view, a broader sensitivity to discrimination and suffering and exclusion would have come through. But not through an organised sense of saying: 'We are Jews. We've been discriminated against, we've suffered.' It's more through the fact that you didn't automatically regard yourself as part of the ruling elite in the country where you were, in the school where you were, or the society in which you lived.

What was life like in exile?

There were very different years. The person is the same, but the experience of living in England is totally different from living in Mozambique. But totally. I can recall very vividly the first few weeks in England. The sense of physical relief was just enormous. I would go to sleep and know I'd wake up, do what I wanted to do the next day without the fear of a raid, being picked up, detained, having my courage challenged again. I can recall lying on Hampstead Heath up on Parliament Hill, and looking at the kites flying overhead and they seemed so peaceful. And it symbolised that sense of peace.

I had also a very strange reaction to the cathedrals that I looked at and visited and toured. I couldn't bear the fact that they were five or six hundred years old, and that they'd withstood time and change and transformation and the civil war in England. It seemed to make all our efforts in South Africa seem very petty and I almost wanted to blow up those cathedrals and to destroy their timeless character. I almost couldn't bear it and the implications of it. I wanted that sense of mobility and change to be acknowledged physically in buildings and everything. That was all at the beginning. I obviously must've been quite disturbed — not disturbed but, you know, the impact of the years of living under extreme tension was quite profound. I took sleeping pills for a long time. I certainly used to go to the doctor a lot with backaches and all sorts of pains. Since I'm back in South Africa I don't have a GP. I hardly get headaches and I think happiness is the greatest pill and restorer and medication.

I did a PhD. It was published as *Justice in South Africa*. I did a fair amount of broadcasting for radio. A little bit on TV. I was quite active in English intellectual life in a certain way. I taught at Southampton University for six years. Southampton University was a totally different existence. I would go down for three and a half days a week. I found that a much lighter load than looking after two children for the other three and a half days a week. I did my writing on sexism in the law. I wrote between 11.00 pm and about 1.00 am or 2.00 am, when the children were asleep and I was on my own for a little bit. That required immense discipline and belief in the importance of the subject.

It was the only theme in England that really reached me as powerfully as the South African struggle against apartheid had done. There were lots of other issues but it was only sexism that was quite profound for me and baffled me and worried me and entered into my life.

Where did that come from? What was that concern a consequence of?

There was a current in the Movement that I grew up in that was feminist. It was associated with the Soviet Union. The women fighter pilots and so on were seen as one of the glories of the Soviet Union. So it was to a small extent from that sense of ideological identification. My mother was an independent person in terms of her life. And her friends, like Lissy, Lily, Cynthia, Pauline [Podbrey], were women who gave each other a lot of support, filled the house with laughter and talk. They attacked life, they enjoyed life. They weren't subordinate. They didn't see their role as being to look after men. So I grew up in a milieu where it was natural to see women who were active and independent, and making decisions about their lives. And to see men relating to them, accepting that as something normal. So I'm sure all that helped.

Mozambique was a totally different experience. It was another continent, another universe. It was Africa. It was poor, under-developed. Enormous problems had emerged, which you can't understand unless you've lived through them. The problems had problems behind them. You can't isolate an issue, because to deal with it you come up against other problems. Mozambique had an enormous vivacity, the human contact was tremendous. The optimism was great in the early years and I needed that. It restored my courage. As the plane landed it was a combination of the light, the flag, the colours, the sense of triumph that for the first time a resistance movement that had fought for its independence against colonial-type oppression had won in the area that I knew, in our part of the world. And the warmth, the enthusiasm, the lightness in people's faces, the optimism, captivated me completely. Progressive ideas, people from all over the world speaking many different languages — all that captivated me. I knew I wanted to live and work there.

One of the first things that struck me and enthralled me was seeing one of the Frelimo soldiers, probably with an AK-47, standing guard. These are complicated things to describe. Having lived in South Africa for so long where guns were always in the hands of the oppressor, and represented their power and all the arrogance and racism that went with it, to see a gun in the hand of somebody who fought for freedom and was now in charge was extremely liberatory for me. Philosophically I'm as close to being a pacifist as you can be. I've never carried a gun since about standard nine in school when I used to take part in the shooting competitions, and I actually once got a fifty out of fifty which I took home and kept for years afterwards. I've never carried a gun since then. I don't want to carry a gun. So there was no thrill in

the sense of the armament, but in the sense of the liberation that was involved.

I might say when I left Mozambique eleven or twelve years later, I saw the guns around me and I didn't have the same feeling at all. There were just too many guns, there was too much killing. There was too much uncontrolled power. So far from AK-47s giving me a thrill and a sense of liberation, it just gave me a sense of dismay that the war never ends and the killing never stops.

The debates and the discussions were about everything: about culture, about art, about politics, history, the world scene, about Africa, about under-development. I'm sure I had more interesting intellectual discussions in Mozambique than I've ever had anywhere else in the world. That includes South Africa before I went into exile. It certainly includes England, it includes the United States. They were interesting because they were real. Every single idea I had I felt was challenged, and my whole relationship to knowledge, to history, to people, was different. The law school had an enormous influx of students. I think they set up a law faculty and a veterinary science faculty just after independence. Or at the time of independence. These were people of all ages, all backgrounds, and now was their chance to study. So you had a very polyglot group in terms of appearance and age. It was a tremendous atmosphere. In personal terms it was quite important. I wrote afterwards that even when I was happy in England, I was a bit unhappy. Even when I was deeply unhappy in Mozambique, I was very happy. My whole relationship was just totally different: my role, my connection with the society, with the people, my sense of being alive; I got my courage back, my vitality, my enthusiasm, and my optimism. And I was lofted by the optimism. And when Mozambique went down I went down with it. So I had this huge range of emotions, from total delight and happiness and confidence and then slowly the crash down, down, down. Crushed physically. To a certain extent crushed morally.

I was now on my own again. Stephanie and I had a terrible year that last year where we were just tearing each other to bits in all sorts of ways, causing each other immense pain. And we had a bitter period during the actual divorce for a few months. I think maybe when you split up it's better that you are bitter for a little while. It's more real. And then we started getting on quite well. Now we give each other a lot of support. Real, meaningful support in all sorts of different ways, so it has worked out well.

Where were your children?

Our kids were with her. They would come and visit me. I became like a holiday dad, in Mozambique, or I would go to England and then take them on a speaking tour in the United States, which was the only way I could pay to have a holiday. I spent my holiday giving lectures so that I could have a holiday. But travelling around the States was fun. They enjoyed it. And sometimes I would spend a week or two with them first, and then do the

speaking and then go back to Mozambique. Laden with all the possible goods that one can carry. And I must say I loved going to the consumer society. It would be just once a year. You know, for the rest of the year I was in a society that was not a consumer society. Just to walk in a big department store and see the lights and the soft carpeting and the beautiful presentation and packaging, gave me a thrill. It was quite a nice balance. I'd gone to Mozambique to get away from that partly, I couldn't stand it. So the annual expedition became one where you would buy all your favourite things, and things for your work and things for your friends that they really needed, usually for their work.

Frelimo had immense prestige at the beginning. Everybody wanted to claim that they knew somebody who lived next door to somebody who was the sister-in-law of somebody who had fought in the armed struggle. By the time I left nobody wanted to know anything about the former war veterans. They were seen as corrupt, inefficient, living in the past. It was one of the most sad and poignant and disappointing experiences of my life.

Whatever happens here, we mustn't end up with the people who went to jail, people who were in the underground, people who went into exile – they don't have to be important, they don't have to be rich, they don't have to be powerful, they don't even have to be honoured – but they mustn't be remembered in a shameful kind of way. Whatever happens in this country we mustn't mess things up. Or succumb to the pressures in a way that's going to make people forget the courage and dedication, the commitment, that went into achieving democracy. I saw that happening in Mozambique. I think the fundamental flaw was they established what they call 'people's power', and 'people's power' meant that you had an immense upsurge of energy – concerted energy directed towards solving problems of health and education, of human relationships – but you repressed the enemy. There was no scope for the enemy. The enemy fled but didn't give up. It came back with foreign arms, foreign support. First from South Africa, then when Reagan came into office, from the United States as well. Because there wasn't scope for political opposition within the political structure, what could've been simply a political battle became a civil war. The civil war generates its own conflicts and destroys the countryside and the rural society, and then you get thousands of homeless people who get picked up in the different armies, and banditry develops. The process has its own self-perpetuating momentum. One of the Mozambican leaders said to me, some years later, 'Albie, we made a big mistake. We felt there was only the workers, the peasants and the leadership. We felt all other social strata had to be eliminated, not physically but as strata.' He said that it was a terrible mistake, 'Especially in Africa. You have a multiplicity of social forms and formations where, in order to achieve a new nation state, you need all the different organic modes to develop inside society itself.' He didn't use the words 'pluralism in civil society' but that was what he was getting at. This was a very sharp lesson for me. That is one reason why ever since I've come back

here, in my writing and elsewhere, I've pushed very heavily for the importance of pluralism. That was our big shift in South Africa in our thinking. Pluralism was always in the Freedom Charter, it was never excluded. But in the hard years of oppression and the armed struggle, the concept of people's power was projected very much. And the whole issue of pluralism was left open. In the late — or middle — 1980s Oliver Tambo reaffirmed a multiparty state and political pluralism. That became even stronger afterwards. One of my jobs as a lawyer was to develop the concept of the Bill of Rights, and what pluralism would mean in terms of the Constitution. One reason I could do that wholeheartedly was because of our negative experiences in Mozambique. In the attempt to create what was called 'national unity' all sorts of modes of popular and diverse expression were more or less contained and suppressed. You didn't get national unity, you got conflict, you got sullenness, you got people going their own ways, quiet sabotage, all different forms of non-co-operation with the major social project. So that was a very important lesson.

On the other hand, in the cultural domain I thought they were way ahead of us in South Africa. In some ways they still are. The whole problem of Eurocentred/Afrocentred culture — they never posed the question like that. They saw things as people-centred. The people of Mozambique had different cultures and origins: they all contributed. They weren't part of Portugal and they didn't take their culture from Portugal, they took their culture from Mozambique. But as Mozambicans of diverse origins, each contributed the roots to the tree that now represented the overall culture. A lot was done through doing — through the dance-school, through painters, through sculptors, through writers — rather than theorising and going in for the metaphysics. So they achieved quite a lively cultural development there.

Whenever I go back to Mozambique I have a very special emotion because I had such powerful feelings there. I loved. I became more jealous than I've ever been in my life, obsessionally so. I felt despair and loneliness. I had the immense joy of being part of a revolutionary upsurge. I've told some of my friends here in South Africa that I feel sad for them because they never had their revolution.

There's a story that I have told several times. My second detention really crushed me in South Africa. The sleep deprivation and the fact that I made a statement even though I did manage to contain it. It was a terrible humiliation. When I went to England I was hoping that love and marriage and companionship would restore my morale. But it doesn't work that way. You can't get your courage back through another person. I remember being at meetings and more meetings in England. We would be in draughty little halls and we would get up and the seats would clatter down, and there always seemed to be broken window panes and we were always shivering a little bit. And we would sing the anthem at the end and everybody would raise their right hands, in clenched-fist form, and sing *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika*, except me. I

couldn't raise my arm because I couldn't feel it. I just felt so sad inside me. So I would sing the song, and it must've been very weird to the others. I just didn't raise my arm. I couldn't until I believed in it. I went to Mozambique, this was on my first visit, and it was the anniversary of the armed struggle day. There must've been sixty thousand people in the football stadium. I saw Samora [Machel] for the first time. And I heard him shouting the 'Vivas!' and singing and addressing everybody, and my friend translated for me. He said: [sings] 'And long live, viva the just struggle of the oppressed people!' And sixty thousand arms shot up in the air and one of them was mine. And it wasn't a decision that I took, it wasn't an option or a mental choice. It was just happiness and confidence. And of course some years later that arm that had shot up into the air was blown up in Mozambique, and I lost it there again. But cutting off my shattered arm saved my life. And so I have a very strong, romantic, warm feeling for Mozambicans. When I came back afterwards I kept bumping into people who had saved my life. Half of Maputo claims that they saved my life.

In the speech you gave at Ruth First's funeral you spoke about her being a white in a black struggle, and being middle-class in the working-class struggle, and other contradictions. I wonder if it was ever a contradiction for you (or other Jews in the ANC) being a Jew in a primarily non-Jewish struggle. Was this something that made any difference to your life in any way?

No. I think what was, in fact, important was that many of us who would have called ourselves non-believers — atheists, agnostics or whatever — were in a struggle where religion was actually quite powerful. That got stronger and weaker at different times. I remember an incident after hearing a speaker on the Grand Parade in the early 1950s. His name was Johnson Ngwevela and he was the interpreter for Sam Kahn. It was well known that Johnson Ngwevela had been an active member of the Communist Party before it was banned. He had spoken on the Grand Parade about Moses and the Red Sea opening up and God's guiding hand.

I said to him afterwards that I was a little bit surprised that he should quote from the Bible. And he said: 'Comrade Albie, we fight for the Kingdom of Heaven on earth, but there's another side to nature and to ourselves that I get from the Bible and that I get from religion that I don't get from politics.' And I was impressed by that because he was a person of total honesty and integrity. I never asked such a stupid question — I see it now as a stupid question — again. One never felt an oppressive Christian-type culture. And one had people like Yusuf Dadoo from a Muslim background. I remember Indres Naidoo being pleased at the acknowledgement when Hindu rites were done at the burial of an MK comrade of Indian descent. All these things were natural in the Movement. I don't think we ever had rabbis who were chaplains. I don't know if people in prison were ever visited by rabbis; I

think they were. I think they appreciated it, I think it was a natural thing. I think they would've not felt very comfortable to be visited by a Christian minister, even though some of the Christian ministers were non-denominational in their philosophy and outlook. Maybe some of them did have good contact with Methodists and Anglicans and so on as well, but on a philosophical level rather than on a religious level. I never felt it as a problem. I never encountered anti-Semitism, directly or indirectly. I never sensed it as an issue. There have been a couple of incidents recently in Cape Town . . . but it was never an issue during the years of exile or in the underground in the ANC.

Did it make a difference in a positive sense? The previous Ambassador from Israel, Alon Liel, who has just ended his term in South Africa, said that he believes one of the many reasons that Israel is enjoying a better relationship with South Africa than might have been expected, is the fact that so many of the whites who were and are involved in the ANC are Jews. And that amongst the ANC there was an acknowledgement and a respect of that.

I wouldn't put it quite like that. Having Jews in the ANC didn't in itself create a pro-Israel sentiment, but it minimised the possibilities of anti-Semitism stemming from a critique of Israeli policy on the one hand, or a broad popular anti-Semitism being projected on to Israel on the other hand. I would say it might have worked more in that way.

Did you ever feel any sort of compulsion — compulsion might be too strong a word — to comment on Israel-South Africa relations or Israel's treatment of the Palestinians?

No, I learned very early on that discussions like that, as far as I was concerned, got nowhere. People got intensely emotional. We would just start shouting at each other. I found it painful and unproductive and I decided just to focus on South Africa. I would disengage rather than engage. I had many friends in the United States, Jews who were strongly for the Peace Movement, and strongly encouraged meetings between Israelis and Palestinians. Some had direct connections with the PLO. Others were involved with exposing human rights abuses in the West Bank. But I tended not to get involved in those sectors: my focus was South Africa. That was where I wanted to fight. I didn't want to confuse or submerge the one issue in the other. So, far from feeling a need to comment on it, I rather tended to keep quiet on the subject.

Do you have any other comments about either Israel or the Jewish community in South Africa?

What I didn't record was that when one dealt with Israeli foreign policy it wasn't just about the rights of the Palestinians. In relation to South Africa, the

Israelis violated the arms embargo. They violated other forms of isolation. They trained Inkatha paramilitary people. They were involved in nuclear collaboration. They probably trained commandos. And sometimes I thought maybe the units that were involved in the attack on me could have directly or indirectly had Israeli training.

They created a whole aggressive pre-emptive strike mentality that was propitious for the historic anti-Semites in Pretoria. Pretoria loved it and hoped to be able to copy their example. All of that meant that Israel, as a state, turned itself into the enemy of the liberation struggle in South Africa. It identified very much with the whites who felt beleaguered and who defended racist policies. After the fall of the Likud government that changed fairly drastically. And I understand even beforehand there were divisions on the question of apartheid and co-operation with South Africa. In the context of the anti-apartheid struggle it wasn't easy to think objectively about Israel, about where it came from and what it was all about, and why it had special meaning for many Jews in many parts of the world. Perhaps now emotions will be normalised and there will be more understanding all around.

As far as the Jewish community in South Africa is concerned, I see three different ingredients. One is a certain measure of idealism that is part and parcel of Jewish culture all over the world, and that responds positively to the democracy we've achieved; that is enthusiastic about the changes. Secondly, Jews in South Africa are strongly community-orientated and organised. And then, thirdly, there are Jews as whites, part of the white community. And when I see them, when I see you, us, I'm seeing whites, not specifically Jews. With the fears and the hopes and the anxieties that the white community generally has, and some of the racism that whites generally have.

How do you feel about your new position on the Constitutional Court?

I can't wait to get fully involved in the work of the Court. I think it's intellectually, professionally, and from the human rights point of view, the most exciting work that one could have at this stage. It's a completely new Court. Its composition is fresh and new. The project that we have is completely different from anything we've done in South Africa before. Thinking about the people who are on the Court, there is a lot of expertise, human experience and brains there. A willingness to be open and to discuss issues. I think it's going to be an outstanding Court, I really do. I think it's going to be a real plus with the legal community, it's going to produce good judgments. I've been optimistic about many things, and sometimes with reason and sometimes I've been disappointed. But here I feel pretty confident it's going to work out. And maybe I'll see a headline somewhere: Jew reaches the Constitutional Court.

ROWLEY ISRAEL ARENSTEIN

'I didn't refuse to help anybody who was charged under the reactionary laws of South Africa.'

Born in Ermelo, Transvaal in July 1918 ('the same month and the same year as Mandela'), Rowley Arenstein was one of five children. 'I was christened (or whatever you like to call it), Israel Arenstein, but my father, Isaac Arenstein, was called Issy, and I would also have been called Issy which would have confused the two. So my mother took the 'rael', r-a-e-l, and called me Rowley, and afterwards my name was officially made into Rowley, so my names are Rowley Israel Arenstein.'

Arenstein's conversion to Marxism occurred shortly after his arrival in Johannesburg to study law, and his faith in his new faith remained constant throughout his political wanderings. He joined the Communist Party of South Africa in 1938. The Party sent him to Durban to help organise the sugar workers, and he remained there until his death. In 1944 he joined the Sixth Brigade and was posted to Italy. In 1947, after his return to South Africa, he was admitted to the side-bar, and practised as an attorney in Durban, doing much political work. From 1953-55 he was banned under the Suppression of Communism Act. During the fifties Arenstein worked closely with the South African Congress of Trade Unions (Sactu) and the African National Congress (ANC). He was also legal adviser to Chief Albert Luthuli, President of the ANC. Arenstein was detained during the 1960 State of Emergency but, following a Supreme Court application, was released again. He then went underground for several months. After the Pondo uprising in late 1960, Arenstein became attorney for the Pondo movement, although banning orders limited his movements. In 1962 these orders were made more restrictive, and he remained under effective house arrest until 1980. In 1964 he defended Billy Nair in the 'Natal version' of the Rivonia trials. He was detained without trial, eventually charged, and found not guilty. In July 1966 he was again arrested, and sentenced to four years' imprisonment. While in prison in Pretoria Local (the white politicals had a special section there), Arenstein was struck off the roll of attorneys because he was a communist. He was released in 1970 and immediately banned again. These banning orders were renewed in 1975, 1980, and 1983. In 1986, after being banned for thirty-

Left:
Rowley Arenstein, 4 April 1996

three years, the restrictions were finally allowed to lapse. Arenstein thus has the 'distinction' of being served the longest banning order in the history of apartheid.

Unorthodox even in his Marxism, Rowley was expelled from the SACP not long after Umkhonto we Sizwe was created, because he opposed the armed struggle as being an irrelevant deviation from the work of organising a mass-based democratic movement. At the time of the Sino-Russian split he sided with the Maoists, thus further distancing himself from the SACP. From 1983, Arenstein — still calling himself a Marxist — was legal adviser to Chief Buthelezi. He grew increasingly close to Inkatha, and identified himself with Inkatha's stance on the need to grant ethnic/national groupings some degree of control over their affairs. He played an advisory role in ANC-Inkatha negotiations and, at age 78, was still practising law in Durban ('I've got to make up for all the time I was banned').

In 1943 Rowley married Jackie Lax, an activist in her own right, who was banned for fifteen years and kept under house arrest. They had two children, one of whom, Bess, is head of Lawyers for Human Rights in Durban. The other, Jenny, is a practising attorney in Johannesburg.

Rowley Arenstein died on 4 May 1996, and was buried in Redhill Jewish Cemetery in Durban.

His interview is in many ways a rambling history lesson where the personal and the political are inextricably woven together, as they were in his life.[1]

Interviewed by Immanuel Suttner
30 and 31 July, and 1 August 1995
Durban

My father grew up in a ghetto, a place called Krook in Lithuania. When he was seventeen he was told he must come to South Africa, there are opportunities there. He had to cross the border illegally, into Germany. This was about 1905, at that time there was no difficulty, anybody could cross into Germany, and then he worked his way to England where he managed to get a deck passage to South Africa. He arrived in South Africa, and then somebody told him, 'Come to Ermelo, the prospects are good in Ermelo.' Ermelo was the biggest town in the eastern Transvaal. It wasn't a really posh place at all but it had a high school, primary school, junior school, and later on it had a convent. So he settled in this place called Ermelo. That's where I was born.

My mother was different. She came from a Menshevik family. Her older sisters were members of the Menshevik Party in the Ukraine, but she was too

1 Much of the information in this capsule biography comes from Sheila Gastrow's book, *Who's Who in South African Politics*.

young to join, so she remembers taking food and things to her sisters who were jailed for Menshevik activities. Her uncle went to London and settled there. Subsequently my maternal grandfather, who was a rabbi, decided to follow him. When my grandfather arrived in London he found that his son's name had become Silver, but they had had a very long Russian name, so he said to his son, 'How can you have a name like Silver?' His son said, 'I got tired of it, writing out the name, nobody could pronounce it, nobody could understand it, so I took a simple name like Silver.' Then my grandfather also became Silver. He was the Reverend Silver. That was my mother's father. He came to South Africa as Silver. My mother's first name was Bess.

She arrived in Cape Town where she met my father. They got married in Cape Town and he brought her to Ermelo. Ermelo at that time had a fairly large Jewish community. And she was shocked. She said to the Jewish community, 'How can you treat blacks as you do? It's equivalent to anti-Semitism.' That was her attitude. And the first thing she taught us was that you never discriminate against anybody. You treat everybody equally, whether they are Africans, Indians, or whites.

On Saturdays I went to *cheyder* where they used to teach us Hebrew and prepare us for our bar mitzvahs. We had a very keen Jewish rabbi who taught us the history of the Jews, and one of the things that shocked me completely was what happened in Catholic Europe, the inquisition, where Jews were tortured to become Christians. Many of them succumbed, but some became secret Jews, the Marranos. They were resisting. And right from the beginning I learned that one must resist what is wrong. One can't just sit back . . .

At *cheyder* they taught us how we mustn't violate the Sabbath. My father, the treasurer of the shul, had to work on Saturdays. So one day I went to my mother and said, 'Dad is working but I'm being taught that we mustn't violate the Sabbath.' She said, 'One day, two thousand years ago, a Roman soldier went to a rabbi in Palestine and said, "If I stand on one foot can you tell me the whole of the Jewish religion?" and this rabbi [ed: Shamai] was a short-tempered person and said, "Don't waste my time." Then this soldier went to another rabbi called Hillel and said, "If I stand on one foot can you tell me what the whole of the Jewish religion is about?" and Hillel said, "Do unto others as you expect them to do unto you. That is the essence of the Jewish religion. The rest is commentary." ' That's what my mother said to me. That is something I never forgot.

Did she shape your values more than your father?

Well, no. My father was a very honest person, in many ways a wonderful person. When I was in jail he looked after my family. Whenever I was in need he was there to help me. My mother taught me social consciousness. I'll never forget the influence she had on my life. My father taught me, you look after your family.

Your mother seems to have been quite a humanist, and applied her values in a very non-particularist manner. Where did she get that from?

Her sisters grew up in the Ukraine and they were Mensheviks, not Bolsheviks. You know, Mensheviks were socialists, but of the moderate kind. She learned from her sisters about socialism and how to treat people. So when she came to South Africa she still had the socialist Menshevik outlook.

You say your maternal grandfather was a rabbi, and the children were already Mensheviks, so where did they make the transition?

My grandfather was not interested in politics, but his daughters were. They always treated him with the greatest of respect. They understood him. He came to South Africa too, and was the rabbi in Reitz for a very long time. And he used to visit us regularly.

In *cheyder* our rabbi used to take the Bible and read the comments of people like Rambam (Maimonides) and others. We were taught, you can't say man is just man. From an early date I learned that man was not just an individual, but a social man. Without society he was nothing. So, that taught me that one must fight for the rights of people.

You got that directly from Maimonides?

Well, I got it generally, but I also got it from Maimonides. Maimonides was one of the two commentaries we used to learn in *cheyder*. I didn't quite get the significance then, but afterwards I put two and two together.

Did you ever study the Talmud as a child?

I grew up in a Jewish atmosphere. I went to *cheyder* of course, and there I studied. We had a very good rabbi in Ermelo. So I grew up as a good bar mitzvah *bocher*. We were always told about the wisdom of Solomon. And of course we studied the Bible. Oh yes, that the world was created in seven days . . . All that was part and parcel of our lives. Because we were going to become bar mitzvah *bochers*. We had to know things . . .

There were five of us. Four boys and one girl. The girl is in London. My oldest brother became a doctor. My father sent him to Ireland to become a doctor, because he heard that in Ireland there were very good medical schools. But my grandfather said . . . he'll come home with a shikse. Which he did. But she wanted to convert to Judaism. Now my oldest brother was a very honest person. He said to my father under no circumstances will I allow her to be converted to Judaism because when I married her in Ireland her mother said if you make her a Jewess then her soul will for ever be burnt in hell, and my brother promised the parents of his wife that he would never allow her to become a Jewess.

Tell me about Ermelo.

The Africans had quite a big township called New Ermelo. Sometimes I used to take my bicycle and ride out there. We also had a big Indian community. I remember once the National Party, before they got into power, called for a boycott of Indian shops in Ermelo. The biggest Indian shop was a place called Dendars, and they used to give the farmers a lot of credit. The Nationalists called for a boycott of Indian shops but the farmers still went to Dendars because they couldn't get credit anywhere else. Dendars used to say to them, you can buy what you like, when you reap your crops you can come and pay us. So the boycott failed completely. And I remember my mother telling me you must look at the economics of things. She showed me how that boycott failed because there was an important economic factor which was ignored. She also said it was quite wrong. She used to say to the Jewish community, 'How can we discriminate? It's the equivalent of anti-Semitism.' Many, many years later when the Jewish community heard that I'd joined the Communist Party, you know what they said? 'With a mother like that what would you expect?'

Neither my father nor mother was really religious. My father was the treasurer of the shul. He used to go to shul regularly, every Friday night and all the main holidays – Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Paysach. Paysach we used to keep to the extent that we bought matzos that could keep us going for the whole eight days. We'd keep it traditionally, not more than that.

Did your parents speak Yiddish at home, or English?

Yiddish was their home language, and they did speak it, but never to us. My mother used to say to us, 'I don't want to confuse you.' But I could understand Yiddish. I'm always sorry she never spoke Yiddish to us.

Did they have Yiddish writers on their bookshelves ... Peretz, Mendely Mocher Sforim?

Oh yes, but English translations. She got them, she wanted us to read those books.

And Zionism ... ?

Yes. They thought 'You never know what can happen in South Africa, one day you might have to go to Israel.' So they were very interested in Israel and they contributed financially.

What do you recall of your schooling?

I'll tell you how I was introduced to politics. One day a little Jewish boy came

up to me and said, 'What are you?' I said, 'What do you mean, what am I?' He said, 'Are you a Nat or are you SAP, National Party or South African Party?'

At that time a lot of Jews were supporting the National Party. This was in 1928. So one day I said to him, 'What must I be?' He said, 'Nat.' That night I went to my father, and asked, 'What are you?' He said, 'What do you mean?' I said, 'Nat or SAP?' He said, 'SAP.' I said, 'That's the wrong party.' He showed me the difference between General Smuts, who was leading the South African Party, and Hertzog, who was leading the National Party. Hertzog was a Nationalist, wanted everything for South Africa, wasn't interested in the Empire. Smuts was interested in the Empire as well, you see. But many Jews felt at that time that the Nationalists were right because they were like the Jews fighting for Palestine. This continued until 1935 when the Nationalists became very sympathetic to Hitler and introduced an anti-Jewish clause. A Jew couldn't join the National Party — throughout South Africa.

There was Oswald Pirow and Robey Leibbrandt . . . the Ossewa Brandwag and the Greyshirts . . .

Yes, there were a lot of them who were very sympathetic to the Nazis. With this background, I went up to Johannesburg in 1938 to become an attorney. At that time, you could become an attorney by going to an advocate who used to give us lectures in law. And then we had to be articled for five years. My father payed 300 guineas to the attorney to get me articled. So I was working for Mr Rosenthal whose practice was mainly conveyancing, but for some reason or other he had clients called the Johannesburg Tramways Workers Union. Now at that time most of the tramway workers were whites, not blacks, and in many cases the white workers were quite militant, although they didn't care about the rights of black workers.

All the trade union headquarters were in Kerk Street at a place called Trades Hall. And sometimes my principal would give me letters: Take this over to Trades Hall for that trade union. And one day I noticed there was a bookshop called The People's Bookshop next to Trades Hall. I'd seen a review of a book called *Walls have Mouths.* A priest communist had gone to jail for some reason or other and he'd written about his experiences in jail. I thought, hell this must be an interesting book. So I walked into the bookshop — it was a communist bookshop, but I didn't know that at the time — and I said, 'How much is it?' Wulfson (the owner) said to me, 'You know, you can get that book for three shillings.' I said, 'For three shillings! How can I get a book that's 15 shillings for three shillings?' He said, 'You must join the Left Book Club.' Now the Left Book Club was started by [Victor] Gollancz in London and they had a book-a-month that you bought, and then you could buy other books from them cheaply. I've still got a couple of their books in my library. I had to pay 21 shillings, three shillings for a book for six months and an introductory fee

of another three shillings. And I became a member of the Left Book Club.

And this was all without your really knowing what it was about?

Ja, nothing. Then I read a book called *The Theory and Practice of Socialism* by Strachey. It was actually an explanation of Marxist thought. When I read that book I said, 'I've found what I've been looking for.' And I've never deviated from that. I became a Marxist. It was an instant conversion. But I had to spend many years learning and studying Marxism in all its aspects.

What had you been looking for?

Well, an explanation of what the world's all about. Poverty — where does poverty come from? How are we going to conquer poverty? I'd see Indians in Ermelo who were discriminated against but were wealthy, and Africans who were very poor. And I couldn't understand. Why was there poverty with all this wealth in South Africa? The book explained everything. What poverty was, how poverty came about. How we could conquer poverty. The final goal of Marxism is that we get to a stage where we won't produce for profit. We'll produce for use. What happens at the present moment with capitalism is everything is produced for profit. So people may be starving but if you can't make a profit you won't produce it. And Marx said that was wrong.

This was right back in 1938. And I said this is what I've been looking for. You see the Jewish religion also had something very similar — that was the coming of the Messiah. When the Messiah came, it was taught that all the people who had died would rise. The lion would lie down with the lamb. Everybody would be brothers. Nobody would exploit anybody else. This is what we were taught about the Messiah. And that seemed wonderful. Now Marxism, practically, was the Messiah coming. It fitted in with the basic teachings of my mother.

Another event which drew me closer to the Party was when Jabotinsky[2] came to speak in Johannesburg. This was before I converted to socialism. My father was a supporter of Weitzman. Once when Weitzman was speaking in Johannesburg, my father and my mother took me to listen to him. I was a Zionist in outlook until I read *The Theory and Practice of Socialism*. Jabotinsky was speaking at a place called the Plaza Cinema, in Kerk Street. So we went to see what was happening. We didn't agree with him, but after all he was the leader of the New Zionists, and we wanted to hear what he had to say. We couldn't get in. So we were walking away when we heard a helluva row and we turned around and got the shock of our lives. We found Jews fighting Jews in the middle of Johannesburg. The Jews who were fighting Jews were the

2 Jabotinsky was a leader of the right-wing Zionist revisionist movement. A brilliant writer and orator, Mussolini, speaking to the Chief Rabbi of Rome, said of him: 'The only person who knows how to make Zionism succeed is your fascist, Jabotinsky.'

Jewish Workers Club, from Doornfontein. Afterwards the police stepped in and there was quiet, and we went up to these Jewish chaps and said, 'How can Jews fight Jews?' They said, 'Those [supporters of Jabotinsky] are not Jews, they're fascists... We've come from Eastern Europe and you know how we're treated there, and unless we fight for the right things, we'll be treated the same.' This is how I got to know the Jewish Workers Club. The Jewish Workers Club [had a big] influence on us, because they were people who had come practically straight from Lithuania here. And they knew what anti-Semitism really meant, and they used to tell us what happened in Eastern Europe, and you felt that you couldn't just relax, you had to fight for the rights of everyone, including the Jews.

Did you get involved with the Club?

Ja. But then, you see, the Jewish Workers Club never joined the Communist Party, because they were scared that they would be deported.

So while their sympathies lay with the Communist Party, they didn't join it. There were three of us who had become friends, a chap called Solly Miller, Joe Braude and myself, and we went together to the Jabotinsky meeting I was telling you about.

We felt that we must do something. We started looking for the Communist Party. We couldn't find it anywhere, until one day Solly Miller came in, very excited, saying, 'I've found it.' I said, 'What do you mean, you've found it?' 'I've found the Communist Party.' We went to Doornfontein, and there was an old man called Cohen, very sickly, but he had a few people around him, and he was a member. So we graduated to the Communist Party because of Jews. I joined in 1937, might be 1938, and I became a leading member of the Party in Johannesburg. One day I got fed up with law. I thought, hell, what do attorneys do? Just make money. So I went to Ermelo and said to my father, 'Sorry, but I don't feel like I can become an attorney. They just make money, and I see all these people starving and I want to help them.' He was terribly upset. But when I told the Communist Party in Johannesburg that I was going to be a full-time person helping the workers, and that I wanted to give up law, they said, 'You're mad, we need lawyers.' So I had to go back to tell my father that the Communist Party had told me to continue. That's why I completed law.

Who were central figures in the Party then?

At that time, there was a very strong Jewish element in the working-class movement, in the Communist Party. In Johannesburg the central figure was a nan called Hymie Basmer. He was Jewish. He was an attorney with a large practice, but he devoted a lot of his practice to helping Africans in their struggle all over South Africa. There was Gesse Landman. She spoke

Russian fluently. Her family had originally come from Russia. She was slightly older than me, and she helped run the People's Bookshop, which was selling left literature. Then one day I met a woman whose real name was Hilda Schwartz, but she used to speak publicly under the name of Hilda Watts so that she wouldn't be dismissed.[3] I think she was working for Ackermans, and she was very prominent in the struggle against oppression. She taught me a lot. Then there was Fanny Klennerman who ran a bookshop called the Vanguard. I didn't know Eddie Roux very well. Bill Andrews I knew. He was a product of the white workers, but he came over to the Communist Party . . . I didn't have much to do with him. Oh yes, Buirski, I had a lot to do with Solomon Buirski. Buirski actually ran a factory. One day I met Buirski and he says, 'Hell, I've just been involved in a strike.' 'What happened?' 'Oh,' he said, 'I wasn't getting what I was supposed to get and I struck. And the employer gave in immediately.' You know who his employer was, his wife! He was working for his wife. He was a real character, Buirski. A very active Party member.[4] Other people prominent in the Struggle at that time were Solly Sachs and a chap called Archie Levitan.

Tell me about Solly Sachs and the Garment Workers Union.

Solly Sachs was running the Garment Workers Union, in Johannesburg. He was perhaps the cleverest trade unionist we ever had. He built a very powerful trade union amongst the poor garment workers. These were mainly white girls. And the Nats hated Solly Sachs. So one time they sent a man called Grobbelaar, I think his name was, to take over the Union and he started going to these girls and telling them, listen, this communist Jew Sachs, hell, you can't have a chap like that organising the Garment Workers Union. And then one day he made a declaration that he had the majority of the girls supporting him. So Solly Sachs challenged him. He said, 'Look, you say you've got the majority of the girls supporting you. I say I've got the majority of the girls supporting me. Let's test it. If the majority of the girls support you I will resign, give up all my work with the Garment Workers Union. But if the girls support me you must resign, otherwise you're just dividing the girls.' And this chap Grobbelaar didn't know what to do and accepted the challenge. This was in 1938 or '39. And then at the City Hall one day there was a huge crowd of girls. I managed to slip in. Sachs started. 'You remember getting so much, what are you getting now? You remember this was happening, what're you doing now? You remember . . .' and he went through all the

3 Hilda Schwartz married Rusty Bernstein, and as Hilda Bernstein published several books, including *The Rift*, *Death is Part of the Process*, *Steve Biko*, and *The World That Was Ours*. Rusty Bernstein was a COD and Communist Party member, a founder member of Umkhonto we Sizwe, and one of the Rivonia treason trialists.

4 For more anecdotes concerning Buirski and other early SACP members, see the interview with Ronnie Kasrils (p 273).

gains achieved under his leadership. And the girls were shouting, 'Good old Solly, good old Solly.'

Then this Afrikaner, Grobbelaar, got up and said, 'He is a communist, Jewish, a socialist.' And the girls shouted 'So what! So what!' And when it came to the vote Sachs won completely.

Every year the Trade Union Movement would hold a conference and the moment the conference opened Solly Sachs would be on his feet, saying 'On a special motion, I wish to be heard first.' And everybody would go: 'Solly, you say that every year.' But then he would win his point, and start an attack upon the highly skilled workers and their attitude, and put forward a working-class attitude. He was a fiery orator, very fiery.

A Jewish Jay Naidoo?

Oh, Jay Naidoo had nothing on him. As an orator there was nobody to touch him. He'd get up and . . . he'd just go off. The only time that the Nats got at him was in the 1950s when they banned him. And then they ordered him out of the Union and he took that on appeal, right up to the Appellate Division, and he argued the case himself. And the judge congratulated him on his ability to argue the case. He would have been a first-class lawyer. But they said sorry, there's nothing we can do, the law is the law. He went overseas, he said he's coming back one day, but he never did. He died overseas, in London. But he left a son, Albie.

Ray Alexander was another outstanding trade unionist. I have the greatest admiration for her. She was married to Jack Simons. Jack Simons wasn't Jewish, but Ray Alexander is. They went overseas. And when they were going overseas, Jack Simons asked me what I was going to do. I said, 'Whatever happens I'm staying here. I like it here.' He said to me, 'You're a very brave man.' Jack Simons led the Communist Party from 1938 to 1950, and he was the best leader that we ever had. Because he ran the party on completely democratic lines. Not 'I'm the leader of the Communist Party, you've got to listen to what I've got to say'.

When Ray Alexander was being interviewed for this book, the interviewer said to her, are you Jewish? And she said, no, I'm an internationalist.

[Laughs] You see, but I don't say that. Now there was a tradition in Johannesburg that at 8 o'clock on Sunday night the Communist Party took the platform. Before 8 o'clock there were various other small parties that used to address crowds. You used to just get on to a platform, and there were passers-by who'd listen. There was Issy Wolfson, who used to speak regularly for the Communist Party on the City Hall steps. He was one of their top speakers. There was a wonderful person called Max Joffe who was a doctor. One day I opened the newspaper and I saw some people had been evicted

from their homes. They were in the streets, they were starving, and there was a Dr Max Joffe who was running around helping them. And I became great friends with him. He was another person who influenced me into becoming a communist. He had quite a big practice among the Jewish community. But he had even a bigger practice amongst Coloureds and Africans. Max Joffe would treat anyone, whether they could pay or they couldn't pay. He made his money from the richer clients. The rich ones grumbled, but they went to him because he was good.

Were these all people who came from the Eastern European Bundist tradition?

The Bundist tradition was the Jewish Workers Club. Perhaps I should trace the beginnings of the local Communist Party. South Africa became an economic force when they found diamonds in Kimberley. Do you know that story about how Rhodes started buying up all the claims? And there was a competitor there, Barney Barnato. Also a Jewish immigrant. One day Rhodes went to Barney Barnato and said, 'Come we must join together', and Barney Barnato said, 'Why should I join with you?' Then Rhodes was supposed to have said to Barney Barnato, 'I'll get you membership in the Kimberley Club', you know, one of these exclusive clubs that wouldn't allow Jews in. So they became partners and Barney Barnato became a member of that club.

Most of the workers on the mines were skilled white workers. Skilled workers were always asking for higher wages and they were highly organised. A working-class movement started to develop in 1907.

By 1922, it had reached its height. It was for the white workers only. They issued a declaration in 1922 – Workers of the World Support the White Working Class. But still, although they thought along racial lines, they introduced a tradition of trade unionism, and a tradition of militancy. There was a big strike in 1913 which Smuts had to deal with. You know, Smuts was ruthless. That was the time he smashed that strike up, and one person called Jopie Fourie, he had him shot. The Afrikaners never let Smuts forget that. He'd come and address a meeting in Ermelo, and somebody'd jump up and say 'Wat van Jopie Fourie?'

Something like the Afrikaans equivalent of Biko.

That's right. And so Smuts never shot anybody else after that. But he was ruthless. He crushed the strike of 1913. And he crushed the strike of 1922. There were some communists who were involved in the 1922 strike and they were not happy about what happened with the African workers. One of them was a man called Bill Andrews.

Now the economy in South Africa, right up to 1932, was based on mines and big farms and very little else. Manufacturing started to develop about

1932. During the war years secondary industries sprang up everywhere because we couldn't import stuff. Now this affected the African working class. Before the war the attempt was always to push the African workers into their reserves, keeping only a very small group to work in the towns. But during the war the African workers poured into the towns to work in the war industries and nobody said a word.

After the war, General Smuts, now prime minister, suddenly found that all the Africans were in the towns. And illegally. What was he to do with them? So he set up the Fagan Commission to make recommendations. Fagan had himself been a minister of so-called Native Affairs in the 1930s, but he'd become a judge in the mean time. In 1948 Fagan said to Smuts, 'You can forget segregation. If you want segregation, want the workers out, you'll destroy the economy. Or you can keep your economy and forget about segregation. That's your choice.' Smuts said, 'Well, that's no choice.' And he accepted the Fagan Report. The Nats were still in opposition at the time, and they said, 'Smuts is crazy. You know this policy of integration, you know what's going to happen? One day the blacks will come and ask for the vote and then what will you do?' So the Nats took over in 1948 and tried to bring about what they called apartheid. They couldn't. They just couldn't do it, it flew in the face of economic realities. The first person to realise this was Vorster. He went so far and he stopped, he got a fright.

All this affected me very personally, you see, because later on I had a big fight with Joe Slovo and company. Because of my analysis of the situation, I opposed the armed struggle tooth and nail. But the Communist Party went in for it. And one of the communists came to me and said why are you opposing the Party line? I said, 'Is that the Party line? I was never involved in that decision.' You see, in the Communist Party you were supposed to accept the decisions of the Party provided you were given a platform to put your viewpoint forward. Then it's debated, then it's voted on. Once the vote is taken, whatever it is, you have to accept it. But first you must be given a chance to put your view forward. That's the Communist Party's democracy. And suddenly, out of the blue, they came forward with the so-called armed struggle. And I opposed it completely. I wrote them a letter, saying I can't accept this decision unless you agree to my being heard. They wouldn't let me, so I resigned. They refused to accept my resignation, but the next day they expelled me.

This was in the 1960s. I refused to flee. People were fleeing right and left but I refused to flee.

Why would people have fled if they'd been expelled from the Party? Why couldn't they have just carried on in other frameworks?

Ja, but you see, the Nats very often didn't accept expulsions as meaning you were no longer a danger to them. Look, I served four years in jail and I had

broken all ties with the CPSA. I still fought the National Party. I still fought apartheid. And I still said I was a communist. I never at any stage denied that I was a Marxist.

That cost me twenty years of my practice as an attorney. They passed a law in 1967 or 1968 that if you were a Marxist, or were listed as a communist, you couldn't practise law. And so they struck me off the roll. It's ironical that my father had always said to me, get a profession because they can't take it away from you.

How old were you when the war broke out?

I was twenty-one at the time. Now, at that time we had been fighting against fascism. On 4 September Smuts said we should enter the war. Hertzog said no. On 5 September Smuts went to parliament and he won by thirteen votes. On 6 September he declared war on Germany. Hitler had never heard of South Africa. He said, 'What's this, who's declaring war on me?' In the beginning the Communist Party in Durban and in Johannesburg said the war must be supported. The Communist Party in Cape Town said no, it's an imperialist war. There was a dispute. Then we got instructions from Moscow — it's an imperialist war.

At that time the communists were all lauding the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union was the fatherland of the working class. We all believed Stalin was a great leader. We didn't know what he was up to. Of course Lenin was a great leader. At that stage I didn't know that just before he died, Lenin demanded that Stalin be expelled from the Party. Because of the Soviet-German pact we got instructions not to support the war. Then, of course, came that fateful day, 22 June 1941. I'll never forget that morning. I was shaving in my room in Johannesburg, on a Sunday, when the news came through. The announcer said at 8 o'clock in the morning, 'This morning Prime Minister Molotov made the following statement: Without any declaration of war, without any cause, units of the German army invaded the Soviet Union and started attacking our army. We are now at war with Germany.'

Then we were all out for the war effort. Michael Harmel was the secretary of the Johannesburg District Party Committee. I told him the news that the Soviet Union had been attacked and he just wanted as much support for the Soviet Union as possible. That night was a Sunday night, I was the chairman of the Communist Party, and at 8 o'clock the whole of Johannesburg seemed to turn up to find out what the communists had to say, there was a huge crowd there. And I said to them: I want you to realise one thing, the fascists will never take Moscow, but the Russian Army, the Red Army, will one day take Berlin.

Subsequently I was sent to Durban for six months to help build up the Party. Durban had developed in a strange way. Sugar was the biggest industry in Natal, and in 1942 there was a strike of the sugar workers, organised in the

Sugar Workers Union, led by an Indian called H A Naidoo. The government at that time didn't want strikes. I mean, during the war years the sugar industry made fortunes. So they had compulsory arbitration, and at this arbitration H A Naidoo was able to get a very good award which affected the sugar workers right up to Northern Natal and right down to Southern Natal.

When I got here [ie to Durban] I worked very closely with Mike Diamond. He was the brother of Issy Diamond, who led workers in the Transvaal. They were both hairdressers. Now Mike Diamond didn't play too much of an active part but he helped chaps like H A Naidoo, he was a sort of adviser. H A Naidoo had already done a lot, and the Party had developed quite strong roots amongst the Indian working class. Now we had to start extending it to the African working class. In the late 1920s the Communist Party had built up a strong group amongst the African workers, but any communists who arrived in the early 1930s were deported. So a lot of the African workers had been supporting the Communist Party but suddenly the Party disappeared. We'd been smashed up practically completely, and disappeared for about twelve or thirteen years. Now in 1942-43 we came back again. We went to the workers, to their compounds and locations. The African workers asked, 'What happened to you? You suddenly disappeared.'

I was originally sent down for six months, but I'm still here. Durban became my home. I married my wife in 1943 and she said she's not going to Johannesburg. So I stayed in Durban and helped to develop the Party here. And one of the first chaps that I recruited for the Party was from Pietermaritzburg. His name was Gwala. Harry Gwala. In 1943. For many years we were great friends.

When did your friendship end?

Well, it didn't really end. We sort of stopped seeing each other when I had difficulties with the Communist Party, but we always remained on friendly terms.

He himself was not very happy with the Communist Party because when the split occurred in the communist movement, between the Russian Party, and the Chinese Party, Harry Gwala and I supported Mao Tse-tung. You know what Mao Tse-tung's famous thing was: all political power arises out of the barrel of the gun. Harry Gwala never forgot that. In the beginning I agreed with it. But subsequently I said no, no, this is going too far. And I wouldn't agree to the armed struggle . . . I also recruited Ronnie Kasrils.

There's an interesting passage about your wife in Ronnie Kasrils's* Armed and Dangerous *. . . he says he's always found her very attractive, and she reminds him

of his mother. He was actually a little infatuated with her.

That's right. It was because of her that he came into the movement. He always regarded her as very important . . . she was a relative of his. You see, he'd come down to Durban, incidentally, and he'd been given messages to take to her. When we heard that he was there, we didn't know much about him, but we thought oh, this is wonderful, because he could act as a courier between me and her. [Rowley was in hiding at that time.] Nobody would think anything different, because he would be going to visit her as a relative. That's how he came into the movement. I recruited a lot of people in Durban. We developed a big Party. But there came a time when I said I must join the army. The whole South African Army was reformed, it was known as the Sixth South African Division, and there was a big appeal to join that Division. So I joined the army and went to Italy.

In Italy they made me run up hills and down dales with heavy forty-pound packs. But I couldn't go to the frontline because of my eyesight. They wouldn't allow people with glasses there. Actually I found that reading was much easier without glasses. But I can't see far. I mean I couldn't drive a car without glasses. Anyway, there I was stuck and one day they needed a lecturer to speak on the African question. It was snowing and the person they'd arranged couldn't make it. So I gave it, without having had any time to prepare.

After the talk I was asked to join the information section, and I said yes. But unfortunately for me the legal section was also looking for somebody and there was a tussle between the legal and the information section. In the end they put me into the legal section. And I had a helluva big job. They had a full-time prosecutor, but every time it came to the defence, they would choose any old officer, so my job was to go and sit with this officer who knew nothing about defence or running a trial and help him. One day, they called me: 'Rowley you're doing a very good job of work, we're going to make you a corporal.' I said, 'A corporal? I've heard of corporals before. Wasn't there a corporal called Hitler? Wasn't there a corporal called Napoleon?' [Laughs] So they made me a corporal. And then when it came for my time to go back to South Africa, they wanted me to stay on, and they offered me a sergeant. I said, 'No thanks, I'm going back to South Africa.'

The first place that I had fought was in Venda. I went up to Venda in 1941 as an articled clerk, working with George Finlay [an advocate and member of the Communist Party] to fight a big case there, and we got it settled. It was over the question of development schemes. Now, on my return to South Africa in 1947 I decided that my practice would be a weapon in the fight against apartheid. As a result I fought cases everywhere, but in Natal particularly. I worked amongst the Pondos and I worked amongst the Africans generally. Now you see here [reads from Sheila Gastrow's profile of him]: 'In 1951 Arenstein was "listed" under the [Suppression of

Communism] Act, and banned in terms of the same Act.' This was for two years. Then they gave me a whole list of organisations which I was not allowed to join.

So what happened to your practice in '51 when you were listed?

That didn't affect the practice. It's only later on that they passed a special law disbarring me. The Law Society supported me. The Law Society saw no reason whatsoever to disbar me. So the government passed a special law which said if you were listed as a communist or a Marxist you could not practise law.

Was Harold Wolpe disbarred as well?

Yes, I think he was. By the way, I remember getting a phone call from Harold Wolpe one day. Harold Wolpe said, there's a certain well- known producer of plays, Cecil Williams, who has just disappeared. I realised what the position was, phoned up the security branch, and said to them, 'Where is this gentleman?' They said, 'We know nothing about him but, Mr Arenstein, we'll do you a favour. We'll see if we can find out anything about him.' Then they phoned me about an hour later and said, 'This gentleman was seen entering the Imperial Hotel in Pietermaritzburg half an hour ago.' I said, 'Thank you very much, I will relay that to his family.' The policeman said, 'By the way, Mr Arenstein, before you put the phone down, his companion was not with him.'

I said I knew nothing about his companion. He said, 'Ja, we know, Mr Arenstein. But we just thought we'd let you know.' So I got hold of Wolpe and told him this. Then I got hold of somebody in Durban, a chap by the name of M P Naiker, whose job it was to arrange for people to be hidden when they came to Durban, and when I got hold of him he said Ja, they've caught Nelson [Mandela].

What was your relationship like with the security police? It sounds almost congenial, in terms of these phone calls.

Well, you see, I always fought the security police so, in a way, they were a bit worried about me. I was challenging them all the time. I was chairman of the Congress of Democrats. But I was banned from that organisation. I was banned from a number of organisations, sixteen in all, including those of the Congress Movement. However I continued as a legal adviser to the Natal Congress Movement and to the South African Congress of Trade Unions, Sactu, in Natal. Now that was very difficult for them to do anything about because as an attorney I could be an adviser.

At one point I defended a number of PAC people, Prince Shange and his

co-defendants. The ANC people came to me and said how can you defend them, and I said to them, you know, as far as I'm concerned, I will defend anybody who was in the Struggle, whether you agree with me or not. One way or another they were in the Struggle.

But were they fighting the same Struggle as you were? I mean, you would have been excluded from the PAC because you're white.

That's right. Because I was white, and because the PAC also didn't agree with the way the ANC was working with the Indians and the Coloureds and the communists and so on. But when they were in trouble, they came to me. I said, I don't refuse to help anybody who's charged on the reactionary laws of South Africa. Whether I agree with him or not.

So it was the common enemy which defined the Struggle . . .

That's right. I defended them, and as a result I made very good friends with a number of them.

Did you have contact with Sobukwe?

No, but I was partly responsible for Sharpeville. I was defending Africans in the townships. One day, the police had a raid in Cato Manor for liquor and it just happened that a white policeman stepped back, and stood on the toe of an African woman, and she began to scream. And the policeman turned round, saw that he had stepped on her toe, and then just got off the toe. Now, the crowd shouted out to him to apologise, and this policeman just ignored them and walked away.

Eventually, the crowd cornered the policemen; they rushed to a hut. The crowd put fire to the hut, and the policemen rushed out, and some of them were killed. This was 13 January 1960. Then Sobukwe started his campaign against passes. Now you had to carry a pass. Not only did you have to have one, but you had to carry it on you. Sobukwe encouraged people not to carry them. A whole lot of people marched on the Sharpeville police station, and said, 'We're not carrying our passes, arrest us.' Sobukwe was influenced by Gandhi to a certain extent. He practised non-violent resistance . . . And of course the police couldn't arrest them, there were too many, and it would have been a fiasco. Right in front of the crowd was an ANC militant whom the police had been looking for, and a security branch man saw him, and darted out, grabbed him, and pulled him into the police station. Now the crowd didn't know what was happening, and they surged forward . . . and the police inside suddenly got a fright, remembering what happened in Cato Manor, where a number of policemen were killed, and they opened fire.

I've never heard this before. You know, in most accounts of Sharpeville you hear that the police just opened fire and most of the people were shot in the back while fleeing.

Which is wrong. This is what actually happened. I was there. I was part and parcel of the whole business. I wasn't at Sharpeville, but I was there with the follow-up. After Sharpeville a State of Emergency was declared in South Africa. In the middle of the night the phone would start to ring. Whenever there was trouble the phone would ring. Somebody else had been picked up. I phoned up the security branch, and said I hear so and so's been picked up, and so and so's been picked up. I went to see them. As soon as a man was arrested, I insisted upon seeing him straight away. I had to fight a law on the subject, because the police had forty-eight hours to bring a person before a magistrate, and they argued that during that forty-eight hours no lawyers were allowed. And I fought that, and I won it. After Sharpeville they picked me up too, in the middle of the night, in terms of the State of Emergency, and I appeared with three others before the magistrate. 'What State of Emergency?' we asked, and argued they must prove it's a State of Emergency. They couldn't prove it, because the Government Gazette announcing it was still in Cape Town. So the magistrate had to release us. We went out and decided, no, we're not going to wait for the State of Emergency, we're going to disappear. Jackie was waiting at home for me, and then I disappeared.

When they got the Government Gazette, they came to pick me up. They looked right through our block of flats, in which my father was also staying. They saw the name Arenstein at no.4, rushed to no.4, knocked, and an old woman came out. 'Where's Mr Arenstein, where's Mr Arenstein?' She said, 'He's asleep.' They said, never mind asleep, we want to see him.

When my father came out they said, 'No, you're the wrong man. We're looking for the man with the beard.' And he said, 'He's in flat no. 14', so they rushed over and knocked on the door, and Jackie came to the door. 'Where's Mr Arenstein?' She said, 'You've got a damn cheek. You took him away this morning, and now you're asking me where he is.' They couldn't find me. I disappeared for the whole Emergency. So, I know all about Sharpeville. Cato Manor was a very militant area. We'd organised in Cato Manor. If we hadn't organised in Cato Manor that would never have happened. Which is why I say I was partly responsible, I don't mean directly.

You had a close working relationship with H A Naidoo. What do you remember of him?

A very striking personality, H A Naidoo. And a very hard worker. When I came down, he had achieved this excellent arbitration. So we started working on the base he built. When I eventually left Durban to go north [to the army] we had 1 500 members.

When did your relationship with Buthelezi start?

My good friend Buthelezi was expelled from Fort Hare for ANC activities and he came to Durban. Because they wanted to train him to become a future chief, they made him work in a special court for African matters, called the Native Commissioner's Court. I did a lot of work there. That's where I met him, in the early 1950s.

One day Buthelezi came to me and said, 'It doesn't look as if the government is going to appoint me as a chief. So I think I'll take up law. I said OK and started working on his articles. The government must have heard something, because suddenly they came to him and said, 'We're going to appoint you as a chief on probation. Chief of the Buthelezis.' So he wasn't sure whether to accept it or not. And he went around to the ANC chaps, and to me, and we all said, he's got to become the chief. Finally when his father died he became the chief of the Buthelezis. Now the Buthelezis had paid one hundred head of cattle for the hand of his mother as *lobola.* Usually ten head of cattle is paid but they paid one hundred... for the sole purpose that her eldest son would become their chief. Then they would be part of the Zulu royal household. And she was a very strong personality, this woman, very strong.

Was she an aunt of King Zwelithini?

Ja, she came from the royal house, she was a daughter of King Solomon, who was then king of the Zulus. And so Buthelezi was appointed chief by the then governor general. Straight after [Buthelezi] became chief the government would come to him and say 'We want you to do this, we want you to do that'. Buthelezi used to answer, 'No, no I can't do that. I can't accept anything until I've discussed it with the tribe.' They said 'But that's nonsense'; he said, 'Oh no, it's not nonsense, you're always telling us to go back to our traditional laws. Well I'm going back to our traditional law. A chief is not a dictator of the tribe. He meets the tribe. (Of course it's only men.) And we discuss things and a unanimous decision is taken, which I'm bound by.' Hell, they were so furious with Buthelezi for taking that attitude.

But that's how he behaved and if he went anywhere, he'd go back and call his tribe together, tell them what happened and discuss it with them so that they could know what the position was. And one day his mother met me; she says, 'You know there's so much trouble being a chief, that sometimes I wonder whether he shouldn't have become an attorney.' So I laughed.

A lot of South Africans would probably wonder about that as well. Were you in Kliptown when the Freedom Charter was drawn up?

I was a banned person at that time. I couldn't attend. You see, bannings took various forms. For example, you could be just banned. Or you could be

house-arrested. I had been involved in a great deal of political activity at the time. I fought numerous cases in the countryside against the betterment schemes. The Native Commissioner would declare a betterment scheme. Then he would work out how many cattle the grazing land could take. Then (because there were too many cattle on the grazing land) he'd call the tribe together and say they must cut down on half of their cattle. Now to tell a tribesman to cut down on half of his cattle is like telling a man to go to the bank to take out half of his money and throw it away. They were told they could kill the cattle, or they could sell them.

Africans usually had about five acres of ground. On the five acres they grazed their cattle, they lived there, and they ploughed. Now the betterment scheme made them go into one area, where they'd be housed in a location. Another area would be for grazing only. Another area would be for reaping their crops. This betterment scheme caused havoc, and one of the very first cases that I fought was on the betterment scheme.

It happened that Hymie Basner had come down from Johannesburg, and the Commissioner had persuaded him that this was in the interests of the Africans. Then one of the Communist Party members said, 'Get this man Arenstein. He'll fight it.'

So I had to go and fight the case at a place called Nqutu on a Monday morning. I drove up in my car and the tribespeople came to fetch me, and just before we got to Nqutu they said, 'Oh the chief wants to see you, he's having some trouble. He's got two wives and there's a lot of trouble between them.' So I had to drive off the road up into a hilly mountain area with no proper roads, and there I met the chief and he explained his difficulties. Then I said, all right, now I must be going. They said, 'No, you're not going, you're staying here tonight.' They wouldn't let me go because they were afraid if I went the Commissioner would persuade me that the betterment scheme was in [their] favour.

The next day when I went into Nqutu I drove my car along with a whole commando of African peasants riding their horses. Now it's etiquette for an attorney who goes to a new place to go and introduce himself. He doesn't just walk into the court and the magistrate doesn't know who he is. So I went and introduced myself to the magistrate. The magistrate said to me, 'Look we're only trying to help these people'; he gave me this spiel about the betterment scheme. I said, 'Haven't you got enough grazing land here?' He said no. I said, 'You know, South Africa is a very big place. You can halve the grazing land or you can double it. You can just go to the government and say we need more grazing land. There's plenty of grazing land in South Africa.' So he looked at me and said, 'Tell me something, are you an attorney or are you an agitator?' I said, 'I don't care what you call me. I'm going to fight you tooth and nail.'

And that was the beginning of my fight against the betterment schemes. I fought them everywhere.

Did you ever encounter overt anti-Semitism from magistrates that you appeared before?

Well, there was always a certain amount but they were very careful not to show it. Not all of them of course. And then they also knew that there was always an appeal. I must tell you something about our Appellate Division. Even in the worst days of apartheid our Appellate Division had a very high standard. And our advocates who became judges also kept up a high standard. I remember some advocates being appointed to the Bench coming to see me and asking what I thought. And my advice to all these advocates was that you go on to the Bench. Because, you see, when it comes to interpretation, you can give a liberal interpretation or you can give a conservative interpretation. It was very important to have judges who gave liberal interpretations. And as a result we found that the judges usually tried to give (as far as possible) a liberal interpretation of the laws.

There are two people in the book — Isie Maisels and Arthur Chaskalson — who were probably passed over for the Bench because of their stance.

When it came to some of the biggest trials, Isie Maisels was leading the defence. During the arguments before the judges, one of the prosecutors got up and said, 'Mr Maisels is talking nonsense.' The judge turned round to him and said, 'Let me tell you one thing, Mr Maisels never talks nonsense.' The judges on the whole were very good.

How long were you banned for?

I was banned originally from 1953 to 1955. Then I was banned in 1960, right through to 1986. I was under house arrest from 1962 to 1980. When that happened my daughter said, 'Oh, it's a good thing, Dad, now you'll have to stay at home and help us with our homework.' I coudn't move. If I wanted to leave Durban, I had to get permission. I wasn't allowed into any black area. I wasn't allowed into any attorney's offices. Why? Because they found that I was helping people through other attorneys. One attorney gave me a job, but I was kicked out of that job because of government intervention. I wasn't allowed to enter any trade union or any attorney's office.

How did the warders treat you in the four years you were in jail?

They had to treat me well because they were scared of me. When I went to jail, I made it clear I wasn't going to stand any nonsense. Now you see, when a prisoner breaks a jail regulation, he's got a choice, he can take the jurisdiction of the commanding officer, or he can ask for a magistrate, to be heard in an ordinary court of law. But in doing that, he takes a risk, because the magistrate can extend his period.

Now they charged me with some small infringement of one of the jail regulations. So instead of accepting the jurisdiction of the officer commanding, I insisted on having the matter heard before the magistrate and I sent for attorneys and advocates. They arrived. Hoo, this chap got the shock of his life. He realised the magistrate would be there, he didn't know what would happen, what evidence I would lead, how he might be implicated. So he said to our advocates and attorneys, 'I now give this instruction to my warders, that whatever jail regulation is broken by the politicals, they are not to be charged. So I'm asking you just to accept this one charge and after that, there'll be no charges.'

So this benefited all of the politicals, the precedent that you set.

Well, the white prisoners. That's right.

How did you survive from 1970 to 1986, financially, in terms of looking after your family?

Well, it was a helluva struggle. I can tell you, we're still feeling the pinch today. I always found some work to do. But I had to call myself a consultant. I was no longer an attorney.

What was your interaction with the Jewish community like?

One thing about the Jewish community, they were really supportive of us when we were in jail. They used to send us on Paysach matzos, and they'd also send us Jewish dishes. When I went to jail I was told by the other prisoners, you may be an atheist, but see that you are regarded as a Jew. Because for eight days [the duration of Paysach], we got all sorts of parcels which, of course, we shared. And this happened twice a year. Also for Rosh Hashanah they gave us enough supplies to last us the ten days, and you know when you're in jail, and you've got only jail food, and suddenly you get this, it's outstanding. Another prisoner, a chap called Kitson, who was a Christian, sent a message to the Christian community that they should do something similar. He asked the jail authorities whether they couldn't also do something about the Christian holidays, and they said they'd never heard about it, they'd only heard about the Jews and the Muslims. The Jewish community also helped to look after my family... they gave us free tuition in the private Jewish schools. My daughters went to Carmel College, and were fetched and brought home. The community went out of its way to help us.

Other Jewish prisoners have mentioned their dissatisfaction with the Jewish community, either for imposing its values on their families while they were in jail or for being sanctimonious and hypocritical. Several complained about Rabbi Katz

who visited them in jail.

To my mind, that's just nonsense. The Jewish community have never dictated to me. I was a member of the Jewish community . . . well, of course, I became an atheist and I didn't participate in Jewish religious life, I stopped going to shul and things like that. Everybody knew I was an atheist, but I've never heard any Jew turn round to me and say, hell, why aren't you doing this, or why aren't you doing that. The rabbi who visited us said he knew that we were atheists but he was there to help us. I had heard that my wife was not well, but she would not write and tell me that because I would worry about her. I asked the rabbi to check on what was happening with her and the following week he told me he had done so and she was well.

I can't remember his name now, it's such a long time ago. He only used to come on a Sunday for a short while. As far as I know, he was a rabbi. Anyway he was representing the Jewish community.

Look, I've done all sorts of things that I'm sure would embarrass the Jewish community. So, I didn't want to go around flaunting that I was a Jew, because in actual fact I'm an atheist. I've never hesitated to say I'm Jewish, but I don't agree with the Bible. I don't accept there's a God. So I can't really be Jewish, in the sense of the religion. I don't go to shul. I never participated in Jewish festivities. I don't do a whole lot of things that ordinary Jews do.

But you can be culturally Jewish.

That I've always been. I've always said, 'I'm a Jew.' You can't help it, because I learned at an early stage that you've got to fight like a Jew. I was astounded by the rise of Hitler, and I studied that inside out, what Hitler was up to, and what happened to the Jews, and I decided that I would never disown my Jewishness. Remember that story my mother told me? About Hillel ['Do unto others as you would be done by']. My mother said to me, that is what you must do. That is the thing that I always looked to.

You could be a good Christian and do that as well.

Oh yes. Well, this is what Hillel is supposed to have said. Hillel said, this is the whole of the Jewish religion, the rest is commentary, and that's what my mother said to me. But my mother also shocked the Jewish community by saying it's wrong to discriminate. She would never let me discriminate.

What about the cultural things which once marked Ashkenazi Jews as a people. Yiddish, the yearly cycle of the holidays, the strong sense of community, latkes and gefilte fish — is that real?

Yes, of course, to a certain extent it is. For example, look at Paysach. We all celebrate it.

Did you maintain any of those things in your home?

No, no. I never did that.

Were your children exposed to it?

Ja, well you see what happened was, they were given free tuition at Carmel College.

And you didn't object to that.

No, not at all, because Carmel College always treated the children much better than the ordinary schools did. I knew if they went to the ordinary schools they'd have a lot of difficulties.

But did you want them to be Jewish? I mean, do you believe there's some particularly Jewish perspective on the world that they should know about?

Well, first of all, I've always believed you must acknowledge your Jewishness, so that people know you are a Jew. And you must be able to face the world as a Jew. You are a Jew, you're born a Jew.

What if you choose not to be a Jew? I've got an aunt who married a Gentile, went to live in what was then Rhodesia, and had some of her children baptised.

That's different. I would never do that.

But what if you do choose that? Is it a legitimate choice, to separate completely?

I'm not going to tell everybody what they must do.

I'm just trying to establish if you think groups should choose to perpetuate themselves. Should the Jews strive to perpetuate themselves as a separate ethnic entity?

They have no choice. If there isn't an organisation that's prepared to fight and help people, then they get oppressed. Wherever the Jews have been oppressed, if they haven't fought back, they've had it. So, it's quite right. I've got no objection to that.

If a collective should fight to perpetuate itself and look after its own rights, why not just fight for your own collective and forget about the rest? Let them look after themselves.

No, my attitude has been that we must learn to work together. All people should get together, you see. For example, the fight of the American blacks became an international fight. When we were struggling here against apartheid, we had international support.

So many whites who fought apartheid were Jewish. Why?

One must never forget the effects of the rise of fascism. Suddenly, the most developed country in Europe, Germany, went fascist. Now how was that? What caused that? And every Jew had to answer that question.

Are there any particularly Jewish writers that you enjoy?

Feuchtwanger, who wrote *Jud Süss*, he's one of the greatest writers of all time. I also studied the writings of Jewish leaders who led the struggle against the Greeks and Romans, going right back to the time when they were expelled from Palestine, the way they fought back.

You know, the way you refer to things Lenin said . . . it's almost like you're citing some revered rabbi. It's supposedly a very Jewish thing, to have great respect for words. God created the world with words, words become almost more important, in some ways, than actions. Or rather, words become actions. Do you think that you've been Jewish, even in your communism, as far as that kind of relationship to the spoken or written word?

Well, you see, being a Marxist means that you turn to Marx. What is a Marxist? A Marxist is a person who's imbued with Marxism, who analyses situations in terms of their most fundamental economic causes. But Marxism is not a static thing, it develops. Now, one of the most important things about Marxism was the national question. What is a nation? A lot of people say ag, nations don't exist, nations are nothing. Joe Slovo came back and said, we must build one nation in South Africa. Well, I've never agreed with that. Lenin was a great democrat. When the Soviet Union was formed Lenin created two houses — one house based on universal franchise, which the Russians dominated, and the second house with equal representation for the major nations of the Soviet Union. And in that the Russians had about five per cent representation. And all laws had to go through both houses, so Russians couldn't dominate. Unfortunately, Stalin didn't like that. And when he got into power, he just forgot it. But Lenin insisted that there must be the right of nations to self-determination.[5]

Every nation has the right to decide what it wants for itself. And if a nation

5 This is debatable. Take, for example, Lenin's stance on the Jews' right to self-determination. In 1903, he wrote: 'The idea of a Jewish "nationality" is definitely reactionary, not only when expounded by its consistent advocates (the Zionists) but likewise on the lips of those who try to combine it with the ideas of social democracy (the Bundists). The idea of a Jewish nationality runs counter to the interests of the Jewish proletariat, for it fosters amongst them, directly or indirectly, a spirit hostile to assimilation, the spirit of the "ghetto".' And again in 1913: 'Whoever directly or indirectly puts forward the slogan of a Jewish "national culture" is an enemy of the proletariat, a supporter of the old and the caste position of the Jews, an accomplice of the rabbis and the bourgeoisie.'

wants to break from a country it must be allowed. Now Finland had been conquered by Russia around 1805 and when Lenin took over in 1917 the Finns asked for their independence and Lenin gave it to them. Now what is a nation? In 1914, Lenin and Stalin defined a nation. A nation is a historically developed community of common language, common territory, common economic life and common psychological make-up as evidenced in a community of culture. That is a nation. Joe Slovo — much later on — didn't bother about that. He said South Africa can form one nation. I want to deal with this question because it affected me at an early stage, and cropped up over and over again. This has become a very important point, now, here in KwaZulu.

What exactly is your relationship with Inkatha at this point in time?

Well, I'm a member of Inkatha, and Buthelezi is a very close friend of mine. I once saved northern Zululand from being taken away by the government, and given to the Swazis.[6] That was the Ingwavuma issue, in 1982. They have never forgotten that. My formal association with Inkatha began in the nineties, when whites could join black political structures, but I was informally associated with the movement right from the word go, from the mid-seventies.

You see, what happened was that Inkatha, Buthelezi, I, we all regarded ourselves as ANC persons, members of the ANC.

Buthelezi was working very closely with the ANC. I was one of the four members of the joint commission which made recommendations that KwaZulu would not negotiate with the South African government until the repeal of the 1913 Land Act, the release of all political prisoners, the return of exiles, the repeal of the Group Areas Act.

But the split developed because the ANC said to him, 'You know, we'd like you to help us with the armed struggle. We'll slip people into KwaZulu. If you can find a place for them to hide, we'd appreciate this.' And he said, 'Look, if I do it, then my organisation will be infiltrated by police spies — yours already is — and when the police get to know about it, that'll be the end of it.' In any case, he said, Rowley Arenstein's against the armed struggle.

Right. Was that a position that you maintained consistently?

Absolutely consistently. Right from the word go. If the army is against you, you're not going to win a revolution. When revolutions succeeded it was because the soldiers defected to the revolution. If you don't have that it's doomed to failure. But Slovo ignored this because he got a bee in his bonnet that the Soviet Union would help him. And of course I was right, what did

6 The government offered Ingwavuma to Swaziland in exchange for Swaziland's not allowing ANC guerrillas to operate from its territory.

the armed struggle do? I'd worked out that what was going to change things was the economics of South Africa. I began to see that South Africa would have to develop as a democratic industrialised state. If you wanted to keep the industries you had to keep the workers in the towns. If you want to keep the workers in the towns you had to deal with them properly. You see, when the armed struggle started the argument was that South Africa would never change. They said it was a fascist system and you had to destroy the fascist government, and I disagreed with that entirely. We said, do you think your so-called armed struggle with a few guerrillas is going to overthrow the South African government with its army? I said to Slovo, that's rubbish, it won't work. He said, no, no, this is the only way. I said, the economy, ag, the economy. That was the difference between us.

So what should people have been doing if they hadn't been putting their energies into the armed struggle?

They should have been building up the ANC, building up whatever organisation you wanted to build up.

Didn't the armed struggle itself build up organisations? You have to be quite organised to be able to train cadres and send them across the border. And it was also a morale builder, people like Solomon Mahlangu, who came across and died here, stiffened the will to resist. All the work done in Angola, in the camps, you don't credit it?

Ja, but they also have a bad record. A lot of people had gone to fight for Umkhonto, but they were told they had to fight for Angola, and they objected to it. And then steps were taken against them, some of them were killed.

When Albie Sachs wanted to become a judge the whole matter was raised. He was appalled by what he'd seen in the camps. Anyway, the amount of people trained was very limited. The real building up of an organisation is where you have thousands, and perhaps even millions of members. It's a different story altogether. You can't have an armed struggle and build up a powerful organisation of the masses at the same time.

How could you have built up mass-based organisations when everything was illegal, you couldn't address large rallies, you couldn't distribute literature freely?

It's difficult, but the way you carry out your struggle is to suit the masses, and to say, we're doing this for you. Look, let's take a very simple example. When I came out of jail in 1970, I found that there was nothing happening. So I got hold of a chap called Mewa Ramgobin. He's married to Ela Gandhi, who is a granddaughter of Mahatma Gandhi. Anyway . . . I said to him, look here, the

Natal Indian Congress hasn't been banned, why have we 'banned' it? Let's restart it. So he went around to the Indian people and said we must develop the Natal Indian Congress. And it was accepted. Then I said we must build up the trade unions, there were no functioning African trade unions, and we got the help of a lecturer in economics from the University of Natal. He had a number of students, and he used to try and get them to do something active. His name was Rick Turner, and he later got shot and killed. He brought in a lot of youngsters. They were each given jobs to do in the trade union movement. [Later] I was building Fosatu up. I got the chaps together. Cheadle, Johnny Copelyn. A whole lot of them. Of course, I had to stay in the background, because I was a banned person. But what I did was I got them moving. They started the trade union movement. Overseas, the ANC said we're crazy. They said how can Rowley Arenstein think of developing an independent trade union movement under fascism. But I always disagreed it was fascism. I never accepted the word fascism as applied to whatever the South African government was doing, never. The communists defined fascism, at the time of Hitler, as the terroristic rule of monopoly capitalism. In other words, the monopoly capitalists, the big capitalists were responsible for it. Here in South Africa, a number of the big capitalists were dead against what was happening, because it was preventing the growth of capitalism. There was no fascism in South Africa.

But isn't that quibbling over terms? In the popular imagination fascism didn't just come to mean national socialism of the sort propagated by Hitler, ie an authoritarian state where there was an alliance between big capital and a militaristic party. Fascism came to represent a certain way of thinking, a brutal police state, very authoritarian lines of control, the jackboot.

It went much further. It went to smashing up people completely. Putting them in jail. Destroying them. The Holocaust. That was fascism. In South Africa we never had that. Do you know why? Because a lot of the big boys wanted to develop the country. They wouldn't support it. Oppenheimer wouldn't support these moves.

So, there might have been fascist intent, but there wasn't a South African equivalent of Krupps?

You see, you've got to learn to define things properly, because if you don't you make mistakes. Now overseas the ANC was saying, you can't do these things under fascism. If we'd listened to them, we wouldn't have been able to develop the mass democratic movement in South Africa. I always maintained that what we've got to concentrate on is the development of South Africa.

Now, when I was expelled, Joe Slovo was the main leader of the Party. But whoever expelled me, I could be expelled because there was a complete

change in the Party's financial situation. That was Joe Slovo's doing. We had no money at all. We had to get people like Dr Dadoo and others to go and collect money from the merchants... and suddenly the movement had money, tons of money. From the Soviet Union.

Post-war, a connection was suddenly made?

There had always been the connection, but there was a split in the communist movement after Stalin died. Because of the revelations of Khrushchev. We had all believed that Stalin was one of the greatest men of all times. We thought he was a great humanist, and of course when the war broke out and the way that the Russians resisted Hitler, and finally conquered the Germans, was to us a marvellous thing. Then Stalin died suddenly in 1953, Khrushchev took over and revealed what Stalin was really like. It came as a great shock to us. Then we became more interested in Mao Tse-tung. Many of us felt, when the break came between the Chinese Communist Party and the Russian Communist Party, that the Chinese were right. Until Mao also started changing the rules. But that came much later.

Do you still label yourself a Marxist?

Oh yes. One day one of my grandchildren said to me, 'Why are you a Marxist?' I said, 'For a very simple reason: why is there so much evil in the world? People are starving, and we can produce enough to feed them, but we don't produce enough to feed them because we produce for profit.' The trouble with organisations like Anglo American is that it never produces for use, but only for profit. If it's not profitable, nothing is done. The American production system is so great they could overnight produce enough food to feed the whole of the Americas. They're not doing it. That is my argument, very simply put. Capitalism's life has been extended by the exploration of space, and other endeavours which can make excess production temporarily profitable... but people won't accept the imbalances for ever, one day we will have to get beyond capitalism.

That's a belief. It requires no less a leap of faith than does the belief in the coming of the **meshiach** ***[messiah].***

The events of the twentieth century, including the collapse of the Soviet Union, the capitalist society that's emerging in China, the collapse of Eastern European socialism, are still in line with some kind of Marxist dialectic. Marxism understands that in a highly developed system capitalism will be democratic. You know why — if you're a very wealthy person, you don't want to spend your time in politics. Oppenheimer doesn't; Oppenheimer used to be in politics, but when his father died, he had to give up politics to run

Anglo American. Now, if you were to ask Oppenheimer what would he rather be, prime minister of South Africa, or chairman of Anglo American, which would he choose?

Did I ever tell you that story about Smuts and Malan? Malan was supposed to have gone to Smuts and said to him, 'Why is it everybody says we Afrikaners are bad businessmen?' This is about '48. Smuts said, 'Come, I'll show you.' They went into a shop, and Smuts ordered six cups from an Afrikaner shopkeeper, and the Afrikaner went to the back of the store and he brought out six cups with the handles on the right hand side. Smuts said, 'No, no, I don't want handles on the right hand side, I want handles on the left hand side.' And the shopkeeper said to him, 'Sir, those are the only cups I've got. Take it or leave it.'

Then he went to the next shop, which had a Jewish shopkeeper, and ordered six cups. The Jewish merchant went to the back of the shop, brought out six cups with the handles on the right hand side. Smuts said, 'No, I don't want cups with handles on the right hand side, I want cups with handles on the left hand side.' The Jewish shopkeeper said, 'You know sir, it's a funny coincidence, this morning a shipment of cups with handles on the left hand side arrived in my shop.' So he goes to the back of the shop, turns the cups around and brings them to Smuts. Smuts says, 'Oh, just what I wanted, thank you very much.' And he walked out with Malan, and he said, 'Now you can see why we Afrikaners are bad businessmen.' Malan replied, 'I don't know what you're talking about. The Jewish shopkeeper had the cups with the handles on the left hand side, and the Afrikaans shopkeeper didn't.'

He was trying to point out that at that time the Afrikaners were bad businessmen. But then, of course, they started to go into business. Now, they had not been in big business. They had never been in mining. There were about six big mining finance corporations, and this is where Oppenheimer came in again. He got hold of Sanlam, and said to Sanlam, look, I'll give you control over one of the very big mines; he wanted to change Afrikaners, you see. So, he gave Sanlam control over General Mining and later on they bought up another corporation called Union Corporation, and that became Gencor.

The same thing's happening now in terms of 'black empowerment', enlarging the circle of privilege slightly, and making it multiracial.

That's right. You see, what they are doing is they're maintaining that class society, that capitalist society, but they are bringing in others to share in the wealth of the country. In the same way they brought the Afrikaners in, and that led to a big split, verlig and verkramp.

With your constant harping on the importance of industrialisation, you make the process of change sound almost deterministic. Are you saying even if people like

yourself hadn't got involved, just the industrialisation of South Africa, the influx of workers to the urban centres, would have created the necessary changes? Because if you are, it seems to make all the sacrifices a bit pointless.

When a political/economic situation arises, it engenders a political movement, like when Joe Slovo decided the only way to overthrow the South African government was by armed struggle. Individual choices are significant in that not everyone chooses to see the social demands of the time, it took individuals to stand up and articulate them and fight for them, but they will only be successful if they are fighting for something which is in accordance with the rules of history. Certain individuals foresee change, there are always individuals who can see further ahead, and they can accelerate change when they make decisions based on historical necessity. Someone has to convince people that changes are inevitable, but individual will can't take the place of historical development.

You seem to completely depersonalise conflict. Is there no one you feel angry or resentful towards on a personal level? Your jailers, or the people who banned you and struck you off the roll?

No, I think it's a waste of time. If you have a system, people will operate according to that system. If you want to change things, you've got to change the system. But luckily for us in South Africa, we were able to change that system.

But in terms of individual responsibility, the police who murdered Steve Biko, the soldier who smashed Rosa Luxemburg's head in with a rifle butt, were they not evil?

Well, of course they were evil . . .

And also in terms of individual responsibility, you chose to try and change things, you chose activities which demanded tremendous sacrifices.

That's right. But many people chose to take that decision. It wasn't just that we chose [as individuals], we chose as organisations. Usually, we were part of an organisation, we were carrying on work as part of an organisation. Of course, a lot of individual choice came about, but as part of an organisation.

Where did their courage came from?

Well, you know, in South Africa there was always a positive and a negative. One must never forget that. That is something I played on, the positive and the negative. For example, when my father came to see me, he said to me, 'Oh my God, how do you find being in jail?' I said to him, 'Forget about me being

in jail. Think of me being at university. I'm studying. Every night, I'm studying. My big difficulty is that I've got a history test tomorrow, will I pass it?' And he forgot about me being in jail, and he said, 'Ooh, history is your favourite subject, of course, you'll do well', and encouraged me...

You must remember another thing that I've learned. There was a chap called Mao Tse-tung, and Mao Tse-tung did many many bad things, but one good thing he did, he said change every disadvantage into an advantage. Now, when I went to jail, I decided I wasn't going to just accept things like that, I was going to change it to an advantage. I've never studied so much in all my life. I didn't complete a BA, but I completed the courses, because my job there was to study. I studied history, I studied Shakespeare, I tell you, I really studied Shakespeare. I really understood what Shakespeare was about when I went to jail. To my mind, there's not the slightest doubt that he is the greatest writer. I also studied Thomas Aquinas, a favourite of the Catholic church. Because I found he was absolutely an outstanding political thinker.

Do you have any bitterness towards Slovo, or the people who expelled you?

No, it never led to any bitterness.

Was he angry with you at your attachment to Inkatha?

No, no, we got on very well, personally, very well.

I could imagine you and him arguing, sort of an unstoppable force versus an immovable object.

Well, we decided not to argue. Because, I said to him, what about the rights of nations to self-determination? And he said Lenin wrote a long time ago. No, we were on different paths, but it didn't affect us personally. I had very few real enemies in the Movement.

INA PERLMAN

'I remember my father slapping the New Testament down
in front of me and saying, "If you are going to live
amongst these people, you must know what they believe."'

Ina Perlman was born in Bloemfontein in 1926 to middle-class German-Jewish parents and grew up in Port Elizabeth. She was involved over many years in a range of social programmes aimed at combating endemic black poverty through organisations such as the South African Institute of Race Relations, the African Self Help Association, and others. For thirteen years, from 1980 to 1993, she ran an organisation called Operation Hunger, whose feeding programmes reached two million people. Corporate executives who worked in their companies' social involvement programmes recall her as a small determined woman who sat amidst a cloud of smoke (she smoked continuously in these meetings, partly to relieve the tension) while she 'reminded them that they were human' and raised large sums for Operation Hunger.

Her philosophy was firmly based on a grass roots approach. Assistance to impoverished communities was used to generate genuine community development which would enable people to stand on their own feet.

Interviewed by Geoff Sifrin
3 November 1994
Johannesburg

This interview will be part of a collection of interviews with South African Jews who were active in the struggle against apartheid . . .

I hope this is not going to be another 'apology' for the Jewish community. We've had too many of those already . . .

No, it isn't, but it's an acknowledgement that although the 'official' Jewish community was largely silent, many individual Jews were active in the Struggle.

Yes. Of course, whether one participated specifically as a Jew or not, certainly the Jewish ethic played a huge part in it.

One thing that is always hurled at the Jews is that the Old Testament does not emphasise the phrase[1] 'Love thy neighbour as thyself', as was urged by Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount. But it actually stresses something much more important, in Deuteronomy, in Moses' final speech. That is: 'The stranger in thy midst shall be as thy brother'. I take the term 'neighbour' not as being literally the person next door, but the person with whom you have some community of interest. The 'stranger', however, is a very much broader concept — it means the people you live among, who may be very different from you and with whom you may have no community of interest. Treating the 'stranger' as your brother requires much more . . .

So one has to cross more difficult boundaries to reach the 'stranger', to understand him . . .

Yes, indeed. I remember my father slapping the New Testament down in front of me and saying, 'If you are going to live amongst these people, you must know what they believe.'

In the mid-1970s, 80 per cent of all organised charity, the voluntary section of it, was dominated by Jews. I think it is part of our Jewish code. If you look at the Day of Atonement service, at the order in which you atone, it is 'Charity, Repentance and Prayer'. Prayer comes third, whereas charity comes first. The strength of Judaism is its moral code, converted into practice.

Do you think that this moral code derives from the Jews' history of oppression, or from the religious teachings per se?

I would say that the original ethical code derived from a situation where they [the Jews] were surrounded by all the idolatries, in Babylon, etc. But I think it was strengthened by the oppression that we were subjected to.

So are you saying that Jews have a heightened sensitivity to social issues and oppression as compared to other people?

Well, they should have. If you look at the history of liberation struggles throughout the world — the Russian Revolution, etc — there has always been significant involvement of Jews, and I don't believe that it has been entirely in response to their own oppression. In the sixties it was very often thrown at people in the liberation movement in South Africa that there were so many Jews who had leading roles. It was the same in America, when the

1 It does. It appears in Leviticus 19, vs 18, and Rabbi Akiva, a leading Talmudic sage, insisted it was one of the most important principles in the Torah.

Left:
Ina Perlman (Photograph: Gisèle Wulfsohn)

NAACP got going — the Jewish community played a very dominant role. If you accept the ethic of Judaism, it follows naturally.

In that book by Leo Baeck, *This People Israel*, he traces the Jewish Code, and particularly the criteria as they follow from Maimonides — what Baeck called 'The Law' and 'The Fences Around the Law'. The Law itself is actually common to the three great monotheistic religions. Unfortunately many Jews, particularly those from Eastern Europe, became obsessed with the fences around the Law rather than the Law itself.

To me it has always been appalling when Jews have not responded to oppression . . . I must be perfectly honest, I have only been in Israel once, for four days in 1986, for a conference at Beersheva to look at what links there could be between Ben-Gurion University and South Africa, and I was appalled at what the Jews were doing to the Bedouin. For me it was all too familiar.

I had spent that Saturday morning in Soweto — we had had one of our upsurges of violence again, and I flew out on the Saturday evening on El Al. The university had sent a car to fetch me at the airport. We passed through the first Arab town, Ramle,[2] and every car with 'whites' in it, that is Jews or non-Arabs, was waved through. There were soldiers on every street corner — it was like home from home.

Then when I was in Beersheva the university took me to look at various Bedouin projects which they were thinking of as prototypes, and I was absolutely sick. You know, the Bedouin had been promised ten dunam of land, like the moshavniks, and they had only got two . . . There were half-built houses all over the place, and they took me to the so-called model shopping centre, which could have been in any of the homelands — a development corporation shopping centre with one or two shops, and people hanging around obviously with no money to buy. I asked what they were doing with the Bedouin who were refusing to move from their casual settlements. I was told by the young man guiding me — who happened to be a Bedouin, the son of a sheik — that they cut off the water supply, an act which I had seen a hundred times in the homeland of Lebowa.

Then they took me to their pride and joy — a clinic. I looked at the kids and I thought 'Dear God, this looks familiar'. . . The young doctors were a mixture of Jewish and Arab and I asked very gently if they saw much malnutrition. One of the doctors said about 70 per cent — and don't forget, this was next to those wonderful moshavs. Of course, I was trying very hard to be diplomatic, but before I could stop myself I said, 'Oh my God! What do you do about the malnutrition?' They said 'We give them the mother's lecture on nutrition', which is just what our bloody homelands were doing at the same time. A clinic sister here in South Africa had said to me that the nutrition instruction was actually a cause of malnutrition, because a mother

2 Ramle is actually a 'mixed' town, the majority of its population being Jewish.

would come to these classes and be told that she had to give her children things that she could not possibly afford. I must tell you, the young Jewish doctors were tearing their hair out just like the Arab doctors, and when they realised how it had hit me, the floodgates just opened up. Then they told me that the treatment of the Bedouin was far better than the treatment of Arabs in the rest of Israel! The next day I went to visit a moshav and they told me about how they fly a dancing teacher down from Tel Aviv once a week, so that their little dimple-darlings can have dancing classes . . .

Having spent the whole day there, you can imagine the way I felt. That night my husband called, and he suggested that instead of flying out immediately after the conference, I should spend a few days looking at the archaeology in Jerusalem and Massada — I have always had an interest in history. Well, the poor man got it all, because the next thing he had one hysterical wife, saying, 'If I don't get out of this bloody place . . . !'

How do you explain this, since Israelis are Jews who come from essentially the same background as you or other South African Jews?

Well, they come from a far worse background, since many of them are still the persecuted from Nazi Germany. I explain it very simply — the corruption of power. Of course, I got long lectures from relatives in Israel about how you cannot expect a country coping with the politics of the modern world to follow ethical concepts . . . To me, it underlined the basic tragedy of the human race — that basically we are not very nice, are we? Power only corrupts if you are not intrinsically good.

Some Israelis would argue that ever since its creation, Israel has been at war, an embattled country struggling to survive, and that in the midst of this there was little energy left for certain things that others take for granted . . .

Well, that may have applied in the rest of Israel, but that area around Beersheva was not part of Gaza . . . And wasn't this even more reason to do right with the one group that had always stood with Israel — the Bedouin? [Bedouin serve in the Israeli army, often as trackers.] It's not just a matter of being just and humane, but also being politically astute to win them over.

My mother, who was German-Jewish, had in our house an original copy of Herzl's *Altneuland*, in which he talks of Jerusalem as the bridge between darkness and light for the whole world — his concept of a united nations in Jerusalem. I suppose Herzl is slowly rotating in his grave because of what is really happening there.

Power certainly does corrupt. In South Africa, some of the people who are least sympathetic to the problems of the very poor are those black people who are educated, who have risen above the heap. I once gave a graduation speech in 1989, just before Mandela's release, to a group at Soweto Training College, and I said to them: 'I have one fear — that each and every one of you, who

have scratched your way out of the refuse pile, will in turn take the attitude that "I've done it, why can't everyone else?"' This is one of the problems at the moment — the number of people on the make...

You see, the ethical code is common to all the great faiths, but very few of us render more than lip-service, do we?

Can you tell me something about your childhood and upbringing?

I was born in Bloemfontein, but grew up in Port Elizabeth. My father was a sheep farmer near Bloem, and at a certain time the whole Commonwealth except South Africa went off the gold standard. As a result the South African wool trade absolutely collapsed, and he was offered a job with the Imperial Cold Storage Group. Later he was promoted and transferred to PE. He was just on fifty when I was born — he married very late in life.

My paternal grandfather initially came to South Africa in 1860 from the Koenigsberg area of Germany, a place called Tapiau. He stayed here for ten years and became a British subject. Then like all German Jews of that vintage, he went back to Germany to find a wife. Well, he found a particularly tough wife, who said that no ways is she going back to wildest Africa — 'There's a good family business for you to go into...' So he stayed. The family in Germany were timber merchants — I presume they started as wood pedlars, but they had reached the stage where they had their little piece of ground and they were merchants. He never went back to South Africa, but he registered all his family as British subjects.

My father finished school at sixteen. His passion was mathematics and he wanted to go to university, but my grandfather said, 'Nonsense, the oldest son must go into the family business!' So my father said that in that case he was going to South Africa. He came out here in 1898, just before the Jameson Raid. The Franks, later the founders of Blyvooruitzicht Mine, were cousins, so my father was sent to work in their store in Potchefstroom. Then, when the Boer War broke out, the entire Franks family departed for Cape Town and left this eighteen-year-old boy to run the store. Then later he got into sheep farming.

He would go home to Germany every five years to see his family — that was one of the conditions of the family letting him come out. He went just after World War One, about 1922, and met my mother, whom he brought back to South Africa in 1924. I was born in 1926, and was an only child. We lived in Bloem and he had four farms.

Your background is very different from the East European, Lithuanian context from which most South African Jews derive. How were you influenced by the middle-class German-Jewish background from which you came?

I was influenced very much by it, although not so much from my father, who was very Anglicised in the South African sense. In his whole attitude he

always thought, as only a naturalised British subject could, that everything that Britain stood for was the best — British law, etc. He didn't deny the horror of the concentration camps but felt that the handling of the Boers after the war was more than generous.

When he went back to Germany to visit he would also travel elsewhere in Europe and England. The family were certainly quite well off. When he was offered reparations from Germany after the War for the family business, he wouldn't accept it. He said it was blood money, and he donated the entire amount to the State of Israel. Everyone in his family was wiped out except a brother who was in America and another who had come to South Africa.

My mother's family, whose name was Kahan, were devout Germans. We have records showing that the first Kahan was in Germany already at the end of the eighteenth century. Even in those days, long before Hitler, Prussia had a rigidly anti-Semitic code — any Jew who married had to get special permission. One of the earliest papers we have is an acknowledgement from the Prussian government for the *vorbeter* (they didn't acknowledge the term rabbi) Gedalia Kahan to marry the Jewess Sara Blumenthal.

My father was very well read, well educated. When they used to trek with the cattle to Botswana in winter, he would take these Oxford books, those leather-bound classics — he had loads of them — in his kit bag. He was a fanatic about languages. He insisted, from the word go, that he and I would speak English, but my mother should speak only German to me. He was a firm believer in the Goethe idea that '*die mehr sprachen du kenst, so mehr mensch du bist*' (the more languages you know, the greater your degree of humanity). Also, those were still the days of the European nanny, your white nanny, and at Tempe there was a domestic training school for girls of 'poor white' families and orphans. My father carefully selected an Afrikaans-speaking lass from Tempe as my nanny. She was not allowed to speak anything except Afrikaans to me. So I grew up with three languages — English, German and Afrikaans.

My father was actually a staunch Jew, a Jewish nationalist, but he was a militant agnostic. Not an atheist — an agnostic. He basically said that organised religion was the greatest tragedy that the world had seen. He came from a most Orthodox Jewish background, but he rejected it and never went to shul. His biggest hatred was the Day of Atonement — he said that it was a perversion that you go along on that day and repent, and the rest of the year you can do what you like.

Most of my parents' social circle were Jews of Eastern European origin. My mother's circle, however, were almost all Germans until 1933, most of them not Jewish. She lived just like a typical German housewife. Her father had been a fanatically Orthodox Jew, but he was also a 'German of Germans'. Of my mother's six brothers, every one of them volunteered for the German Army in World War One, and two of them were killed. They were very proud of the fact that they weren't conscripted, that they volunteered. I mean,

Hitler was just the biggest shock to her, because she was a German! Even to this day, when I think of my mother, I automatically think in German. When I think of my father I think in English.

My mother never really came to terms with the whole system that because you were black you were condemned to subservience. It was always drummed into me by her that it was wrong, even though she never did anything about it. Her family, the Kahans, had been printers for several generations, ever since the liberation of the Jews in Prussia under Frederick the Great, and she had been brought up in a German-Jewish household at a time of huge persecution of the Jews in Poland, etc.

Her father, who was not well off, opened his house to poor Jews looking for refuge. He headed the committee in Koenigsberg for helping Eastern European Jews, and she grew up in that sort of environment.

When we lived in PE we used to go out on Sundays to the company farm, and I would play with the little black kids who were in rags. My mother would always impress on me that my good fortune was thanks to my white skin. PE was a weird place — it actually had the first cell of the ANC in the country, under Clements Kadalie with his trade union. Govan Mbeki was a big name to me long before I had ever heard of Mandela and Sisulu. Some of my mother's friends were like-minded — there was Lolly Stein, there were the Gottschalks — Bernard — who went into exile. It was a liberal circle.

I went to Collegiate Girls' School. Because of the teachers, we were brought up in an intensely liberal atmosphere, which influenced me very much. Our pride and joy at the school was that Margaret Ballinger[3] was an 'old girl'.

If you had to give yourself a political label, what would you call yourself?

Well, I have certainly been on the left. My husband and I were among the founder members of the Progressive Party in Northcliff. I have always supported the principles of the Freedom Charter. I voted ANC in the election. Just before the election I was asked to endorse the ANC platform, and I stalled until they made a strong statement on land reform. Then I gave a written endorsement.

I have had a personal relationship with the Mandela family since 1980 through Nelson Mandela's daughter Zinzi, who came to work for me at Race Relations. Being Mandela's daughter prevented her getting jobs anywhere else at that time.

Can you describe how you initially got involved in the South African Institute of

3 Margaret Ballinger was a 'Native Representative' in parliament in 1949, when the communist Sam Kahn joined her. She was also a leading member of the Liberal Party.

Race Relations, and how this developed into your involvement in Operation Hunger?

I did three years of medicine at Wits when there were still blacks there. Those were the early days of the Afrikaans Nasionale Studentebond and Wits was an open university. We had to specify in writing that we were willing to work at the same anatomy table as blacks. Once in my class there were four blacks in a class of ten at an anatomy table. These were all men with BScs — mature, educated men who'd had to battle their guts out to get to where they were. And here was I, a silly eighteen-year-old flapper, as much concerned with dates as anything else, learning with them. And among the flappers like myself there were some who refused to work at tables with blacks. I remember being appalled. Later, I helped Arona Cohen start a night school for the staff at Wits, because we discovered that two-thirds of them were illiterate.

With my husband, the Army had an effect. When the Italian Campaign began they sent out an emergency appeal for medical dressers, so he, a fourth-year medical student, went to Italy. There he was attached to the American Fifth Army and later a British field hospital. There was a battalion of Gurkhas there, and what he learned, of course, was that blacks were people. From the time of the end of the War, he and I were acutely conscious of the dangerous path that South Africa was walking.

When I was first married I was involved in 1949 through Helga Kaye with the African Children's Feeding Scheme, which was started by Father Trevor Huddleston. This was in the last days of Sophiatown, when they were demolishing it. Most of it was broken down already, but there were still those last few streets, and we had a small feeding scheme there. Then we moved to Western Native Township.

I found it very unsatisfactory going in there and dishing things out. At one time, Helga was not there and the woman who came with me was 'Monday Club'. She brought along a box of tissues to wipe the children's snotty noses before she handed them the food. She didn't seem to notice their rags . . . I realised then that this top-down stuff was not for me.

Then in the sixties I met a marvellous woman called Doris Binswanger who was the founder, with Dawn Haggie, of the African Self Help Association, and I worked with them as a volunteer for about four years. Round about that time Sofasonke Mpanza led the people out of Orlando — there were those three squatter camps outside Orlando, and we went to help. I was a co-worker with a group of African women who basically ran the feeding scheme. My function was things like bringing the peanut butter and other food once a week. I was also involved with the sewing group, and we raised money to build a little crèche there. Then I moved over to do the same with a group in Pimville, and among those children were three of the cast of *King Kong*. I had two kids of my own at that stage, and I had a great old

Plymouth station wagon. I used to load the back with masses of toys and we piled all our kids in to play while the mothers worked.

By that time I'd also met Ellen Hellmann of Race Relations and I used to ask her for advice. I once said to her that I was working with only about twenty women, and we're affecting only about two hundred kids, while there were four thousand people in the squatter camp. Ellen looked at me very coldly and said, 'Aren't you being a bit presumptuous? Not many people are given the ability to move mountains, but if at the end of your life your shovelling molehills has helped fifty people, that's as much as most people have the right to expect.' And I agreed entirely.

By the way, I joined the Black Sash in the first year of its founding, when Mary Day was there, before she and Jimmy fled the country. I used to stand around at the airport protesting at the crack of dawn. My father-in-law was one of those people who gibbered that Jews shouldn't be seen to be doing things like that, because we would provoke anti-Semitism. My mother-in-law, who I adored, phoned me up and said, 'Be careful, there's a picture of you on the front page of the newspaper . . . ' And Dad said, 'You know, that looks like Ina.' She had to say to him, 'Don't be ridiculous, the hair's different . . . ' Fortunately it wasn't a very good photograph . . .

During those years my husband and I decided that with Christian National Education, we couldn't possibly send our kids to a government school, which left us the choice between the local Convent and King David. We took a very cold-blooded decision, because we were totally opposed to chauvinism, and the chauvinism of our own people was as displeasing to us as any other . . . so we chose the Convent and De La Salle and later Woodmead for our kids.

Did you still hold to that view that King David School represents a chauvinistic attitude?

I'm a bit out of touch now. It depends a lot on the headmaster, and I think the two Wolf brothers did an enormous amount to change that. But certainly in those days, King David Victory Park was unbelievable! It was narrow and inward-looking . . .

Do you regard yourself as very Jewish?

I regard myself as Jewish and I believe deeply in God. Obviously my whole moral code is Jewish. I can't bear cant and I can't bear dogma. That's why today we are no longer members of the Orthodox congregation — we were initially, but we moved over [to Reform] about ten years ago. Look, I never generalise, I can only talk in personalities. But certainly in far too many of the Orthodox congregations I've seen, Zionism is a substitute for religious faith — a Zionism that excludes awareness of the situation in the country that has basically put you in a position to be a Zionist.

But now with Rabbi Harris [the Orthodox Chief Rabbi], things may be different. I listened to him on that *Agenda* programme on TV, and he talked about the role that religious leadership has to play in terms of morality, violence, etc, and I was most impressed. The previous Chief Rabbi, Casper, was also sometimes very supportive of the concept of Judaism having to help in poverty. In fact, when Operation Hunger started, he sent for me and he based his Yom Kippur appeal on this. Of course, the Reform rabbis were always much more outspoken – Lampert, who they kicked out, then Mendel, and also Assabi.

Can you tell me something about your philosophy in running Operation Hunger?

In my community work I had come to realise the futility of setting up tea parties for black and white to meet together, which some well-meaning people were doing. I knew that unless you had a project in common it was totally contrived and artificial. My work at Race Relations had been mainly similar to what the Black Sash was doing – working with people, working with women's groups, setting up community projects. But I knew that the answer was for the people themselves to get involved and to confront. I literally would drop a black woman a block away from the government offices and send her in and say to her, 'If you are in trouble, come back for me . . . but you do it, you show this bastard that you know the law . . . '

There were a helluva lot of people who wanted to be involved in the political activist thing, but far fewer in the hard grind of working with the community. Then, after the 1976 student uprising in Soweto, about seven hundred kids pitched up and said we want you to arrange a bridging programme to get us through our exams. I went to Freddie van Wyk, the head of Race Relations, and said I don't care what the activists say, if we are there to carry out the will of the community, then seven hundred kids represent the will of the community and we must do it.

More and more it became clear to me that black women, particularly rural women, were in dire need – we knew it from the figures coming in. (You know, one of the cleverest things that Verwoerd did was that simultaneously with stopping the compulsory school feeding system, which existed until about 1958-59, he stopped the publication of figures on malnutrition and kwashiorkor – until then the publication of figures had been mandatory.) What was coming through was that the malnutrition situation in South Africa was becoming absolutely gross. Then the KwaZulu drought started, and more and more organisations were phoning in and saying that the Institute of Race Relations had to take a lead.

By that time, which was 1977-78, John Rees had taken over Race Relations, and if there was any founder of Operation Hunger it was him. The basic philosophy was: Firstly, you never went anywhere unless you were invited by the community – there was no 'lady bountiful' stuff. Tragically, if

a community hadn't got its act together sufficiently to know that it had a problem, there was very little you could do anyway. Secondly, when you were invited in, you listened to what the community said — you never took the lead. Because if you took the lead in the situation in South Africa at that time, you lost the community for ever, because you were working with communities that were used to being told what to do, particularly in rural areas.

We insisted that the feeding programme was crisis intervention only — the long-term solution had to be self-help. Later on we realised that in terms of school feeding there had to be an intermediate four to five years of intervention before the community turned themselves around economically.

And there had to be volunteers from the community doing the work — Operation Hunger's role was never a handout one. Never in my Operation Hunger life did I personally hand out a food parcel or dish out a cup of soup. It was always very difficult coping with white volunteers who wanted to go out there and play the Victorian role. That was not our attitude. We insisted that feeding should be part of community development. From the word go the communities knew help was temporary, that at some point they had to do it themselves.

I always used to say to my field staff that the answer was to listen to the people. I used to sit at these endless community meetings saying to myself 'Shut up!' when they looked at me and expected a response. I would tell them if an idea was impractical, but never take the lead. Two words were totally taboo in my philosophy: the word 'teach', and that terrible word 'hand-up', which is particularly beloved of relief groups. It's the effect on you, not on the people — your leaning down to hand up. In fact 'hand out' is what it's about — in the sense that the community puts out a hand, you take that hand and you walk together.

Through all those years of activity, you were coming from an upper middle-class environment, but you were working with the most devastated and poverty-stricken communities. How did you cope with this huge gap between yourself and them?

Well, you did always have one thing in common with even the poorest person, and that was your caring and your humanity. You know that Kipling thing: 'The Colonel's lady and Julie O'Grady are sisters under the skin'. I found that provided you worked with the women, provided you listened to them, they accepted you. When I was out in the field I stayed with them, there was never a question about it. It was either a mission station or I would stay with people in their homes. The hardest line that I walked was accepting what you knew had been a battle for them . . . the fact that the meal you had there was an exceptional one, that they had put it together especially for you.

And — on a purely personal level — you must never pretend to be what

you are not. You must be yourself. I used to say to my people, 'We can't pretend. I am what I am, and I am trying to understand what you are . . . I know what you are going through, but I can't say I've personally experienced it.'

I always remember one of my black co-workers saying to me, 'You know, at home I have only one tap, outside, and we haven't got a bathroom, but I would kill any one of my kids if they went anywhere looking like some of these white radical students.' You know what I mean – the great unwashed radical, who comes from an affluent home but dresses as though he is poverty-stricken as a gesture.

Did you ever experience any resentment against you, people saying, 'Oh you rich white women, you come here from your comfortable homes . . . '

No, because we never went unless we were invited. That was the whole point. And people knew that if I did stay over, I was quite happy to put a mattress down on the floor and bring a sleeping bag or whatever. I found that they did want that. For example, the husband of a very dear friend died recently, and everyone took it for granted that I would come to her, take my shoes off in the passage, that I would sit on the floor with her. That I wouldn't just pitch up for the funeral like a whitey – that I would come the night before, sit through the vigil, wash in the basin with all the other women . . .

A lot of your activities in the white world involved fund-raising. Can you talk a little about how you got white businessmen in big corporations to give their money to Operation Hunger?

Well, for one thing we could show them total accountability, that Operation Hunger was run on a strictly business basis, and had minimum administration expenses. And secondly, you must never forget that corporations are still made up of people.

Once we put it to them that a country like South Africa, with the fourth or fifth highest gross national product in Africa, had children dying of hunger . . . It's not difficult to follow the logic through – chronic hunger affects educability, educability affects productivity, and so on.

Look, the brilliant success of apartheid was the dividing of black and white. We [at the Institute of Race Relations] did a survey once, stopping people in the street in Braamfontein, and we worked out that 85 per cent of whites passing by had never ever been into Soweto.

But you know, to me the most fantastic thing about South Africa was that our biggest support never came from the corporate sector, or from the government – it came from the man in the street, from mister and missus average. Our average contribution was about R20. Until 1986 when Operation Hunger doubled its budget in one year, 90 per cent of our funding

was raised in South Africa. Even in 1992-93, when we raised R34 million, 60 per cent of funding came from within the country.

How many people did Operation Hunger reach?

Well, in feeding alone we were reaching 1,8 million, and another 200 000 with the agricultural self-help programme. A total of about two million people.

Can you tell me about some of the personal high points for you during your long involvement in Operation Hunger?

An event which was very meaningful to me occurred in October 1993, when the Morota-Maredi tribe of Sekhukhuneland, in what was the homeland of Lebowa, conferred upon me the title of *Mmabatho* ('Mother of the People'). Their chief is the paramount chief of Sekhukhuneland. These are people that I had worked with since 1983 in Operation Hunger and other projects, and I knew them very well. There is a special necklace that is worn only with the chief's permission, and they gave it to me to wear at the special ceremony at Mohlaletsi. I felt very honoured.

You see, in 1983 KK (he is known as KK, but is actually Chief Kenneth Sekhukhune) was selected by the elders of the tribe as chief, and thus became the paramount chief of Sekhukhuneland. But the Lebowa government deposed him totally arbitrarily in 1988. They wanted to put in Ryan Thulare, his brother — they had different mothers but the same father. It was that old Verwoerdian thing, whereby the selection of chiefs was transferred from the tribal elders to the government, which would then put in its own puppets. All over Lebowa you found cases where the people supported one chief and the government chief was the guy who was oppressing them.

KK is an extraordinary man, and he's got 80 per cent support in the tribe. He is one of the few homeland chiefs with whom Operation Hunger was prepared to work, because of his integrity. He is in his mid-thirties, and blind — when he was eighteen he was visiting in Soweto, and was hit in the back of the head and received a brain injury.

Well, the tribe took the government to court to contest the deposing of KK. The court case was still pending when the government forcefully moved Ryan Thulare in. It was funny, because the tribe wouldn't let him into the royal kraal at Mohlaletsi — the government had to establish him in a caravan just outside it.

Ryan Thulare is a nothing — he was controlled by a couple of people in government. For example, one Christmas they had the first rains in the area for eight years, and he suddenly laid down that the people all had to pay him a R50 'ploughing fee' before they could plough their land. As an act of solidarity, even those who could afford the R50 didn't pay it, because they

said it was illegal.

The Lebowa government did everything they could to get rid of KK. But that tribe, who are as poor as church mice, raised a quarter-million rand for the court case. The tribe actually won the case in 1989, but then the Lebowa government appealed it. The judgment was later upheld by the Appellate Division in 1991, the verdict being that a homeland government could not overrule the traditional custom that the elders elect the chief. It was a watershed judgment.

Anyway, they had this ceremony in October 1993 which was officially celebrating the tenth year of KK's installation as chief, but it was really thumbing their noses at the Lebowa government. And in the middle of it all (I didn't know about it in advance — they had simply asked me to be one of the speakers) they conferred on me the title of *Mmabatho*. KK's real mother was already dead.

The special yellow and black bead necklace, the royal necklace, is very distinctive, and one can only wear it with the chief's special permission. He gave permission for me to wear it. And that is something that I am terribly proud of. The ceremony was very moving . . . The chief was up there on the dais, arrayed in his cheetah skin over his very smart suit, and there were flowers all around. All the important people of the tribe were there, the elders and so on, and he put the necklace on me. Then the women all crowded around me and put this special shawl around me, a sort of brown and white colour — the only other woman who wears that particular colour is the mother of the candle wife.

Traditionally, the chief's mother and the mother of the candle wife play a special role. The candle wife is the woman selected by the tribe from whom the chief's heirs will come. The Bagomani — the elders — select whichever of her sons they think is most competent to be chief. She is called the candle wife because she is brought in at midnight in a candle procession on the night of the official wedding.

How did you feel when they conferred the title of Mmabatho on you?

It was the culmination of everything that working with the people meant, because it came from the people themselves, with the women acknowledging it . . . It is obviously a very formal necklace. I wore it at the inauguration of President Nelson Mandela. The Pedis who were there in the area where I was sitting at the inauguration told the chief about it, and he phoned me to say how thrilled he was.

What did your family think of this?

My husband was not there — he can never come on a Saturday because of his doctor's practice, and I didn't tell him about it. He was furious that I hadn't

told him — he would have cancelled his consulting to be there. I knew that I was going to be making a speech, but I didn't know that this was going to happen. It was a surprise. As far as I know, it's never happened to a white person before. When I told my son-in-law Peter Delius, who is a historian, he sort of whistled and said, 'My God, that's an honour!' He is the official historian to the Sekhukhune tribe — they appointed him after he wrote the book *This Land is Mine*.

Operation Hunger has had a long involvement in the area and is still working there. For example, we have established about eighty vegetable gardens in that particular area.

But I also got very involved on the political side. You see, they ran out of money for the court case, which eventually cost half a million rand, so I raised the money from various American legal advice organisations. In his speech KK said that if it hadn't been for my intervention, my persuading the USAID people to help, they might not have succeeded in the court case.

Are there any other highlights that come to mind?

Look, I've always believed in thinking small. I've always believed that the biggest excuse for doing nothing is the what-I-do-is-a-drop-in-the-ocean problem. We have to learn to think in puddles, not in ponds. All over the country today there are little oases that are being set up. In a personal sense, a lot of my greatest excitement is that I can see that a lot of communities all over the place are now on their feet and no longer need Operation Hunger.

But it's also the individuals. For example, the educational programme which I ran at the Institute after 1976 — some of my biggest excitement is those kids. I got a message in 1982 that four kids who had gone through our upgrade programme for three years had graduated as doctors. I was invited to the party.

It's also the little communities, like the little village of Matsike in Venda, where we started one of our first pre-school projects . . . I was talking to someone yesterday who said that those twenty women from Matsike, starting from their vegetable garden, have now built up a business where the average earning is R4000 a month.

How do you feel about the prospects for South Africa now? Do you think we will make it?

Look, we will make it. South Africa always does make it — God knows why, but we do. Of course, all us white liberals will no longer be in the leadership positions, we will have to find a new role for ourselves, but that is the way it should be.

But my biggest concern at the moment is that we are doing much too much talking . . . We're not listening to the people, we're imposing from

above. It's all sanctified because it's in the name of a black government, but my constituency, the ultra-poor, will just fall through the cracks if we're not damn careful. The poor will benefit, but not the ultra-poor. There is grave danger unless we move quickly. People won't accept that everything will stay the same for four years — they won't accept it! You have to give people some hope! The most crucial problem area at the moment is the youth — that huge group from about fourteen to twenty-four who are not just marginalised, but are actually the no-hope people. The worst thing is the acceptability of violence amongst them.

If you look at Mugabe and those first ten years in Zimbabwe — the man had giant courage. He took office in October, and announced that from 1 January there would be free and compulsory education for everyone. OK, it was a shambles at first — they brought in teachers from Australia and other places and dumped them in the bush. They couldn't speak Shona and the kids couldn't speak English. But it didn't matter — it gave people hope.

You know, my brother-in-law is a commercial farmer in Zimbabwe, and after Mugabe took over, my husband and I decided to drive up there instead of flying, as a sort of celebration. All along the way between Beit Bridge and the old Fort Victoria, there always used to be kids popping out of every bush asking for sweeties. So at Messina I bought R50 worth of penny-horribles. We stopped at the first point, and the kids popped out of the bushes, but they didn't want sweeties — they asked for books, magazines, anything that they could read, and you could see that a whole new world had opened up for them.

Further on we stopped at Lundi River, where an old guy with an old rusty gun used to take you down to see the hippos at the pool. I said to this man, 'What's happened?' He had worked on the mines, so he could speak English, and he said to me, 'It's quite simple. Look, my life won't change, not even my children's lives. But I know, and my children know, that if my grandchildren are prepared to sit on their butts and work, the whole world is theirs.'

The other thing that Mugabe did was that he abolished the power of the chiefs over land. He laid down that if you were going to be working your land, you then had a right to own it. Look at the incredible results — in the 1989 figures, before the drought, 40 per cent of all cotton and 60 per cent of the maize was being produced by the small farmer. (Zimbabwe was the biggest producer of cotton and maize in Southern Africa.) I think this is what we have got to do.

Given that the Jewish community is a rather wealthy one, and that many of its members have the opportunity to go to other countries like Australia, what do you think you can realistically expect from the community?

I don't know. Someone once said to me that the best thing that happened to Zimbabwe was the 'when-we's leaving [the ex-Rhodesians who left Zimbabwe and continue forever to talk about the past, 'when we . . .']. The

people who stayed in Zimbabwe knew that they had to change their attitudes and become Zimbabweans. Look, your average Jew here has got to make a decision. Most South African Jews don't intend actually going to live in Israel, but they pay that lip-service. We have got to get our priorities right, and this is where our main energies should be going. When you look at the size of the Johannesburg Women's Zionist League as opposed to the Union of Jewish Women, it's absolutely terrifying. The Union, which was one of the ten original co-founders of Operation Hunger and is a wonderful organisation, has a membership which I think is not even 20 per cent of the Zionist League.

If Jews want to have a future in this country, if they want to enjoy the benefits of South Africa, they have got to make this their first priority. This country is now in as great a turmoil as Israel was when it was founded, or as it was after the Six Day War. Until a few years ago South African Jews gave more per capita to Israel than any other Jewish community, including America. Over the years when we were fund-raising there were always certain Jewish businessmen who were so pro-Israel that we knew we would never get more than a pittance from them compared to what they gave to Israel. Haven't we got to think a bit?

So you believe that South African Jewish money should be diverted from Israel to development projects within South Africa?

Or reduced. Or maybe we have got to go into an era of 'giving', perhaps at the expense of some other things. There are no two ways. Anti-Semitism is always just under the surface throughout the world, and in a situation that is in turmoil, this can be fanned very easily. When there are problems it could come from all over.

On a more general level, how do you feel towards Israel and what it has achieved over the years?

Look, the negative impression I gave you earlier about Israel is not at all fair — it was just one snapshot, and doesn't describe the whole situation. I would say that in general Israel itself is a miracle — that it ever happened. Look, that sort of success is always based on an intense moral fibre, and the Israelis had it. I get the impression now, and it worries me enormously, that I don't know how much of that moral fibre is still left in Israel. Power corrupts.

Of course, one can never judge a country by its expatriates, so I am not talking about the Israelis one finds here in South Africa. I have absolutely nothing in common with them.

Do you think we have something to learn from the Israeli experience?

We could have. The whole arid lands thing, for example. But it's got to be modified. Their high-tech subsistence farming has got to be modified for a

population which is 80 per cent functionally illiterate. The early stuff they did when they first started their involvement in Africa was good.

There are also other opportunities. Israel did wonders with the violence-ridden youth that was brought through from Europe. For example, I remember talking to someone who taught at this children's village called Ben Shemen, where they brought orphaned children after World War Two. These were virtually little gangsters, totally traumatised, who had been hiding in caves and so on. The Israelis worked out successful rehabilitation programmes. Also, Israeli youth have, like our youth, grown up in a state of chronic war. There's a lot of that experience that can come through to us.

But again, we must not be setting up elaborate programmes where the bottom line is being seen to be doing something. We must forget that we are trying to boost the Jewish community. The boosting will come if we do things right.

How do you relate to being well known as someone who has made a significant contribution to the lives of hundreds of thousands of people?

I never even think of it. As far as I'm concerned, I could never have lived in South Africa without doing what I did. I happened to be the right person at the right time. Operation Hunger saw some people through the difficult period when the government was playing games. I was privileged to be part of a relevant process.

Did your involvement affect your family?

First of all, I didn't get really involved until my kids were old enough. But I am very proud that the two of them who are in South Africa, and even those in Canada, are all in 'people-work'.

What I do feel sad about is that more and more, because of our views, we have dropped out of the Jewish community. Because, increasingly, the majority of our Jewish friends didn't share our views, and you didn't want every encounter to turn into an argument. We have lost contact with many of our Jewish friends and the community, and this has happened to my children as well.

Has this made you feel any less Jewish?

No. One of the things I learnt from Operation Hunger was an enormous personal faith. I get the impression that since 1990 the Jewish rank and file of the community have moved more to the right politically. It's the old story — when fear comes in the door, logic goes out the window. And they are all so terrified . . .

HELEN SUZMAN

'Once I had absorbed the ill-treatment that blacks were subjected to, which happened quite early in my life, I thought that you can't stay in this country unless you do something about it.'

Helen Suzman was born in Germiston in 1917, the daughter of Lithuanian immigrants, Samuel and Frieda Gavronsky. Her father, who was very poor upon his arrival in South Africa, became a successful businessman and the family was well-off by the time Helen was born. Her mother died two weeks after her birth. Ten years later her father remarried, this time to an English Jewess. She attended school at Parktown Convent, did a BCom degree at Wits University, and became active in the South African Institute of Race Relations. In 1947 she prepared evidence for the Fagan Commission on laws restricting the mobility of blacks. In 1953 she was elected United Party MP for Houghton. She remained in parliament for thirty-six consecutive years, until 1989, consistently using her position to oppose apartheid laws and expose the injustices they caused. In 1959 she was one of eleven United Party members who broke away to form the anti-apartheid Progressive Party. For thirteen years, from 1961-74, she was the lone MP of the Progressive Party in parliament and often the sole anti-apartheid voice. In 1967 she visited Nelson Mandela and his comrades in the Robben Island Prison, and achieved many improvements in prison conditions there and elsewhere. Breyten Breytenbach, the poet, artist and activist, wrote of her: 'The prisoners, both political and common law, consider her as Our Lady of the Prisoners. She is indeed a living myth among the people inhabiting the World of Shadows.'

In 1993 she was one of eleven South Africans appointed to the Independent Electoral Commission, charged with overseeing the country's first democratic elections. She has received numerous awards, including twenty-two honorary doctorates, from Oxford, Harvard, Columbia, Brandeis, and other institutions; the UN Award of the International League for Human Rights; two separate nominations for the Nobel Peace Prize; Dor L'Dor award of B'Nai Brith International; and the American Liberties Medallion of the American Jewish Community. In 1989 she became an Honorary Dame Commander of the Civil Division of the Order of the British Empire, conferred by Queen Elizabeth II.

Left:
Helen Suzman (Photograph: Gisèle Wulfsohn)

Interviewed by Geoff Sifrin
27 March 1995
Johannesburg

Your father, Sam Gavronsky, and his brother Oscar were immigrants from a shtetl called Klykoliai, in Lithuania. Can you tell me something about him and the shtetl?

Yes, it's about a two-hour drive from the border of Latvia. An Associated Press correspondent in South Africa whom I was friendly with was transferred to Stockholm. He visited Lithuania, and he phoned me to say, 'Guess where I have just been . . . to Klykoliai!' I said, 'My God, it actually exists . . . I hope you visited the "ancestral castle" in which my father was born.' He said, 'Well, there are not many ancestral castles there, but there was a Jewish cemetery.' But he couldn't decipher the names because they were all in Hebrew. Of course, the ancestral castle was a small wooden house, poverty-stricken . . . I think my family were traders of some kind.

Did your father ever pass on any stories about the shtetl?

Never. And we didn't press him. I think that was because one was so busy being a South African child. And now, of course, one regrets the things that one didn't ask, because I really don't have any knowledge of the background at all. I know that it was a large family – there was one girl and there were eight brothers, all of whom came out here eventually, one by one, but not the sister. She stayed behind and died there. But one of her daughters came out here, and she is in fact Irene Menell's mother.[1]

The family ties were not strong. We saw very little of our avuncular relations. One brother, Oscar, was my father's partner in the hides and skins and meat business they started. Oscar did the cattle buying, and acquired the reputation of being able to estimate the total weight of a pen of animals to the nearest ten pounds. My father managed all the financial stuff, he was very bright at that. And between the two of them they did very well, although they didn't really communicate much with each other. There was hardly ever any conversation between them.

The two brothers had married two sisters, and since my mother died two weeks after I was born, we went to live with my aunt, Oscar's wife, who was childless. One of the things I remember clearly is that there were no books in the house at all.

1 Irene Menell was Progressive Federal Party provincial counsellor for Houghton for nine years, and lost the Houghton seat to Tony Leon when Helen Suzman retired.

Did your father speak Yiddish at home?

I understand Yiddish quite well, but I don't actually speak it. I picked it up from my father and aunt and uncle talking together at home. They spoke only Yiddish. But they never mentioned the shtetl at all. It was a strange thing — it was as if they wanted to forget everything about their past life in Russia. It was a hard life, and they left to escape the draft . . . the usual story.

I used to ask my father in the dark days of the apartheid regime, 'Why did you come here? You could have gone to America! Why on earth didn't you go to America?' And he used to say, 'You're crazy, this is by far the best country in the world!' None of his siblings went to America, they all came here, and some of them worked for him — he also had a soap factory. Two of his brothers worked there, and one worked with him in the hides and skins and meat business in Pretoria and Johannesburg and Germiston.

One of the brothers, Boris, was the educated one — he went to a gymnasium in Europe — he could speak languages and so on. He was literate in English. My father taught himself to read English, but he didn't know it when he came to this country.

After your father remarried, you grew up with two cultures — your stepmother was of English origin, and your father of Lithuanian origin — and you carry within you both of those cultures . . .

That's right. I understand both cultures, but I don't necessarily follow either of them to the letter. There were lots of things that I didn't like about both cultures. For example, this snob thing that my stepmother had, irritated me. She came from a very ordinary English Jewish family, but she rather liked the idea of socialising with the rich . . . she had those values. She also had a lot of very good values, like trying to improve the household, and giving us an understanding of good clothes, good furniture and good taste, and so on, which we would never have had in the other culture . . .

What did you get from your father?

Just to be damn hard working! His most endearing characteristics were his sense of humour and his love of animals, but aside from that he was a rather contemptuous man, a cynic in many ways. He had a lot of contempt for people who didn't do well, because he had 'done it' himself. He was a self-made man, and he couldn't understand why others couldn't be successful as well. He had very little sympathy for the underdog, and very little sympathy for the blacks in this country. He didn't think of them as people that one had to be compassionate about, understand their disabilities, and so on.

Did he understand the politics of the country, or was this just a gut reaction?

It was a gut reaction. But he was very concerned about the Jews in this country, and was a generous giver to Jewish charities. He was not religious. I do not have a religious background at all. My stepmother used to light candles on Friday evenings when we had family dinners. She couldn't speak any Hebrew, so she wouldn't say the blessing over the candles or anything like that. But they used to go off to shul on the High Holy Days, all togged up.

Did you go with them?

No, I didn't go with them. I initially went once or twice, and didn't like it at all. I didn't understand what was going on, I didn't like the segregation of females. It was the ordinary 'conservative' Jewish shul, the Wolmarans Street synagogue. Not Lubuvitcher, not Orthodox to that extent. We didn't keep a kosher home at all, except that they would never serve pork at home. But I used to be amused when we went away on holiday to see my father ordering bacon and eggs, which he thoroughly enjoyed. But we would never have it at home.

Did he come from a religious background in the shtetl and reject it, or simply not come from a religious background at all?

I don't think he came from a religious background at all. But again, we never knew, because he didn't talk about it. I mean, I didn't know my grandparents at all. I have never even seen a photograph of them. For him it was really a matter of closing that chapter ... he was only about seventeen or eighteen when he came out here, and he was so glad to get out of it. You know, to get to somewhere with a decent climate, and where there were no restrictions per se on Jews, no attempts to keep them down. There was also not much encouragement for them either from people in power. But as long as you were hard working, you could make your own way. And he did. He had no formal education. He had the shtetl education.

Do you think that you carry in you anything deriving from that shtetl culture?

Only survival. But then again, that could have been my father's genes rather than the shtetl. I really only became aware of anti-Semitism when I was a teenager, not before. Also I was sent to a convent, because one couldn't get into one of the Anglican schools. I know I was trotted off on trial to Roedean, for instance, and in the end I went to Parktown Convent, as my father and stepmother thought private schools superior to the government schools.

When I was nineteen, that was already the beginning of the Hitler regime in Germany, and I was very conscious of that. I never experienced anti-Semitism at school or university, but I knew what was happening in the big

wide world. My father, of course, was furious with Smuts for closing the doors of South Africa to Jews at that time, preventing Jewish refugees from coming here to escape the Nazis. He never forgave Smuts for that.

You come across in the world as an extremely self-confident person. Were you always like that?

I was always fairly independent. Not having a mother was one factor in this. My aunt was a very cold woman, not affectionate at all. And with my stepmother, we got on OK, but it wasn't the same maternal relationship that one would have had with a mother. So I learned early to do my own thing. My father was not around [for] organising entertainments, or taking one out for picnics or anything like that. There was none of that in the household at all. So I made my own friends and organised my own life.

Was that childhood independence sufficient to give you the confidence to go out into high-level politics, into parliament . . .?

It was the actual knowledge of what was going on which motivated me, and I became more knowledgeable when I started to teach economic history at Wits. It was a gradual development. I initially joined the Institute of Race Relations because the subject interested me. The Institute was a great educational factor in my life. I intended to do law, and I would have been a good lawyer, even if I say so myself, because I was good at picking up relevant points and developing them. But then I dropped out of college halfway through my degree, got married, and had a child. I then went back and finished my degree, and did very much better then. I was too young the first time — I went to university just turned sixteen. It was ridiculous. I should have had another two years at school and developed my attitudes and become more mature. But never mind . . . then I did quite well, and started teaching economic history at Wits. And you know, as you teach you learn. The Institute was run at that time by people like Ellen Hellmann, Senator Brookes, Barn Friedman, Rheinallt Jones, all the old greats . . .

From what you have said, your awareness of the situation of blacks in this country did not come from your home.

Absolutely! We never talked about these things at home. I had a very privileged life, although my father didn't flash money around at all. He was a careful man, taught us the value of money, that it didn't grow on trees. And 'switch the lights off, because electricity costs money'. He was very stern about that sort of thing, but nevertheless we never lacked anything materially.

There must have been servants in the house. How did he relate to them?

They were treated civilly, but not with great generosity or much care about where they lived or what families they had. They were considered 'domestic servants', with no real personal relationship. In fact, I never really met blacks in any other relationship until I went to university. And even there not to any great extent, because there weren't many blacks there. There was no incident in my life where I had any immediate switch, but as I read more and taught more... and as I say, the Institute was a big factor in my life. Then in 1947 I prepared evidence for the Fagan Commission on migrant labour commissioned by Smuts, and I suddenly realised that blacks didn't have the right to live a family life because of laws restricting their mobility. I was shocked. This was one of the things that brought me into politics.

Is there anybody that you would call a mentor?

Well, Ellen Hellmann was a big influence in my life because she was so knowledgeable. And there were people like Hansi Pollack. She had a big influence on me at the Institute and when she lectured at Wits in economic history. From her I learned facts, the unpleasant facts that applied to you if you were not white. Also, Julius Lewin, who taught African law and administration, had a lot of influence on me. That's where I learned the law as it applied to blacks, and became really keen to see if I could do anything about it.

Did they impart to you a value system as well as factual information?

Oh yes. Because I didn't learn much of that at home at all. Home was a different thing — getting up, going to school, having a tennis party or going to parties, having friends around — it was a very pleasant life. Privileged, young white South African, but not much relating to a value system.

You mention in In No Uncertain Terms *[Helen's autobiography] that your Jewish background was one of the things that influenced you. What does your Jewishness mean to you?*

Well, it was just an awareness of the fact that I was Jewish, that there were anti-Semites, and that Jews weren't allowed in certain clubs and in certain schools. And then there was the persecution under the Hitler regime. That was really what it was about. It had no religious aspect to it at all. Absolutely none.

So for you, your Jewishness is more of an ethnic thing...

Absolutely. I never joined any Jewish clubs, I never went to synagogue, there were no rabbis who ever had any influence in my life. I knew Rabbi Landau.

He actually married us, but he just happened to be the rabbi at the Wolmarans Street shul and my husband used to go there on the High Holy Days. My husband wasn't a religious man either, but it meant more to him than it did to me. To me it was purely ethnic.

What did you feel when you were in a shul?

Well, if you can't read Hebrew and you can't follow the service, it doesn't mean much to you.

Do you have any views about whether there is a God?

No, I don't. I am just not religious. It is as simple as that. I think that everybody must make up their own mind about that. But I must say that I react very strongly against fundamentalism in all religions, because it leads to such extreme actions. People will do almost anything in the name of Allah or God or Christ or whatever else, because they believe it will give them entry into whatever heaven they believe in.

When you die and are buried, does it matter to you that you should be buried in a Jewish cemetery?

My own preference would probably be to be cremated, but I am not adamant about it. If my children wanted a proper burial for me in the Jewish way that would also be OK. My husband was buried in the Jewish cemetery, and he had a very fine burial service, conducted by Chief Rabbi Harris. It is a way of showing respect for what one's life has been.

If we consider just the ethnic side of Jewishness, what are the values that that implies for you, or that you think are carried along from generation to generation?

Getting on in the world, I suppose, was the big thing. Because that was really what was stressed at home. That 'he' did well and 'that one' didn't do well, 'that one' was a loafer and 'that one' was a hard worker, 'that one' was a brilliant man and 'that one' was a fool.

Would you describe this as the striving for excellence?

Yes. You know, for example, the ambitions of Jewish parents for their children ... I always remember a joke one of my Jewish friends told me. I said to this friend, 'It's a shame in a way, when our parents' generation dies out there will be no more Yiddish in South Africa.' So he said to me, 'Don't worry, my dear, there will always be three Yiddish expressions: 'mazeltov, extra lessons, and stop orders'. You see, that's what it was — you got extra

lessons for your children because they weren't getting on well enough, and the stop orders for charity were always there because all Jews felt that they had a responsibility towards the Jewish community, to make sure that poor Jews were looked after by Jews. My father, for instance, donated a surgical theatre to the Jewish Old Age Home, and he always gave donations to Jewish causes... And I do the same, by the way. I give to Zionism, and to the Women's Benevolent Society, and the Union of Jewish Women. But I take no part in the activities, not as a matter of principle, but because I am more interested in other things, rather than in doing that sort of straight charity work. But I have considerable regard for those people who it.

Would you also perhaps call that a Jewish value, the fact that Jews take care of each other?

Yes, absolutely. They look after their own, and that is a good value, an excellent value!

Do you feel a strong sense of your own ethnic Jewishness?

Well, of course one is always more totally at ease with people who have your same background, ethnic basis and same past experiences (I won't include religion, because it plays so little role for me). But I also have lots of friends from other ethnic groups.

The Jews are often accused of being insular and exclusive. To some extent, you are an exception to this...

Am I really? Surely not...

Well, for example, most Jewish parents don't want their children to 'marry out', want them to mix with Jewish friends, and so on...

Well, you'll find that most Anglican parents don't want their kids to marry Catholics... And certainly wouldn't want their kids to marry across the colour line...

So you don't think that this sense of exclusivity is a particularly Jewish thing?

Well, perhaps because they are such a small group in the general population, they are more apt to stick together... and it is also easier socially, of course. You know, when you are with Jews you can always throw in a Jewish word or expression here and there. It is a more relaxed atmosphere with your own group... But I also have a lot of non-Jewish friends who enjoy that part of it too.

On the question of politics and rabbis, have you ever been disappointed that rabbis have not been very outspoken on the issue of apartheid over the years?

Well, some have. For example, Rabbi Harris. But that's now, in recent times. Way back, you never heard much from the rabbis — they were much more concerned with what was happening to the Jewish community.

Did this disappoint you? Did you expect more of them?

Well, I never thought much about what they said, because the religious side was of no interest to me at all. But I thought that the Jewish Board of Deputies should have spoken up more against apartheid. Of course, they changed over the last ten years, and became very much more outspoken in their condemnation. Prior to that, I think they were just dead scared to bring the Jews under the beady eye of people like Dr Verwoerd, who were outspokenly anti-Semitic. And they were not going to subject the small, minority Jewish population to any strictures which the Nat government might have brought on them.

You would have wanted to see them take the risk of anti-Semitism and speak out?

Yes, I would have. You know, when I was in the position that I could use being in parliament I spoke out even though there was a lot of anti-Semitism in parliament itself, but I didn't give a damn about that.

But of course you weren't speaking officially as a Jew . . .

I never ever spoke officially as a Jew! But I never spoke officially as a spokesperson for black people either. I spoke on issues.

But you agree that the Jewish Board making a statement would have been seen in a different light?

Yes, but still I would have thought it was the right thing to do. I was very pleased when my brother-in-law Arthur Suzman became the chairperson in the seventies, and they started making statements against apartheid.

Do you have some particular connection or affinity with blacks because of the common history of oppression which both blacks and Jews share?

Not in South Africa, because Jews were always white here. Therefore they were part of the privileged class regarding the franchise, entering the professions, and so on. Many of them have done extremely well here. The social ostracism against the Jews came not from the government but from the English-speaking South Africans. It was a social thing for them — they didn't

want Jews in clubs and so on, though there was a religious aspect as well — the Christian aspect.

Regarding blacks, I did not feel a special affinity but rather an awareness of the unfairness of the situation. Like the fact that they couldn't own land except in certain areas, which was the same situation in Tsarist Russia for the Jews. And certain jobs which they couldn't do — there was also job reservation in Russia preventing Jews from doing certain jobs.

You mention in your book that when the Nats came to power, you considered leaving South Africa . . .

Yes, I didn't think we'd ever get them out.

Over the past four decades many whites have left, and many Jews amongst them . . .

Oh yes, I hardly know a family whose children aren't 'away'. It is a very sad loss for this country.

This brings us to an issue which Jews have always faced, the issue of 'dual loyalty'. They have often been accused of being loyal first to Jews and Israel, and only secondly to their country of residence . . .

Well, I think that that applies to every ethnic group in South Africa except the Afrikaners, who certainly have no affinity for Holland, and the blacks. But English-speaking South Africans always talked about 'home' when they were going on a holiday to England — even though they were born here and were already second generation South Africans. And Indians, Muslims, too, have got strong links with other countries. It is only the Afrikaners and the blacks who don't have this.

But the English never asked, for example, to send money home to England.

Well, they didn't have any problem. If they wanted to send money to England they could simply do so, as part of the Commonwealth, until exchange controls were introduced.

That is true. But nevertheless the Jewish community did obtain some very significant concessions from the Nationalist government regarding sending money to Israel during a time of strict exchange controls, aside from all the other links that were established between Israel and South Africa . . .

Oh yes. But of course it was a quid pro quo. The SA government was getting a lot from Israel. They were getting know-how, they were being taught how to deal with terrorism, how to cope with subversive movements and so on.

And of course there was the whole question of the armed struggle — all that came into it.

How did you relate to the connections between Israel and the apartheid government over the years? It must have been at times a source of considerable embarrassment to you.

Well, I took a more pragmatic view about this because, you know, people have to survive. I was once asked by Bishop Tutu, 'How could the Jews, Israel, with its history of Jewish persecution, have any dealings with a country like South Africa which is full of race discrimination?' And my answer was, 'It was purely a question of survival!'

And does that justify it for you?

It didn't justify it. It explained it to me. I mean, I can understand a lot of things without condoning them.

Did that satisfy Bishop Tutu?

No, I'm sure it didn't. When he used to compare the treatment of blacks by the government here with the Holocaust, that used to irritate me very much indeed . . .

Do you think it is possible, or useful, to compare such things as apartheid and the Holocaust?

I don't think it is possible, or useful. I think it is harmful. Because although there is no doubt that blacks were persecuted and oppressed and denied equal opportunities, there was never an actual attempt at genocide. And that is the real big difference. It is true that a lot of babies die of malnutrition and a lot of people who were forcibly removed were starving in the rural areas . . . but they are not comparable situations, because the intention was not to wipe out the blacks. The system of apartheid was a totally heartless system which didn't care what the results were, but nevertheless it wasn't the practical implementation of genocide, and that was the difference. I did say that to Tutu, because he once compared apartheid to the Holocaust in front of a delegation from the American Jewish Congress. They were furious with him.

And how does he react when you say that to him?

Well, then they all say, 'It's all very well for you . . . you haven't suffered . . . your children haven't suffered . . . you don't know what we have gone through . . .' It's that sort of thing.

So is this something on which you simply have to agree to disagree?

That's right. There are lots of things on which one has to agree to disagree.

Although a full comparison between apartheid and the Holocaust might not be valid, nevertheless many of the apartheid laws were virtual carbon copies of Nazi laws — for example, job reservation, the Immorality Act, Influx Control and so on.

Absolutely. I am only talking about the actual Holocaust, the programme of extermination of the Jews. That is not comparable. But the rest is comparable to some extent. But apartheid even differs from slavery in the United States. Blacks were never slaves here, which is an important thing to remember. I often find that the hostility between black and white in America is almost more visible than what you see in this country. I have long wondered why this was so, and I have come to the conclusion, not tested by any authority or anthropological expert, that it is because blacks in America will never ever forgive the status of slavery. Slavery is particularly humiliating, and the consequences were the break-up of African black families. They were left with no language, no roots. Dispersal. Complete cut-off. Whereas blacks in this country, although they were badly treated, nevertheless maintained the tribal entity, the family entity, despite the migrant labour system. And they were never slaves. There were, of course, slaves in the Cape, the Cape Malays, as they were known — imported by the Dutch East India Company — and their mixed-race descendants.

What do you think explains the incredible ability to forgive that seems to exist amongst blacks in this country?

I think they are able to do this because they don't carry that awful badge of slavery, where you are not a human being. You were never a slave. You were never sold and bought. Your language stayed, your ethnic origins were easily apparent. It was quite different.

How would you compare the Jewish response to the Holocaust and the black South African response to apartheid? Would you say that the Jews have been less forgiving?

Sure they were less forgiving, because it went much further . . . I don't actually know of any relatives of mine that died in the Holocaust, but I mean, those pictures . . . I have been to the Museum of the Holocaust in Washington, and to Yad Vashem and the Children's Memorial in Israel. I have visited all these places, and they have a meaning for me. The terrifying brutality of people.

What about Nelson Mandela's remarkable magnanimity and bigness of heart? Do you think that that is just him as an individual, as a person, or is he a product of his culture?

It is Mandela as an individual. I don't put it down to his being the son of a chief, or African culture or anything like that. We are so unbelievably lucky to have a guy like that. He has such presence. He is a great guy, he really is! Humour and humanity. A special man.

You always worked within the 'system', with an explicit regard for the legality of what you were doing. Nadine Gordimer was at times critical of you for participating in parliament. She wrote in an article: 'I have wished that she, with her intellect and strength, would have given her forces entirely to extra-parliamentary movements outside the white enclave.' Can you talk a little about what made you choose to always operate within the system?

I didn't choose! I ended up in the system. I was asked to stand for parliament, and I thought that if I can do something, I will do it. I would never have thought to join an underground movement. I was a member of parliament from 1953, and in those days there was no active underground as such. By the time the underground was formed I was already entrenched in the system. And I used it to the very greatest advantage! In many instances, it was only due to my questions and speeches that people outside of parliament knew what was going on in the country. I was fed information by the newspapers, for example, which wasn't allowed to be quoted unless it came from parliament because of the constant States of Emergency, in which the press was stifled. They couldn't quote anything on unrest-related situations. So I took full advantage of parliamentary privilege, and the information could then be published. And, I might add, the people who criticised me for being in parliament, for giving it what they called 'legitimacy', were the very people who used the information that came from me all over the world. The Anti-Apartheid Movement in England, America . . .

How did you feel when you were attacked for being in the apartheid parliament, in the system?

I didn't give a damn! I knew that I was there and that I was using the system to attack apartheid. I made no bones about it, that that was my purpose in being there, and I thought that I was performing a useful function. I didn't care what others said. So what were they doing, in fact?

You went through six prime ministers and presidents during your time in

parliament. Which did you like the most . . . can you talk a little about them?

Oh, there was nobody that I liked! It started off with Malan, then Strijdom, Verwoerd, Vorster, Botha, and De Klerk. De Klerk was by far the most civilised of them all, particularly in the last few years of my parliamentary life, in 1988–89. He was very conservative, but he was never brutal and rude and crass the way Vorster was. Or Botha — he was the worst of the lot! And there was that dreadfully scary man Verwoerd, who honestly was a maniac — a terrifying man! He thought he had a divine mission. He scared everybody stiff, including me! There was something about that man that was really scary . . .

Were there ever times when you were genuinely afraid?

You mean of being put away . . .? No, I never really thought about that. You know that can always happen. But, for example, in the house in which I lived until just a month ago, there was no gate, nothing. It had a split-pole fence which I could jump over, and no gate at all. People would tell me that I was mad, that somebody could just drive down the driveway and . . . And I would say that if somebody really wanted to get me, nothing would stop them.

There was one occasion when I did feel threatened, and that was when I was returning from a visit to Winnie Mandela, when she was banished to Brandfort. I was on an absolutely empty stretch of road, all alone in the car which I had picked up at the airport in Bloemfontein. I had seen Winnie, and we had had a long chat, and the special branch had arrived on the scene as they always did, and then I set off back to Bloemfontein. Then a little way out of town I saw this car following me, with one guy in it . . . it was probably my imagination, but I thought it was one of the special branch guys, and it might well have been . . . But I thought that at that spot he could simply run me off the road and nobody would ever have been the wiser. There wasn't a soul in sight. But nothing actually happened. Also, I used to get a lot of ugly calls in the middle of the night . . . but I had a shrill whistle, and I would just blow it into the telephone . . .

How did the Nationalist parliamentarians relate to you over the years?

Well, one or two had a respectful admiration for me . . . that I knew what I was talking about, the fact that I really did prepare my stuff. I had one researcher and a secretary, and that was it, but I did my work very thoroughly. I made quite sure that my facts were correct, to the extent that one could be sure. And I was quite quick-witted, so if they started with me they got as good as they gave. In the end, one or two of them really quite liked me, and quite a lot of the others hated me. And some of them saw me as just another cheeky little Jewish girl . . . But in the end, by and large, I had the respect of these people.

During your thirty-six years in parliament you were never in a government in power, yet as an opposition parliamentarian you were tremendously successful. Do you think that perhaps your particular personality is more suited to an opposition role, a critical, attacking role, than a role in power?

Oh yes, I think that what you say is quite right. I'm sure that I was better in opposition than I would have been in power. It is much easier to be in opposition. I never would have been as effective as a minister in government as I was in opposition. And of course my effectiveness in opposition was very much due to the support I got from the press. You know, if I had just been attacking these guys in parliament without anyone else knowing about it, it would have had no effect. But it had such wide publicity in the press. And they realised that what I was saying was generally correct. They agreed with the liberal views that I was expounding. I was very lucky to have press support . . .

So the 'fit' between you and the South African press at the time was perfect.

Yes, they needed me and I needed them. That is absolutely right. And one actually accomplished some important things. For example, I got many improvements in the prison system. I ran into General de Bruyn at the airport the other day, and he was very friendly. He was a lieutenant in my day, one of the up-and-coming ones, the public relations officer in the Prison Commissioner's office. Now he is the head of the whole damn show . . . He has gone through the whole transition.

He said to me, 'How are you, Mrs Suzman?' I said, 'How are you, General? Are you still locking people up?' He said, 'Well, still a few . . .' I said, 'Well, you never got a chance to do that to me . . .' He laughed and said, 'We never would have done it . . .' We had a little banter of that kind. A nice guy actually. I was able at the time to get quite a few things done through him. He wasn't one of these sadistic warder types who liked kicking people around.

Can you talk a bit about these personal 'friendships' that occurred between people who were on opposite sides of the political spectrum. For example, there was the friendship that developed between Nelson Mandela and his prison warder on Robben Island. Did you have many such friendships across the political divide?

Well, we didn't actually see each other socially. For example, some of the National Party people that I was friendly with were also golfers — I used to play a lot of golf over the weekends — but we never actually got to the stage of playing golf together. But if we met at an airport, or if I was sitting next to a guy in an airplane, I could have a perfectly reasonable discussion without any animosity. There were others, however, that I couldn't bear and wouldn't talk to at all. But those friendships never really became very deep, because South Africa's political divide was much too great. I mean, in parliament you never

sat at a meal with anybody who wasn't in your own party. You went into the private parliamentary dining room and you made straight for the all-Progressive Party table. You wouldn't dream of going to sit down with the National Party, or the United Party when it was still around. You wouldn't even have a drink in the pub with them afterwards. If you met at social functions you would behave yourself. If you found yourself standing next to a guy in another party and he was having a drink and he offered to get you one, you would politely say OK.

There was no game about politics in this country. It was deadly serious! Deadly serious, because so many lives were at stake, or a least the way in which people were able to lead their lives. I mean, you couldn't really be friendly with a guy who you knew was using the Group Areas Act to its utmost limit . . . It was impossible!

South Africa is a pluralistic country, consisting of many ethnic groups. Yet, because of what has been perpetrated here in the name of ethnicity, many people, particularly on the left, have a strong aversion to acknowledging ethnic identity in life and politics. A visiting African academic referred to the 'pathological denial of ethnicity' by the South African left. What do you think of this?

Well, I think it is a bit ridiculous. You can't deny the existence of ethnicity. But there is nothing to stop you from having friendships across ethnic lines, and that is what I have done. For years I have had friends who are black and coloured and Asian. I meet with them on perfectly easy terms.

What about the role that ethnicity plays in national or regional politics?

Well, I wish it didn't play that role. Ethnicity is something that permeates the whole system. I would like it to decrease, and for us to have divisions on other lines rather than purely ethnic ones. But whether this could ever happen is another matter. I would very much hope that the next national election, not so much the coming local election because I think that is too soon, will cut across ethnic lines. I think it is possible, because there is a growing middle class among black people, so you might even get the economic divide becoming more important than the ethnic divide. You might get a workers' party emerging.

So you would prefer 'class' divides to replace the ethnic ones which currently exist?

Yes, because I think it is easier to cross those class lines than it is to cross ethnic lines. I think you could quite easily get a workers' party breaking away, say with Cosatu and the Communist Party. And now of course with Winnie Mandela [who had been sacked from government at the time of this

interview], she might go out now and form her own party, but that would depend on whether she can get sufficient funding.

How did you feel as a middle-class white woman going into Soweto, into situations where people were living in extreme poverty? Did you ever feel any resentment towards you?

No, not resentment. But I always felt it was such a shame that these people hadn't been educated, taught skills, that they weren't given job opportunities – all of that. I hate poverty, I think it is terrible. And not having experienced it myself in a way makes me more sensitive to it. Of course one feels uncomfortable. But they accepted me because they knew that I was trying to do something about it.

Did anybody ever say to you, 'Oh, after you leave us you go back to your rich home in your fancy suburb . . . '

Oh yes. People do say things like that. But that is the truth of it, so what can one do about it? You simply say, 'Yes, it's true, but I'm doing what I can in the situation that I am in.' I had a little exchange recently with Leah Tutu on TV. Tutu and myself were being interviewed by Felicia Mabuza-Suttle, and she asked about the sanctions thing, whether I now regretted opposing sanctions against South Africa. I said, 'Not at all . . . In fact, everything that I feared has come about – increased unemployment, and with it crime and violence, and the country being put back many years. Certainly it did expedite the end of apartheid, but at dire cost.' So Leah Tutu said, from the audience, 'It's all very well for you, living in Hyde Park, you could afford to wait.' So I said, 'Take it easy now, Leah, you live in Bishop's Court!' And that was the end of that one! It wasn't a case of not being able to wait – I was never unaware of the hardships and the difficulties that others were experiencing, but I just knew that they would be worse off with sanctions. And they have been!

What would have happened if there had not been sanctions?

Well, I think that eventually the black trade union movement and the black resistance would have done it. That was my whole point.

For six of your thirty-six years in parliament you were the only woman amongst 165 MPs. Nadine Gordimer said of your situation: 'I have often wondered how, above all, she could stand the snickering patronage and vulgar flirtatiousness of some of her fellow parliamentarians . . . metaphorically fingering her beauty with salacious references to the face that launched a thousand ships . . . a yahoo level above which she always managed to hold her head.' What was it like being a

woman in that male-dominated parliament for so long?

Well, it was an advantage actually. I never took any notice of these chaps. They were the sort who used to whistle at me when I was fifteen years of age and a good deal better looking than I am now . . . You know, you just shrug it off. I lambasted them wherever I could. And I have said, somewhat immodestly I am afraid, that I knew that in order to be considered the equal of a man in that milieu, I had to be better than them, and that it wasn't too difficult because, really, most of them were third-rate. They were just party organisers, junior civil servants, nothing very tough. There were a few good debaters among them, but not one that one couldn't combat.

What do you think of the crop of leadership that has now come up into parliament, from the ANC and elsewhere?

Many of them have been in exile, others have been in jail, some have been denied opportunities all these years, and I think it is remarkable . . . The manner in which they comport themselves, without any vicious retribution or anything like that. They are pretty good. It is just very sad that all the years in between were denied their skills and talents. Not only Mandela, others as well . . .

Do you think this is going to last? Some of these current leaders are quite old and will soon pass on. Will it become just politics-as-usual after that?

It is already becoming politics-as-usual. But the young ones are coming up, and there are some that we have never really heard of who are doing very well.

In the 1950s some Jewish farmers in the Delmas area were convicted for abusing labourers working on their farms under the Farm Prison Labour Scheme. At that time you, in parliament, moved to reduce the minister's salary as a protest against this scheme, in which blacks arrested under the Pass Laws were sent to work as unpaid labourers on white farms instead of being prosecuted in court. Can you talk a little about this scheme, and how you felt at Jewish farmers abusing the black labourers in this way.

Well, obviously I was ashamed of them as Jews, because they certainly should have known better than to treat blacks the way they did. I mean, they used to work in sacks, and they used to be beaten up by the farm foreman, and they slept on concrete slabs — they were really treated disgracefully. Of course, the prison system was to blame as well — they had no business turning these wretched people loose on to the merciless behaviour of these farmers. There were many others who were not Jewish.

The system was actually illegal. You see, it was legal to hire convicts as farm

labour, but these people were not convicts! The police arrested chaps under the Pass Laws, and said to them, 'If you go to court you will go to jail for five years, but if you go and work for four months on the farms in lieu of prosecution, we will let you go.' This was all done totally within the police system, and not in the court system, which is what made it illegal. And the deputy minister, a man called Mentz, denied that there had ever been an instruction given to the police to do this. But what he didn't know was that I had in my possession a circular of the Department of Police which somebody had sent to me anonymously, stating in Afrikaans that '... when picking up blacks under the Pass Laws, tell them that they can serve four months on the farms as labourers in lieu of prosecution ... '

For the farmers it was good because it was cheap labour. And you know, one Jewish farmer was actually sentenced to whipping because he murdered a black. Do you remember that case?

Was that Hirshowitz or Mann?

No, those two were convicted under the farm labour system for maltreating blacks. This man was convicted of murder. He actually murdered one of his black labourers — I think he whipped him to death. The sentence he received was six strokes, and the whole Jewish community was absolutely appalled. His name was Nafke.[2] There was an outraged roar from the country Jews [ie they were appalled by the 'severity' of the sentence].

Over the years there were some Jews who supported the National Party, gave them money and so on.

And how there were! I never could understand how anyone could support the Nationalists. And for me, for Jews to support the people who were in favour of race discrimination was the ultimate in treachery. Treachery to the values that Jews should hold. I sometimes had occasion socially, when people used to say proudly, 'I support the National Party', to say, 'You should be ashamed of yourself! How can you? You're a Jew, and you know what Jews went through with persecution in Russia, with pogroms, unable to move freely, no mobility! How can you support a government which is doing exactly the same thing to the black people?' This was not a comparison with the Holocaust — I was comparing apartheid to the treatment of Jews in Russia.

But, of course, you never got anywhere with them. They would say, 'What? Blacks? Who cares about them? Shvartzes! Shvartzes!'

There is also a flip side to this issue. For example, Nelson Mandela says in his autobiography, '... in my experience I have found Jews to be more broad-minded

2 Jack Nafke. A year after coming out of jail, Nafke suddenly dropped dead.

than most whites on issues of race and politics . . .' Would you agree with that comment?

I would certainly agree with it as far as left-wing Jews are concerned, but not as a general comment. I think Jews are as inclined to be as racist as anyone else.

In other words, they have not learned from their history in a general sense?

Well, it is a question of . . . they don't put blacks on the same level. Which is race discrimination, no doubt about it. But I really don't like generalising. As I have told you, most of my Jewish friends are Progressives.

It is well known that the number of Jews in the upper echelons of the liberation movements is out of all proportion to their numbers in the general population, which might suggest that Jews actually have learned something from their history. How do you account for that?

Yes, their numbers are out of all proportion. But again, it is an individual thing. I don't like generalisations. I don't think of them as representing Jews. These are individuals who feel strongly about discrimination . . .

And of course there is a high proportion of Jews who are jolly racist! They have contempt for blacks, for Afrikaners. They have pejorative expressions for all those people. Even for ordinary non-Jews — they talk about the yoks and the shikses. And those expressions are never ever used in any other way except pejoratively, right?

When you were subjected to anti-Semitic remarks in parliament or elsewhere, how did you relate to it? Did it tend to heighten your sense of Jewishness?

I took no notice of it. It really didn't worry me. I only care about the opinions of people I respect, and you cannot respect people like that. It is like worrying about the opinions of hooligans, and people who go around smashing the windows of cars. They are rubbish! [Geoff Sifrin's note: The day I completed this interview with Helen Suzman she received a letter in the mail. It was a clipping from a Cape Town newspaper with her photograph on it, on which was scrawled, 'You Jews are the outcasts of the world and your Israel will come to an end shortly . . . If Hitler had won the war we would not have the problems we have today in SA . . . biased Jew, *Kaffir Boetie* . . . Jews are half black anyway . . . You can be sure your tombstone will be kicked over, I hope soon . . .']

You have met some of the world's great leaders. Does anyone come to mind as

someone for whom you have a special admiration?

You know, I am not one of these people who go around admiring and having role models... I like to take each individual on their own. I found Mrs Thatcher to be very intelligent, extremely well versed, well briefed, and so on. But I could not say that I admired her enormously. She and I agreed on sanctions — she has hard and fast views on most things. But I found her to be a humourless woman. There was no real rapport. I liked Hilary Clinton when I met her last year. Very much indeed! Very easy to get on with. There are lots of others, for example Mandela, if you want to get back to local politics.

What about Israeli leaders?

Well, I met President Weizman. I was invited to lunch in Israel, in Jerusalem. And he was very affable and pleasant. I have also met several Israeli politicians, but I can't say any of them have been extremely close to me. I like Amnon Rubinstein.[3]

Were you ever a Zionist?

No. I give money, but I am not a passionate Zionist. I never thought of actually going to live in Israel.

But are you supportive of the State of Israel, of its existence?

Oh yes! I think it is an absolute essential. First of all, there are now several million Jews there. It is essential.

Does racism amongst Israelis towards Arabs bother you?

I don't like it if it is on an ethnic basis. But I can understand it if it's because of resentment about the manner in which the Arab states have refused to accept the existence of the State of Israel from day one and didn't let them live in peace.

Over the last thirty years the African liberation movements moved towards support for the PLO and animosity towards Israel, for well-known reasons. In your contacts with these movements did you have problems in relation to this issue, since you and the liberation movements were essentially on opposite sides on this issue?

Well, I wasn't on the other side in so far as bringing down the South African government was concerned. But I obviously didn't support violent movements...

3 Minister of Education under the Labour government which fell in the May 1996 Israeli elections.

Do you regard the PLO as an intrinsically violent movement?

Certainly in the past I have always regarded them as a very violent movement. My revulsion at their previous terrorist methods dies hard.

How did you feel seeing Yasser Arafat come to South Africa for the inauguration of President Mandela?

I was not particularly delighted to see him here. But then, everybody was here, so you couldn't expect him not to be here. One thing about Nelson Mandela is that he is extremely loyal to people who helped the liberation movements. And the PLO and Arafat did, and Gaddafi did, and Castro did . . .

If you look back on your long political career, what do you remember as some of the main highlights and low points?

Well, one of the high points was when the Progressive Party won six more seats in parliament in 1974, because at that point I had been alone in parliament for thirteen years. That particular night was tremendously exciting for me, a vindication of what I had been fighting for. And then we became the official opposition in 1977, which was also very important.

Inside parliament itself, the most dramatic moment was the assassination of Dr Verwoerd and the aftermath, with P W Botha accusing me of having arranged it.

But the greatest relief I felt during that period of parliamentary life was the abolition of the Pass Laws in 1986 which controlled the mobility of black people. To me it was as if a huge, dark cloud had lifted off the country, because of all the thousands of arrests which had taken place, and the terrible disadvantages for blacks who didn't have the right stamp in their books, the thought that a man couldn't walk freely around his own country and seek work and live a family life. To me, it was just the most basic injustice!

Of course, another very moving event was the announcement by President de Klerk in 1989 that he was going to transform the country, his first announcement of his overall intention. That was before the announcement that he would release Mandela.

SHAWN SLOVO

'I would have liked to have received some nurture from religion.'

Shawn Slovo is a screenwriter who lives in London. She wrote the award-winning feature film *A World Apart*, based on her childhood perceptions of the detention without trial of her mother Ruth First in the early 1960s.

Ruth First was born in 1925 in Johannesburg to Julius and Tilly First, Jewish immigrants who had been members of the International Socialist League and active members of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) of which Julius was treasurer. Ruth joined the CPSA while a student at the University of the Witwatersrand. Soon after the 1946 miners' strike she became the Johannesburg editor of *The Guardian*, 'helping to make it and its successor publications effective spokesmen for the cause of liberation. She later edited the monthly magazine *Fighting Talk*. From her part in the revelation of farm conditions in Bethal in 1947 to her book *South West Africa* published in 1963, she sought to oppose the worst effects of...'[1] apartheid. She wrote extensively as a journalist and as an author of articles and books, which include *117 Days*, the account of her detention without trial, *Power in Africa: The Politics of the Coup d'Etat*, *Libya: The Elusive Revolution*, *Black Gold: the Mozambican Miner, Proletarian and Peasant*, and (with Ann Scott) *Olive Schreiner*.

In addition to her writing, she was very active in the South African Communist Party and the African National Congress and its allied groups, both in South Africa and, after 1963, in exile. In 1982 she was killed in a parcel bomb explosion in Maputo, Mozambique, engineered by the South African security police.

Shawn and her two sisters, Gillian and Robyn, had previously been interviewed by Hilda Bernstein for her book on exile entitled *The Rift*. Shawn's comments about that interview capture her discussion of her parents and, inevitably, herself:

> The thing that quite upset me when I did *The Rift*, the interview with Hilda Bernstein, is that it ends with me saying 'I'm angry with him

1 Tom Karis and Gail Gerhart (eds), *From Protest to Challenge*, Volume Four (Stanford, California: Hoover Institution Press, 1977). Other sources of biographical information used here include: Ronald Segal, *Political Africa* (London: Stevens and Sons, 1961), Shelagh Gastrow's *Who's Who in South African Politics*: Number Four (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1992), and various articles in *The Weekly Mail and Guardian*, January 13 to 19 1995 and January 20 to 26 1995.

[Joe, her father], and I'll be angry with him the rest of my life.' And the thing is that that is true, but it's not how I would have chosen to end it. It's one of the things that's true about him, but I'm also immensely proud of him and of Ruth, I feel privileged, in spite of the way he's affected my life, in spite of the anger to both of them individually and together, and the difficulties and the interrupted childhood, and all the rest of it. I think if you inherit something, the capacity to understand, or to pass something on, it's their commitment. And I'm sure a large part of that is because of their Jewishness... It goes so much further than the religion and the belief, it's so cultural. I can't express it terribly articulately. But it's a cultural inheritance that they have, which is to do with being Eastern European Jews.

Interviewed by Fran Buntman
6 March 1995
London

Please tell me a little about your grandparents: where they were born, when they came to South Africa, and what they did when they got here.

My father's parents were born in Lithuania, and so was Joe. Joe was born in 1926 and came to South Africa in 1935.[2] They were escaping what was happening in Lithuania. His father came ahead of the family. He went to South America, actually, and the family were about to set off to join him when they received a telegram saying 'No work here, meet me in Cape Town'. My mother's parents were born in Eastern Europe and they came over, I suppose, at the turn of the century — I'm not sure.

Ruth's parents were communists, so she had absolutely no Jewish upbringing in a religious sense. But I think Jewishness goes much further than that. For both Ruth and Joe, the food they ate, the friends they had, their cultural interests, intellectual curiosity were all part of their Jewishness. We were brought up as complete atheists. But it's a cultural inheritance. And that's how Joe became a communist, through his involvement with Jewish organisations. That's where he first read Marx; that's what he used to say. I don't remember what the organisation was called.

I think it was in their curiosity, in their sense of injustice, in the corpus of

2 Shawn had said JS came to South Africa in 1937, but Shelagh Gastrow in her *Who's Who in South African Politics* says he came to South Africa at age nine, ie 1935 (or possibly 1936).

Left:
Shawn Slovo (Photograph: Anna Zieminski)

books, in the corpus of learning, in the corpus of food. I remember my grandmother's [ie Ruth's mother] food was quite Jewish, even though she was a real rabid communist, a Stalinist down the line. But she did chopped herring, and chopped liver, and it wasn't on the Sabbath or any kind of celebration. And I think there were some Jewish weddings [we went to], because all the rest of our family, particularly Joe's family, married very religious Jews, so there were weddings of cousins.

You know, if you want a fuller understanding of Joe's Jewishness, you must ask South Africa's Chief Rabbi Cyril Harris. He gave the most extraordinary speech at Joe's funeral, in which he blasted the Jewish community for their inaction, their complicity, and for being judgemental. What resonated for me was when he spoke about how it is kindness that truly reflects the human soul, and the way that countless millions of people in South Africa have been touched by the humanity and kindness of Joe.

In [Shawn's sister Gillian's novel]* Ties of Blood, *there is a sense that although the older generation were politically involved, there was still an actively Jewish dimension. Is that just fiction?

It's not my memory. I never went to synagogue once in my whole childhood. Actually, I went once, because I had a lot of Jewish friends, and I had a Jewish friend who was bat mitzvahed. I remember the dress I got for it, but I was really not part of that at all. It was never an option — not that we were told not to go, it was just never an option.

How did Joe's parents react to his leaving Orthodox Judaism and turning to politics?

His mother died two years after they arrived, when he was thirteen. Joe only had two years of formal schooling his whole life. And I don't know about his father who was in and out of debtors' prison. Joe's father is a big mystery to me. (Gillian's done a lot more research on this.) But Joe wasn't forthcoming. He had very limited time. When we were growing up he was actually terribly self-absorbed. There wasn't really ever enough time with him.

I think his roots became very important to him in later life, and I think he would have put his Jewishness, even though he was a communist, to the forefront of what made him [who he was], of what informed the way he thought. I think the people who he used to hang out with in his very formative years before he went into the army would have made him aware of injustice. Because he was working at the age of fourteen or fifteen and saw that blacks were paid half for the same amount of work that whites were doing. The people who were concerned about that were Jewish, Jewish immigrants, like his family, so I think it was very important in making him what he was.

And his humour as well is Jewish. He could tell a good Jewish joke — an excellent Jewish joke. It was Jewish humour that amused him the most. I suppose in that way he was undeniably Jewish. And I think, as he got older, particularly since he made that trip back to Lithuania, and after he became more secure when the ANC was unbanned, and once again came back to the country, his Jewishness was very important to him. He had a very strong sense of family loyalty, in the limited way that he could. That trip to him was very important for his Jewishness, for his roots anyway.

And Ruth had no Jewish upbringing at all, because her parents were communists?

Except, again, the parents were very inquisitive and placed a huge emphasis on learning, enquiring, seeking, which is what made her what she was.

Was anti-Semitism ever translated out specifically as something that would lead one to an anti-racist position? Especially given that Joe had, with his family, experienced anti-Semitism in Lithuania?

No, I don't think so. It's more a class thing than a Gentile/Jewish thing.

I wonder if you could talk a little about your grandmother, Tilly First, Ruth's mother. She features very strongly in **A World Apart*, **she features in Robyn's interview in Hilda Bernstein's*** **The Rift*, **and in Hilda Bernstein's own editorialising in that book. What kind of role did your grandmother play in your family's life, and what was her relationship with your mother?***

She was very important to us because she picked up the slack, to put it quite simply. Her support was one of the reasons my parents could do what they chose to do. That's why my mother was able to work full-time and commit herself in the way that she did. Even though she had servants to help her. When she was arrested or had to go into exile or had to go into hiding in those dark days, my grandmother and my grandfather were around. They provided financial support. My grandfather had a furniture factory, and although he wasn't wealthy by South African standards, he was doing well, so he was the one who helped them set up in their house. They were very key to our childhood.

My mother and her mother had a very difficult relationship, like most mother-daughter relationships. I think my grandmother in a sense felt quite resentful in the role she was forced to assume because of the time she was born. She could have been an activist in her own right. That's what she would have enjoyed. My grandfather, Julius, was very modest, very consistent, very supportive, very behind the scenes. They came into exile with us. They took a lot of risks for us. They were a hundred per cent behind us; behind Ruth and Joe . . . In a sense this is what Tilly's dream was for. To act out the fantasies of

the life that she could have made.

And it's very tragic that Tilly never had a chance because of the time when she was born. She died a couple of years ago; she had lived until she was about ninety-five. She came back to South Africa because she had a son there — who brought his children up to be practising Jews.

Is there any interaction between your family and that son, your uncle?

Yes. There wasn't for a long time, though. You know, Ruth and Joe, their names were mud. Communists were KGB colonels with stockpiles of weapons plotting against the peace and stability of South Africa. Since Joe has got back the family have come out of the closet. But in the years of exile we were never close. It was damaging for them to be associated with Ruth and Joe. It's hard to imagine what it was to live through those times, compared to the esteem they're held in now. I spent quite a lot of time in South Africa since Joe got back, just hanging out with him, seeing the way South Africans, including white South Africans, now leaped across airport concourses to shake his hand, people who I'm sure would not have been seen dead acknowledging him a few years ago. But that's OK, you can't stand in judgement. It's just hard to take that kind of family seriously. I get much more support from people I have no blood link to. I feel I can trust them more.

Was that part of the exile experience? That the family got broken up?

It was a difficult experience, and we had a relatively easier experience than other people — we were white and middle-class and my mother had a way to make money. You know, I feel very envious of the extended family. Particularly for South African Jews where family is the most important thing. I think it can be very supportive and nurturing, although possibly claustrophobic and judgemental as well. But we didn't really have that because of the politics, because of their activism.

What are your own feelings about being Jewish?

I don't know how to answer that question. I would never deny that I'm Jewish. And I've never felt a desire to deny that part of me, in the cultural inheritance of it; the emphasis on learning and creation. There are a lot of Jewish people in the film industry that I work in.

Has being Jewish ever affected you?

Well, I look Jewish. I've got dark, Eastern European looks, so I'm sure that's acted against me in this kind of Aryan, upper-class society that I live in, but it hasn't really stopped me. But I know it exists. And I think Ruth must have

experienced it as well when she came here. Especially in the publishing field, there's a kind of sense of superiority among the upper-class British, non-Jewish community that operates here at the intellectual level.

How did Ruth and Joe feel about Israel?

They reacted to Israeli policy against the Palestinians. They reacted in the way that their politics informed them. They were internationalists. It was exploitation and oppression and racism operating there just as it was in South Africa.

Do you think Joe and Ruth felt a special need to respond on the Palestinian issue because abuses were taking place in the name of Jews?

I think that they reacted because these things were reprehensible to them. And because it was done in the name of Jews. Both things are true.

Would it be correct to assume that Ruth and Joe had a secular or civil wedding?

I assume so. I don't really know what their wedding was actually, but I'm sure Gillian knows. On the other hand, Joe had specifically requested that his funeral be multi-denominational. It was more for his relatives that a rabbi was there. I think it was out of not offending our multitude of relatives, who we'd never met before the funeral. Also, Rabbi Harris and Joe had an enormous amount of mutual respect.

Are you saying Joe was concerned with being respectful to the family, or Rabbi Harris, or the Jewish community?

I think it was to the Jewish community. I think I have to say it's not only our family, it was the Jewish community, because Joe was first and foremost a politician, particularly in his later years. He understood the importance of a broad base of support and understood the contribution Jews have to make, as any other sector of South Africa has to make, to the new South Africa to make it work.

And do you think that would explain more broadly why a publicly identified atheist would ask quite specifically for a multi-denominational funeral? Out of that sense of being a politician?

No, I think as a humanist, out of humanitarian concerns. I don't want it to sound calculated. Men on their death-beds are not generally calculating, especially when they're taken before their time. I don't think he was thinking about his reputation; I think it was part of his commitment to the

people of the country and an acknowledgement of the role that Jews have played in the resistance movement, and the role they have to play in order to get the new South Africa to work.

Afterwards there was this discussion about saying kaddish. It has to be a male member of the family. But none of us felt it was right for any of the male members of Joe's family to say it. So at one point I was going to do it. And Ann Harris, Rabbi Harris's wife, was going to give it me phonetically. But I pulled out. I discussed it with everybody and we all felt uncomfortable about it. Actually, Anne Harris said she was glad we pulled out.

Because you were a woman?

She had no objection to that. Because it was kind of a bit dishonest. It wasn't organic and it didn't feel natural and it didn't feel right.

This has nothing to do with this, but I have to say that I have great and possibly irrational feelings of resentment towards the Jewish community in South Africa. That's why I related to Rabbi Harris's speech, because one would have thought that with the tradition and the history and the knowledge and the awareness of Jews it would have, generally speaking, made them more sensitive and supportive. The interesting thing is when I made *A World Apart*, black South Africans would see that film and say 'that poor child, that poor little girl, there was nobody in the community who took care of the children'.

And that is, I suppose, why I'm upset, why I feel these mixed feelings about my Jewishness. We were ostracised and isolated, and even if I can now understand the atmosphere of fear [which kept people away from us], I didn't know about that when I was a child. There wasn't any reason for my grandmother to have a nervous breakdown when, in the early 1960s, she was having to take care of us because my father was in exile and my mother was detained. There were lots of women and families in the white northern suburbs of Johannesburg who could have taken some of the load, who could have helped explain things to us, kept us amused, distracted, busy, the things, you know, that you do for children in these kind of situations.

How did Joe feel about your making A World Apart? *Did he play any part in its making?*

I think it was very crucial to the development of our relationship. He was a great man to have as a father, but he really was an atrocious father. He didn't take on the responsibility of being a father — he was great when you would get him, but he just wasn't around very much while we were growing up. When he was around he was totally preoccupied with other things. It's easy to understand why, now that the details of what he was up to during those years, the years of exile in the seventies and eighties, are beginning to emerge. They

must have been very dark years for him. I had always been waiting for this telephone call that Joe had been assassinated, that Joe had been killed. So when it happened to my mother, it was a call I had always expected, but I had always thought it would be Joe.

You see, what *A World Apart* did was give us an opportunity, Joe and I, to talk about the past, and about Ruth. I made him read every draft of the script I could. You know, he even wrote a scene. We had dreadful problems with one scene, the scene after the mother (Ruth) has been rearrested for a second period of ninety-day detention. Harold, a fictional adult friend of the mother's, visits Molly (me) at the school (Roedean) where she is boarding. He takes her aside, and tells her that her mother could be in prison for a very long time, that the authorities might charge her at the end of her second period of ninety days' internment. He's trying to prepare her for the worst. She's crying, and says 'But we're by ourselves . . . ' and he responds that the children of Elsie (the family's black servant) have been on their own all their lives. She says, 'I know. But I'm not talking about them. ' 'But you always have to ,' says Harold. 'How can you live in this country and do nothing?' 'Lots of people do,' says Molly. 'And what do you think of them?' asks Harold. She doesn't answer. Then Harold says, 'We also have to live with ourselves. Not just for now, but for later as well.' That's Joe's line, that's Joe's scene. It's completely brilliant, the most meaningful scene in the whole film, for me anyway.

It's exciting making a film, it's kind of a never-never land, and Joe enjoyed it: enjoyed meeting with the director, visiting the set in Bulawayo, dipping in and out of the whole process. If he was around, he'd come into town and spend a couple of hours with the director, and read the script, and enquire about it. He was completely fascinated, seeing our childhood home re-created, hanging out with Barbara Hershey (who played Ruth), flirting with her . . .

It was beyond his experience, and I liked very much being with him and relating to him on my territory. It was a great way for us to be together. It changed our relationship completely. I thought he gave a lot, and I thought he got a lot too. He was very proud of the film. He followed its progress, he was very interested in the reviews, and he was thrilled when it got the Cannes prizes. The experience was good for me in the way that it established me as a screenwriter, but equally because it moved things on for me and my dad. And he took it full on the chin, that part of the film that is an indictment of him and Ruth, at least as far as their parenting went. I don't think for one moment he would ever have claimed to have been a 'good father'.

It seems to me that Joe's death has actually led to a refocusing on Ruth in South Africa. Do you agree with that?

Yes. I think she's been neglected. Not neglected in terms of her importance

and the contribution that she made, but South African history has still to be written . . . it is quite natural that his death should focus some attention on her role, and the kind of woman she was. A lot of people have been made aware of her contribution, in ways that they weren't before. A lot of the interest that has focused on Ruth has been in the context of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It's to do with Craig Williamson's confessions, and that is very much part of what's happening at the moment.

What has been the effect of Craig Williamson's[3] confessions for you?

You see, there are no surprises there. If it wasn't Craig Williamson, it would be someone Craig Williamson knew. We've always known who sent that bomb. These people have to admit to what they have done, and to take on the responsibility for their past actions. You see, I don't have any feelings of revenge. If I was in the same room as the man who'd sent the bomb to my mother, I'd walk away. I wouldn't even want to look him in the eye, I don't want to be contaminated by that kind of encounter. I don't want to get into anything like that — it's not healthy. I understand the context in which it happened, there's nothing to be gained by any sort of personal revenge. If this sounds a little impersonal, it doesn't cancel out the anger that I feel at this murderous act that deprived us of a parent, and the feelings of loss and sadness that I carry with me every single day of my life.

Do you feel confident — at the moment, obviously things can change over time — that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is up to the task you've just described?

I don't know enough about what's going on there. I think if they're not up to it, they'll have to shape up to it. I think there's too much emotion involved. But I think Mandela and everyone in the cabinet knows this is a terribly sensitive area.

That was the thing about Joe. You'd get some really choice information from him. Although we never spoke for very long on the phone, I used to call him up and say, 'Just tell me, what's going on?' And he would say something that would give me a completely different perspective on the whole thing. For example, over Winnie Mandela's bizarre behaviour, I'd ask 'Why doesn't Mandela act? What's his problem? It's causing so much damage, particularly in the international arena.' And he would say, 'Nelson feels completely responsible for the way Winnie is, he's an African, he's a traditionalist, he feels as the head of the family he let his whole family down, you've got to take

3 Craig Williamson was a South African police spy who did the dirty work for Nationalist politicians. He confessed to involvement in several incidents, among them the murder of activist Jeanette Schoon and her seven-year-old daughter, blown up in 1984, the murder of Ruth First, and the bombing of the ANC offices in London in March 1982.

all these human factors into account.'

He'd point out that Winnie had the most terrible life for twenty-seven years, banished and hounded. 'Have some sympathy for the woman,' he'd say. 'Understand the context in which she's operating.'

And that's what I really miss, I don't have this kind of take on what's happening in South Africa.

That's interesting that Joe sometimes gave you completely fresh perspectives — the news behind the news. But you've said elsewhere that things were very secret during exile. Is that correct?

Yes. By necessity, they used to say. But there are people who were activists in exile who had young children and who dealt with it in different ways. Those years in Mozambique and Zambia were very secret years, and people like Sue Rabkin (who, by the way, comes from a very strong Jewish background) had two young kids, under ten years old, and they were around all the time, in the thick of ANC and Umkhonto we Sizwe plotting and planning. Not to the point of telling them anything that would be indiscreet, but they were included in a way that we weren't. We were kept very separate. They said they were trying to protect us, but really it was easier, simpler, not to have to explain things to children: 'This is the work I do, you know I can't talk about it', which is the line from *A World Apart*. There's a way of explaining things to children which can help to banish the fear, the fear of not knowing, not understanding, without giving away any of the details. It's much easier to say to kids, 'It's secret, can't talk about it, it's about politics, let's go to the movies, let's go to Cape Town and lie on the beach' than to sit down and explain, 'Look, this is what is happening, this is what we feel about it.' Whereas we had to kind of pick that up, work it out for ourselves. [But] the resentment goes. You know, they're only human, they made mistakes.

I wanted to go back to something about Ruth. In quite a few of the interviews that Joe gave before his death, he talked of the fact that Ruth was ostracised from the political community, from the ANC community, because of her questioning of the Soviet Union, and presumably the way the ANC and the SACP were following it. Were you aware of that?

No. Absolutely not. Partly I wasn't interested, but also the Communist Party had so much secrecy surrounding its proceedings, that I think the truth of all that went on, the factionalism and the splits, is yet to come out. She was very feisty, I don't think she went into deep depressions, she was very strong, she was very busy. I think she was up to it. But she and Joe used to have the most incredible arguments. You could set them off really. We used to do it actually, at Christmas and times when we were together here. And we'd just throw in some kind of remark about Russia, or some remark about China, because

Ruth was pro-China. And they'd just go at it. But Joe acknowledged a huge debt to Ruth. As intellectuals they had the most fascinating relationship. Intellectually very interesting. People who knew them knew about the tensions. But you're not really aware of that as a child. And there were big gaps, because Joe was away so often. He was very resistant to the criticism but he has acknowledged that he was rather blinkered at a certain stage. I think she chipped away at him. She was the intellectual one, and she challenged him all along the way. And he was way up to it.

She was formidable.

Mmm, yeah, she was fantastic. She really was.

Did you ever go to Mozambique?

I went once. And then again for Ruth's funeral. They both seemed very happy there. I think it was the first time all the strands in her life came together, because she was an academic and a researcher and a writer and an initiator and an administrator. And she was an activist. And she could be all those things in her role at the University of Eduardo Mondlane in Maputo. She ran the department and she was helping to shape Frelimo policy in the work that she was doing. And was very fulfilled in the last few years of her life.

Something that comes across in* A World Apart *and in the growing body of accounts of the fifties, is the sense of Ruth and Joe's home being not just a political centre, but a centre where there would be incredible parties. A sense that they drew people together, and often made multiracialism — as it was then called — real in a social way.

There were too many years of exile, and disappointments and set-backs, but the fifties — before all that — were a fantastic time for them. They were young, they were in their early twenties, they were leading a really exciting life, they were full of optimism and a sense of their own power and potential and ability to organise. And they'd have conversations in cars, and not use the telephone, and make all kinds of liaisons and drop things, it was spy stuff. And they had a great time. I think the parties were really a part of that. It was a very optimistic time.

Don't everybody's parents have exciting parties where you stay up, and you wear your pyjamas, and you stand peering, watching people get drunk, and being slightly shocked, and caught up in the thrill of it, watching your parents dancing, and hearing all this loud music, and all this nice food around.

I don't know about my sisters, but I don't think I was conscious there were black people there — I thought it was quite normal. They were friends.

You know we had a wonderful, incredible South African childhood, long

holidays in the Cape, and that was till '62. It was just fantastic. We also went into the townships, and none of our friends ever did any of that kind of stuff. Actually went and had curries in Alexandra and Sophiatown.

Do you remember that?

No [laughter]. I should, but I was ten when I went. There's no sense in being truthful about those sorts of things [more laughter]. 'Tell people what they want to hear!'

Was there any sense of those parties continuing in exile, or did all of that come to an abrupt stop?

No, they had a good life. In Mozambique there was a thriving exile community, and though nobody had very much, nobody was starving. And people would get together and drink and eat and gossip and work very hard. A lot of very strong relationships were forged in exile.

And in England? Were there ever fun times?

Well, they had quite a thriving social life, you know, Ruth and Joe. On an intellectual level, and they had parties, celebrated Christmas, birthdays. We didn't lock ourselves inside against the weather. They had a big circle of friends there. There were always people at the house.

Do you think they were disappointed that the three of you did not take a political path?

No.

The political lineage had gone far enough, in a way?

We were all terribly insecure as a result of all the secrecy and all the disturbance, and not understanding what was going on. Apart from anything else, I think that basis was not really conducive to taking a stand politically. Besides which, they were pretty formidable, and one would have to kind of match them and then surpass them, an impossible task, so it seemed. We never felt any of that kind of pressure at all. Ruth was terribly busy, the main breadwinner, the main parent, and just didn't have much time. As for Joe, I think it was just easier to say 'I can't talk about that'.

I felt terribly intimidated when I started to read Marx and Lenin for the first time. I was just curious, it was quite late in life. But I would never have dreamed of starting up a discussion at that late age with the head honcho Marxist. They were just too high powered. And they didn't encourage it, in

the way that I think my mother had been encouraged by her mother. I think that was the basis of their relationship, you know, long discussions and exchanges of opinions. But Ruth and Joe were out there: plotting, planning, building a revolution ... it was too intimidating to enter into that political arena.

My mother always encouraged me to write. I went into the film industry because I wanted to be in an area where I could excel, as far away from their world as possible. What could be further away from the ANC than Hollywood? And you know my mother loved films. So did Joe in a sense. But she thought it was very exciting. Getting to work for Robert de Niro, she was thrilled, and very curious.

I like the life style of being a writer, I feel very in control of my working life. Now, I have to get another film made. *A World Apart* was my first screenplay, and I think it was a story that was interesting and accessible for all sorts of people, particularly because it was from a child's perspective. I wrote it specifically as a low-budget film to increase its chances of being made, and I'm grateful our financing came from the UK rather than the US, because we didn't have to make all sorts of compromises. It didn't do fantastic business, the distribution of it was very screwed up, but it worked out very well for me, establishing me as a screenwriter. I do anything that I want, I do adaptations, I do rewrites, I do originals, as long as I respond to the subject. I feel really fortunate. I have choices in my work. I've been working for the Americans, because there is no industry here except television. The Americans also push and push and push stories. So I'm learning quite a lot and getting a hell of a lot better ...

You know, I think a greater exposure to Judaism would have helped me as a writer. I think it would have given me some grounding, some kind of perspective. I would have liked to have received some nurture from religion, to have that in one's life, to have some sense of being part of and belonging to a community.

I have to say that I really resent not having the choice of a religious upbringing. I was not aware enough as a child to say, 'Look, I'd like to go and try synagogue.' I wasn't in the world of people whose lives centred around Friday nights and Saturdays, to make me curious. (I had two sisters as well, which meant ready-made playmates at home.) I think I've missed out more from the lack of symbolism and mysticism and ceremony and ritual. You know, I'd really like to have been a Catholic! [Laughter] But I think I missed out on a lot, and there's a lot that I could have learned. And I'm not saying this because of the context of this interview, but because it's something I feel quite strongly about.

Did you ever wish that there had been anything Jewish, or anything religious, about Ruth's burial?

No, absolutely not. Never.

And did the ANC live up to your expectations when she died; did they do what you felt was right?

Well, it was the Mozambican government really. Frelimo. She had a very public funeral. It was a big thing, a big shock for everybody. On a smaller scale, there was the same show of solidarity and support that there was for Joe's death, in the way that they came to the house and took over [took care of the practical things], were supportive.

You mentioned earlier something about sitting shiva*, and I just wondered if you could go back to that. Did you sit* shiva *in South Africa for Joe?*

Well, the house was open. We didn't sit on mattresses. But we were at the house and people came, and people talked about him, and I suppose that's shiva really, ANC style. It's Irish, too. For ten days; it's a long time. And all sorts of different people came.

And was there any comfort for you?

Mmmm, oh yeah. Absolutely. People were fantastic. Everyone from Mandela right through to delegations from the outlying regions came to the house. Just to see the effect he had on people's lives, to see how much people loved him, was very comforting. And not to be alone at that time. It's just very strengthening to have that kind of support. It's hard to lose your only surviving parent. It's hard to lose Joe.

INSIDE

When South African troops were repulsed before
    Luanda
Our fig tree got chopped
down in reprisal. — That's Raymond
Nudging me, he's pointing
At Dave K who looks bemusedly
Up at the camera. Denis sits on an upturned
Paraffin tin. When this shot was taken
He must have completed
            17 years of his first
Life sentence.
            David R at the back is saying
Something to John, who looks at Tony who
Jerks his hand
            So it's partly blurred . . .
For sure an uprooted tree
            leaves behind a hole in the ground.
After a few years
You would have to have known
            it was here once. And a person?
There we are
            seated in our circle, grinning,
            mostly in short pants,
            some of us barefoot.

Jeremy Cronin, extract from the poem 'Group Photo from Pretoria Local on the Occasion of a Fourth Anniversary (Never Taken)' in his 1983 collection Inside

I will lie down to sleep
Without a woman and without a sheet . . .

Chayim Guri, from the collection Compass Rose, *Am Oved, 1960*

אשכב לישון
בלא אשה ובלא סדין....

חיים גורי, מהקובץ שושנת רוחות

DENIS GOLDBERG*

Denis Goldberg was born in 1933 into a family already deeply committed to radical politics. He trained as an engineer, and in 1955 graduated from the University of Cape Town. In the 1950s he became prominent in the Cape Town Congress of Democrats, amongst other involvements in anti-apartheid politics. He was tried in the famous Rivonia Trial in 1964, along with Nelson Mandela and other African National Congress leaders and activists. In the trial it was revealed that he had manufactured devices that Umkhonto we Sizwe used in their sabotage activities. Together with his fellow trialists he was sentenced to life imprisonment. Because he was white, he was incarcerated in Pretoria Central Prison rather than Robben Island.

In 1986, after twenty-two years in prison, he accepted then President P W Botha's conditional offer of release, which compelled him to renounce the use of violence to overthrow apartheid. He went from South Africa to Israel, where his daughter Hilary lived on a kibbutz, but soon after his arrival left again in the wake of a controversial interview which misrepresented his politics as, inter alia, supportive of any and all violence as a tool in liberation politics. He went to live in England with his wife Esme, where he continues to live today. From the time of his release, he actively campaigned for the ANC around the world. He currently runs Community HEART, a non-profit organisation seeking to support social development projects in Southern Africa.

At the outset of the interview, he clarified his understanding of his Jewishness and the question of Jews and apartheid:

> In the United States, where people are very sensitive to these things, far more so than in Britain where Jews hardly acknowledge their Jewishness (except if they go to synagogue and then it's a very tight closed community), I would say I am a chicken soup Jew. I like chicken soup, it's very nice with matzah balls in it as well, but I reckon that's about the limit of my Jewishness.
>
> When I arrived in Israel straight from prison I had a very long interview with a journalist. He asked me how I felt as a Jew about being in Israel. I said, 'You know, I've come to Israel because my daughter is here, and had she been in Saudi Arabia, that's where I

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