

Ruth First as educator: An untold story

Alan Wieder

Abstract

When South Africans think about Ruth First or her husband, Joe Slovo, the knowledge is always connected to the struggle against apartheid. Ruth is too often remembered because she was assassinated by the apartheid regime. Scholars and comrades, of course, have a broader and more complex view of their lives. She was a journalist and editor of the Johannesburg office of the many reincarnations of The Guardian between 1946 and her forced exile in 1964. She had more ideological breadth than her South African Communist Party comrades and was viewed by some as a 'new leftist' in the mid-sixties. She published numerous books and was the Director of Research of the Centro de Estudios Africanos (CEA) at Eduardo Mondlane University in Maputo when she was killed by a letter bomb at the hands of the South African government in 1982. But Ruth First was also an educator – a teacher and scholar who had a great effect on colleagues, comrades and students. While this part of Ruth's life and work is seldom discussed, there is irony in that her posthumous honours are from educational institutions. This article attempts to chronologically describe and analyse Ruth First's work as a teacher and mentor – a mission that was always grounded in the struggle against apartheid and social justice throughout the world. Both her formal and informal teaching experiences are the stuff of this article.

Key words: revolutionary, 'new left', socialist, teacher, mentor, Ruth First

When South Africans think about Ruth First or her husband, Joe Slovo, it is usually to identify them with the struggle against apartheid. While Joe is most often remembered as one of the Communist leaders of the armed struggle, or for his promotion of the 'sunset clauses' in the negotiations between the African National Congress (ANC) and the National Party that culminated in the end of apartheid, Ruth is too often remembered as a victim of the Struggle because she was assassinated by the apartheid

regime. Scholars and comrades, of course, have a broader and more complex view of their lives. Joe was a lawyer and then one of the leaders of Umkhonto we Sizwe, the armed wing of the ANC, in Angola, Zambia and Mozambique. He also became the Minister of Housing in Nelson Mandela's cabinet before dying from cancer in 1995.

Ruth was a journalist and editor of the Johannesburg office of the many reincarnations of *The Guardian* between 1946 and her forced exile in 1964. She had more ideological breadth than many of her Communist Party of South African (CPSA) comrades and was viewed by some as a 'new leftist' in the mid-sixties. She published numerous books and was the Director of Research of the Centre of African Studies (CEA) at Eduardo Mondlane University in Maputo when she was killed by a letter bomb at the hands of agents of the South African government in 1982. But Ruth First was also an educator – a teacher and mentor who had a great impact on colleagues, comrades and students. While this part of Ruth's life and work has seldom been discussed, its significance has been demonstrated by the award of numerous posthumous honours from educational institutions. First's role as a writer and scholar has received considerable attention, but this article will concentrate on her role as a teacher and mentor. It is important to note, however, that Ruth's teaching and writing were always grounded in the struggle against apartheid and social justice throughout Africa.

High school and youth politics

Ruth First was born in Johannesburg in 1925. At a very young age, her mother, Tilly First, introduced her to books and emphasised the importance of socialist politics. Even as a high school student, it appears that Ruth First took on the role of teacher to her fellow students. Myrtle Berman, a lifelong friend, who was one of the founders of the Armed Resistance Movement (ARM) in the late fifties, remembers Ruth being well ahead of their classmates in her knowledge of politics, particularly focusing on the Soviet Union, and the nature of oppression and racism in South Africa. According to Berman, Ruth First did not hesitate in instructing her peers as a student at Jeppe Girls High School. When Ruth was 14 years old she joined the Junior Left Book Club, a group that met weekly to discuss political books they had all read, sing socialist songs and report to the group on research they were assigned to do on issues of racism and oppression in South Africa and throughout the world (Berman 2010). Ruth read and discussed politics in South Africa and the Soviet Union with her parents, was quite vocal at Junior Left Book Club meetings and easily won debates with her comrades.

One other event that occurred at the end of Ruth First's high school years foreshadows her becoming both an informal and formal educator later in life. At this young age, Ruth gave a speech on the steps of the Johannesburg City Hall, where her parents had taken her to political meetings from the time of her childhood. Her brother described listening to her speech. 'What made a great impression on me was the first time I ever heard her speak on the steps of the city hall in Johannesburg. And she was young, she

was a brilliant orator' (First 2011). According to her close adult friend, the late Ros De Lanerolle, when Ruth told of these events some 30 years after the event, her memories were not of an extraordinary accomplishment, but rather of her mother's criticism (De Lanerolle ND). What is clear, however, is that the political world that she was introduced to by her parents became the foundation of her political activism, journalism and teaching, all strands of a holistic mission, throughout her adult life.

Witwatersrand University, politics and coming of age

Ruth First majored in Social Studies and received a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1946. She spent five years at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), yet her formal education was secondary to both her political and social awakening. She was heavily involved in leftist political work – both at the University and in the community. She attended political meetings, the Left Book Club and the weekly orations at the Johannesburg City Hall, where she gave her commencement address. Ruth spent time at Salmon's Bookshop, Peoples' Bookshop and Vanguard Bookshop, where she could find Left Book Club books as well as socialist publications. Ruth debated with comrades at Florian's Cafe, a Johannesburg coffee shop that was opened during her Wits years by German Jewish immigrants. She was a constant visitor at 13 Kholvad House on Market Street, the meeting place for young leftist activists between 1943 and 1946. It is here that she debated with comrades like Ismail Meer, Joe Slovo, JN Singh, Michael Scott, Yusuf Cachalia, George Bizos, Bram Fischer, Tony O'Dowd, and Harold Wolpe. While the discussions were informal, Ruth is remembered as a comrade who questioned commonplaces and challenged her comrades. This was informal teaching, but she nevertheless played a significant role in educating her colleagues.

While still a student at Wits, Ruth First participated in two more formal teaching experiences. Along with Berman and long-time comrade Rusty Bernstein, she taught literacy classes to black South Africans at one of the CPSA night schools. Her second pedagogical experience at the time came as she travelled through Europe just before her final year of undergraduate studies. Travelling with Harold Wolpe, she went to London for the World Federation of Democratic Youth conference. She continued on to Prague for a meeting of the International Union of Students and then to France, Hungary and Yugoslavia, speaking to local groups about South Africa and learning about revolutionary movements in Europe. Ruth notes this experience in *117 Days* (First 1965), and she wrote a descriptive and detailed, but not reflective, article at the time in *The Passive Resister*.

The Guardian, politics, and mentoring young journalists

After she completed her studies at the University of Witwatersrand, Ruth First took a position at the Social Welfare Department of the Johannesburg City Council. She was hired as a researcher and her job was to document city life for a commemorative

celebration of the 50th Jubilee of Johannesburg. When the African miner's strike approached in August 1946, Ruth quit her job, telling her supervisor that she wished to do 'political work.' Ruth First was elected to the Johannesburg District of the CPSA in 1946. Years later she spoke with John Heilpern about how she had joined the Party.

I became a communist because it was the only organisation known to me in South Africa that advocated meaningful changes. And because it wasn't just a policy, but something positive. They wanted to do something. They were immersed in the struggle for equality. They were committed. (Heilpern 1967: NP)

Ruth began her work at *The Guardian* at the end of 1946 as the manager of the Johannesburg bureau. According to James Zug, Ruth was responsible for adding the representation of black voices and articles on black issues at the paper (Zug 2007: 90, 91). She wrote weekly editorials as well as 'muck-raking' articles, sometimes as many as 16 a week. She was also a mentor to the young African journalists who joined the paper in the 17 years she devoted to *The Guardian*. In the fifties, the list of young writers included Alfred Hutchinson, Joe Gqabi and Willie Kgostile. She pushed Hutchinson very hard and he credited her with providing him with the craft to write the story of his escape from the apartheid regime, *Road to Ghana*. Gqabi, who, like Ruth, was assassinated by the apartheid government, was nurtured by Ruth in his work as a writer and photographer. Kgostile spoke about Ruth First.

In fact I found that Ruth used to encourage me a lot. She would say, 'Look, I'm going to talk to you about such-and-such, and I need you to point out some of the problems which you see out of what I'm saying. If you disagree with me, don't be shy – speak.' She was one of the white people who really made me feel that she wants me to know as much as she does. (Zug 2007: 309)

Teaching and mentoring were integral to Ruth's role as an editor. In general, one might say that she was *The Guardian*. One example of Ruth First as a mentor, at this time, comes from her comrade, Albie Sachs, who was her junior in the political movement in 1954. Sachs accompanied Ruth to Beijing for an organising meeting of the World Federation of Democratic Youth. Both First and Sachs were to speak at the meeting, and he recalls Ruth carefully reading and critiquing his paper before he presented it to the conference (Sachs 2011). A second life-long comrade, Ronnie Kasrils, also spoke of Ruth First as his mentor. Kasrils recalled Ruth's generosity even before they became comrades. At the suggestion of Party stalwart Rowley Arenstein, the young Kasrils sent Ruth a political poem he had written. Ruth responded positively and provided him with a reference to the *Daily Worker* in London (Kasrils 2011).

In 1963 there were two banning orders: one restricting Ruth First to Johannesburg, and the second preventing her from attending any political or social gatherings. In spite of her new constraints, Ruth visited Rivonia almost daily, sometimes for strategy meetings, but also in a mentorship role to work with Govan Mbeki to edit his manuscript on peasantry in South Africa that he had written on toilet paper while in detention. The manuscript was to become *The Peasant Revolt* after it was smuggled

out of the country to be published in 1964 as part of the Penguin Africa Library. On 3 June 1963 Joe Slovo left South Africa on a mission to promote the armed struggle against apartheid in other African nations. He would not return until 1990. With Joe Slovo away, all 'normalcy' collapsed when Ruth First was apprehended on 9 August 1963 under a 90-day detention order. She was arrested at the Cullen Library at the University of the Witwatersrand and taken into custody, just 29 days after her comrades were detained in the raid at Lilliesleaf, leading to the Rivonia Trial: she was expecting the arrest. Ruth chronicled her incarceration and its aftermath in her book *117 Days* (First 1965).

When Ruth was released in late November, Joe and her father Julius were living in London. Joe wanted Ruth and their daughters to join him as soon as possible. Although she knew that she had to leave South Africa, she did not want to be viewed as having deserted the cause. She did apply for a passport but was turned down by the South African government. Instead, she was offered an exit permit that arrived on 9 March 1964, informing her that she was approved 'to leave the Republic of South Africa permanently'. Ruth was followed from her home by Special Branch officers as she was driven to Jan Smuts International Airport to leave South Africa.

Exile in London in the sixties – writing, speaking, and studying politics

When Ruth First initially arrived in London she clearly believed that the struggle against apartheid was lost. In addition, she was worried about how she and Joe would support their family. Her anxieties were political, professional and personal. Encouraged by friends like Ronald Segal as well as Joe, she remained committed to social justice as both a writer and a speaker. She had published *South West Africa* in 1963, and she dived into writing *117 Days*, her prison memoir, which she completed in the quiet of Cecil Williams' London flat. As she was working to finish writing *117 Days*, Ruth was also helping to edit Govan Mbeki's book, *The Peasants' Revolt*, as well as a collection of Nelson Mandela's writings and speeches, *No Easy Walk to Freedom*. Mbeki's book was published in 1964 and *No Easy Walk to Freedom*, like *117 Days*, came out in 1965. At the time of publication both Mandela and Mbeki were beginning their decades of imprisonment on Robben Island, and Ruth would never see them again. All three books were banned in South Africa.

Writing in 1964, Ruth began the preface of *The Peasants' Revolt* with the following sentence: 'This book has had a painful birth.' She recounts Mbeki writing while on the run from authorities as well as during a pre-Rivonia sentence in prison. The prison writing had been done with pencil stubs on toilet paper. At this time she was also working on policy papers with Oliver Tambo that he presented to other African leaders. Ruth First began her association with the United Nations as well as Amnesty International in 1964. Initially, this work centred on prison conditions in South Africa. Reflecting the same degree of persistence seen in her journalistic work in South Africa,

Ruth's determined campaign led to the appointment of a United Nations Special Investigative Commission.

Ruth worked relentlessly during her first years in London. She worried about money, unconvinced that she could earn a living as a journalist and writer. She applied for an academic fellowship at the University of Manchester, but was informed by Peter Worsley, considered in the United Kingdom as one of the founders of the New Left, that they felt that they needed to continue to support her comrade, Jack Simon, who was already in the position. Thinking that an academic career might facilitate her political, economic and personal aspirations, Ruth enrolled in graduate studies at the London School of Economics (LSE) in 1966. She also began a long list of book projects. Similar to her work for *The Guardian* in South Africa, Ruth's writing was political, sociological and also ideological. At LSE she met scholars from across the world, and was clearly influenced by the burgeoning New Left, an ideological perspective that was often not welcome amongst her comrades in the CPSA.

Her ideas were respected by New Left stalwarts such as Tarik Ali, and she had the honour of studying with Belgian-born Ralph Milliband, a one-time student of Harold Laski and one of the leading anti-Stalinist theoreticians of New Left politics. Ruth took Milliband's courses at LSE, and they spent time in each other's homes, where the conversations were usually political. Milliband admired Ruth First.

She was the least 'utopian' of revolutionaries; but she was not in the least 'disillusioned'; she never gave the slightest hint of doubt about the justice of her cause or about the urgent need to strive for its advancement. She deplored the shortcomings, stupidities and crimes of her own side. But this never dimmed her sense that there was a struggle to be fought against the monstrous tyranny that is South Africa ... Beyond all disappointments and setbacks, it was [the] sense of the reality of oppression which moved her. (Williams 1982: NP)

Ruth First found new excitement in her life at this time as the people she met, both at the London School of Economics and generally, expanded her world outside of the boundaries of the SACP. One of her friends at LSE at the time was a young man named Danny Schechter. Schechter returned to the United States in the late sixties and launched a news organisation called the African Research Group. He and Ruth often corresponded, helping each other with information on what was happening on the continent. They also collaborated from afar on research on the CIA. Schechter's first memories of Ruth First are instructive.

At LSE in my class I saw this really attractive woman who was clearly older, professional, not sort of the student culture, and when she spoke and asked questions she was extremely compelling, very brilliant. Ruth was also interested and intrigued by the American New Left. So here's this woman who is very intimidating to me initially – didn't take any shit. (Schechter 2010)

Schechter provides an insightful analysis of Ruth First's time in England, saying 'she was not playing the revolution; she was making the revolution, or trying to' (Schechter 2010).

Being in and out of London became a pattern until Ruth took an academic position at the University of Manchester in 1972. Joe's time included working in the Goodge Street office of the ANC and travelling to the German Democratic Republic, the Soviet Union, Angola, Zambia and Tanzania. Ruth's travel included multiple research trips to Kenya, Tanzania, Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Ethiopia and Libya by the end of the decade. While Ruth had numerous projects, much of her work in Africa at the time was researching for her future book, *The Barrel of a Gun* (First 1970). She was besieged by speaking and writing requests, and continued to do research reports for the United Nations. In 1972 she was awarded the Manchester Fellowship that had earlier eluded her. She had made an ideological shift in her writing on Africa, moving from the SACP theoretical conscript of 'colonialism of a special kind' and traditional Marxist analysis to more of a C Wright Mills, New Left Power Elite view, stressing the importance of socialism in the context of class and race oppression. Gavin Williams analysed this shift many years later in a lecture at Rhodes University.

Ruth did not engage with the dialectical controversies of the 1970s, when intellectuals were concerned to elaborate definitive versions of Marxist theories. Ruth made use of and, at Durham University, taught theories of development and underdevelopment not for their own sakes but to explain historical events and institutional structures. (Williams 2010: NP)

This point of view energised Ruth's journalism, reports, books and eventually her teaching. She had breadth that made her very attractive to faculty and students at Manchester. It was during her year at Manchester that she began a collegial/political relationship with Gavin Williams, a South African-born sociologist who at the time was on the faculty of Durham University. He would later teach at Oxford, and after reading Ruth's work and meeting her at both academic conferences and political meetings, he encouraged her to apply for an open position in the Sociology Department at Durham. Ruth was initially reticent, as she did not have a PhD. The head of the department, Phillip Abrams, however, was very positive about Ruth's applying for the position, as he recognised the value of her work. Williams wrote a recommendation, as did Thomas Hodgkin, Ronald Segal, Sir Robert Birkey, Peter Worsley and a number of Manchester professors. Williams' letter of support read

Last term she gave a lecture at Durham on the military in underdeveloped countries which in my view was a model of clarity of exposition of complex and unfamiliar material to my undergraduates. Tony Barnett prescribed *The Barrel of a Gun* as one of the key books in the course on sociology of developing societies, which is of course the one we would be wanting her to teach if she were appointed. (Williams 1973: NP)

Becoming an academic

Ruth was appointed to the position and lectured at Durham University from 1973 to 1978. She taught numerous courses, including the Sociology of Developing Societies, during her first year. The syllabus was rather typical of the new orthodoxy of the time, which relied heavily upon Dependency Theory, but according to Williams Ruth's experiences as an activist and journalist brought both breadth and depth to the course

(Williams 2011). During her second year, she helped develop a team-taught course on Sociology of Industrial Development. Students studied industrialisation during their second year and development in the third year. While colleagues collaborated on the course, Ruth was mostly responsible for the development section. She also taught Political Sociology, Third World Social Movements, and Sociology and Gender during her years at the University. The Sociology of Gender course is interesting in that Ruth has been credited with pioneering the course as part of a shift to feminist scholarship. The most noticeable sign of that shift came some years later, with the publishing of her book on Olive Schreiner. The course took the form of a student-initiated seminar, with Ruth being the most logical instructor. In addition to her appointment at Durham, Ruth developed a course for young people who wanted to be writers, using the expertise that she had developed in her own attempts to have her writing published. The curriculum included topics such as ‘internal structure’ and ‘administration of publishers’, ‘creative role of editors and agents, contracts, subsidiary rights, production, marketing’, and more.

Ruth First never promoted herself as a fashionable academic. Gavin Williams related this characteristic to her intensity and powerful work ethic.

She certainly never had a sort of fan club in a way that some star academics do. You know, a group of people who associate themselves very closely with an academic star. It was a very small department. I think she was too acerbic for that to be feasible. But also it wasn't her style. She was getting on with things – doing things. She had no interest in having that sort of set of followers. It just didn't fit. (Williams 2011)

However, she did have a powerful effect on some students, both formal university students and others whom she mentored just as she had during her time at The Guardian. She was able to hire some of her students from England when she left Durham to work at Eduardo Mondlane University in Maputo. Included in that group were Judith Head, who was subsequently a member of the Sociology Department at the University of Cape Town, and Chris Gerry, who teaches at the University College of Swansea. Gerry recalled being Ruth's student at Durham:

As a young research student, I was introduced to her at Durham University and she played a very important role in sorting out some of the inevitable clumsiness and errors in the first academic article I submitted for publication. The legacy Ruth leaves in the university and outside is bigger than the sum of all its parts – bigger than Ruth herself, because she caused so much to develop in others and demanded as much from those around her as she did from herself. (Gerry 1982: 3)

Ruth also continued to mentor young journalists. Michael Wolfers, who recorded her last public talks for Radio Mozambique, recalled asking Ruth to read his work when he was a young writer.

I took the manuscript to Ruth and she found time to read it and to give me pages of trenchant comment and criticism. Her notes were a mix of line by line commentary and introduction to areas of theory and understanding that were entirely new to me. I reworked and rewrote the material and was saved from much slackness of thought through Ruth's incisiveness. (Wolfers ND)

While Ruth First became very much a part of Britain's academic world in the mid-seventies, it is important to emphasise the fact that she never left the world of progressive politics. Often her life as an academic and revolutionary were wed. In collaboration with Williams, Lionel Cliff, John Saul, Chris Allen, Robin Cohen and Peter Lawrence, she launched the *Review of African Political Economy*, an academic journal that was committed to a radical analysis of race, class and oppression in Africa. She also attended both African National Congress meetings and those of the Anti-Apartheid Movement, and she encouraged young comrades who did not necessarily follow the ANC or the SACP party lines to become involved in the movement (Legassick 2011). At meetings she did not hesitate to engage in radical and controversial debate. For example, Gavin Williams recalls a meeting of the Anti-Apartheid Movement where she was attacked after criticising the movement's support of ZAPU in Rhodesia.

I sat next to Ruth, on her right-hand side, at the meeting. Thabo Mbeki then came up to sit on my right-hand side. He had no love for me. His purpose was presumably to keep an eye on Ruth. Afterwards, at her house over drinks, she said that Thabo was the sort of person who, come the revolution, would put you up against a wall and shoot you. (Williams 2011)

On a lighter note, Williams also remembers Ruth complaining about the South African academic mafia during a meeting of the British Historical Association. He quickly reminded her that she was a member. But most importantly, as both an academic and a revolutionary, Ruth First wanted people to challenge commonplaces, especially those of her own political camp. Rica Hodgson recalled being with Ruth at a meeting of ANC women in London.

Ruth was not one of the speakers that day, she was on the floor. The chairperson said: 'In the Soviet Union 75% of the doctors are women.' Everybody cheered and clapped, you see. Ruth said: 'Excuse me madam chair, have you ever seen a woman up in the presidium with all those double breasted suits.' She wasn't letting them get away with anything. (Hodgson 2011)

A Semester at the University of Dar es Salaam

While Ruth First was engaged in academics and politics during her time at Durham University, she continually questioned why she personally, and the ANC institutionally, were not doing more to get home and continue the struggle. She took a leave of absence from Durham in 1975, spending one semester on the faculty of the University of Dar es Salaam, at the time one of the most vibrant institutions of higher education on the African continent. Phillip Abrams worked on the logistics of the exchange and while he questioned whether it was timely for Ruth academically, he was certain that it was important for Durham to establish relationships with universities in Africa (Harlow 2009: NP). It also appears that he knew that it was important for Ruth, personally and politically. Although Ruth spent only a semester in Dar es Salaam, her time coincided with lectures and teaching by Walter Rodney, Terence Ranger, Mahmood Mamdani, Archie Mafeje and John Saul (Harlow 2009:

NP). She was excited by the conversations and debates with colleagues, but was also taken aback at how vicious some of the debates became and wrote to Joe on one occasion 'but even my stony heart was moved by Ranger's plight' (Harlow 2009: NP).

Upon her arrival, the department chair informed her that she would teach the course he was teaching. She had the weekend to prepare. Ruth was still elated to be back on African soil. She wrote to Gavin Williams, telling him how exciting it was to be teaching about issues that were directly relevant to her African students (Williams 2011). Thus, in spite of a great lack of supplies, the ambush of the department chair, colleagues from the German Democratic Republic with whom Ruth never got along, she was there to teach and interact with students. The semester was somewhat of a precursor to what was soon to become her life at Eduardo Mondlane University in Mozambique. She taught the second-term economics course and the syllabus topics included theories of underdevelopment, strategies of development, industrialisation, rural development, rural cooperation in Tanzania, and class and development (Harlow 2009: NP). Ruth's course notes, located in The Ruth First Papers, capture something of the flavour of the course. Especially instructive is her concern for student feedback:

Hope you'll speak up, even dissatisfaction, complaints. Lectures pack too much? Too thin? Coming over too fast? [...] Interruptions (questions) during lectures? You must judge. Break continuity – danger. Throw me off my balance? On the other hand sometimes helpful to ask for clarification. And if I can't give it at the time I promise to go away and think about it for the following time. As for seminars, these are to be 'working sessions', she emphasises to the students. YOU to do the work.' (Harlow 2009: NP)

Ruth wrote Joe that she was excited about her students throughout her semester in Tanzania. She was pleased that the university had appeared to be serious about enrolling older students and in one early letter she said:

I'm amazed at the level of my students, though I'm sure there are duds and conservatives among them too ... From the looks of it numbers of older people, experienced people have got in, and their commitment is very earnest, even if only for careers. (Harlow 2009: NP)

First did question her students who were driven by 'fixed ideological position' and wondered out loud whether they were going to use their university credentials to become bureaucrats above other callings. Yet she was aware that the Tanzanian students were not uniform, and she shared this perspective in a later letter to Joe.

My course hit a few good high spots – and some low – but they're hipped to the analysis of under-development, and it's really intriguing how they react when they have to apply their method to Tanzania. This is when the divide comes. The radicals persevere with the analysis; the nationalists take refuge in statements about exceptions. Or something even less tangible. (Harlow 2009: NP)

Ruth First left Tanzania at the end of the semester. While there were both highs and lows during her stay, it might be that she returned to England and her position at Durham knowing full well that it would only be a short time before she returned to Africa, which she believed was her academic and political home. In England she divided her time between London and Durham, continuing her torrid pace of writing, public speeches and lecturing. She interacted with colleagues and students at Dur-

ham, worked studiously on the Review of African Economy as well as on forthcoming books.

In spite of the intensity of her work in the United Kingdom, First was driven to return to Africa. In March 1976 she wrote to her friend and comrade, Aquino de Braganca, saying: 'Beside a revolution, doing a teaching job is mediocre stuff' (De Braganca & O'Laughlin 1984: 159). Aquino had published articles by Ruth in *Afrique-Asie*, and he responded to her letter after Mozambique was liberated and he had founded the Centre of African Studies (CEA). Ruth came to the Centre in 1977 to direct a study on African miners, and she returned the following year, taking an appointment as Assistant Director and then as Director of Research. Although it took her another year to formally resign from Durham, she was firmly placed in Mozambique from 1977 onwards. Judy Head, Ruth's student at Durham, came to work with her at CEA: she remembers Ruth expressing how important it was to be at home, geographically, politically and pedagogically (Head 2011). Of course, the three dimensions were, to Ruth First, actually one. While Ruth was finishing her book on Olive Schreiner with Ann Scott at the time, she leapt into the work of the Centre. It should also be noted that not long after her arrival, Maputo became one of the most important points of entry back into South Africa by the ANC, SACP and Umkhonto we Sizwe. Joe Slovo led the movement.

Coming home: Eduardo Mondlane University

Aquino de Braganca believed that Ruth First was the perfect person to lead the research on southern Africa. For Ruth, it was the opportunity to combine research and teaching with a 'direct revolutionary force' (De Braganca & O'Laughlin 1984: 160). While she was still doing individual writing, it was on collaboration, and especially on the centre's course, named The Development Course, that Ruth focused her efforts. Staff at the CEA, with Ruth as the leader, worked with cadres of worker-students. Defined succinctly by De Braganca and O'Laughlin, 'The course was innovative in its objective – to teach research by doing it' (De Braganca & O'Laughlin 1984: 161). More descriptively, students came from different government workplaces, which included a bank credit manager, a director of a port workers' school, army officials, people from the education ministry, and more. Staff members, including Ruth, taught collaboratively, and attended the classes with the students even if they were not formally teaching, with the goal of 'constructing new forms of socialist agricultural production, state farms and cooperatives' (De Braganca & O'Laughlin 1984: 161). Quickly the course was expanded to include non-agricultural social production. After addressing both theory and academic construction of what was happening throughout the country, the course culminated with a month-long field project where students and staff went together to live amidst and study various sites of production – farms, cooperatives, mines, shipping and more. Students were divided into brigades and usually two members of the CEA staff accompanied them on the field projects.

Ironically, it was Ruth who initiated the field projects, even though she was totally a city person. In fact, she claimed that the ‘country gave her a permanent headache’ (De Braganca & O’Laughlin 1984: 162). But she was committed to the fieldwork because she believed that it would lead to the transformation of peasant production, first in Mozambique and then in her native South Africa.

Ruth First herself considered this period at the CEA to have been one of the most productive and militant in her life, precisely because political struggle was directly integrated into her everyday work of teaching, research, and writing. She considered her contribution to the consolidation of the Mozambican Revolution to be a direct involvement in the liberation of South Africa. This was possible because she had a clear political vision of her objectives and a sharp analysis of the political context within which she worked. The importance of the Development Course derived for her not only from what it was in itself, but from where and when it was located – in revolutionary Mozambique during a period of revolutionary conjuncture in southern Africa. (De Braganca & O’Laughlin 1984: 162, 163)

Ruth First designed the course around four principles:

- Implementing revolutionary strategy is a matter of method – of using Marxist method to investigate and analyse the concrete and constantly changing situations which the revolution confronts and directs
- Promoting a revolutionary context, where the university had to take on new forms of training that took advantage of the experience of cadres and responded to the requirements of everyday practice
- The struggle to build socialism as a struggle to transform the organisation of production
- The struggle for national liberation in South Africa which was strategically of a piece with the struggle to build socialism in Mozambique

While the Development Course started with theory, the purpose was application, not memorisation or intellectualisation. When Ruth discussed theory in the course at the 1982 Social Science in Southern Africa Conference that she organised for CEA, she said, ‘We’re very interested in provoking. If students don’t ask questions then we are failing’ (Radio Mozambique 1982).

Ruth had endless discussions with her colleagues at the Centre regarding the curriculum of the course. They were particularly concerned with student participation, i.e. getting their adult students to be fully involved and engaged, even though all of the students were in full-time jobs. In the end, Ruth and her colleagues wanted their students to view ‘social investigation as a necessary part of their work’ (De Braganca & O’Laughlin 1984: 165). Their task, of course, was not always successful. She addressed some of the difficulties at the Social Science Conference:

The kinds of questions I’m referring to, for instance, are the problems of how we teach students who have different histories of education, come from widely different range of structures, the university, ministries, mass organisations and so on. And I think that whereas we should probably admit that we started off rather romantically about this, saying it’s so important to crash educational barriers and break this elitist monopoly, we

shall do it with sheer willpower, in the course of teaching we have come to acknowledge that there are problems ... Now I don't say we've resolved it. We struggle with it. (Radio Mozambique 1982)

Students and staff went throughout the country, set up camps and learned about and worked with tea workers, contract harbour workers, small farmers and cotton workers. Correspondingly, connecting their theoretical training and field work, they learned about the colonial aspects and exploitation of family agriculture, cheap contract labour, the petit-bourgeois trader class, and technological exploitation. These were all issues that were later expanded upon in Ruth's posthumous book, *Black Gold*, a publication that came out of CEA work.

Besides managing the development course and other administrative tasks, Ruth also served as a mentor to the young researchers who became part of CEA. Bridget O'Laughlin joined the Centre from a post as an assistant professor at Stanford University. Although quite established as a scholar, and already well-published, she viewed Ruth as both a teacher and colleague (De Branganca & O'Laughlin 1984). Jeanne Penvenne was still in her twenties when she came to work at CEA, and her recollections include Ruth's aiding her as a researcher and writer while at the same time nurturing her politically (Penvenne 2010). Judy Head smiled as she recalled the red marks that covered the pages of her dissertation, a document she wrote while on the staff of the Centre (Head 2011). Finally, Helena Dolny, who would marry Joe Slovo in 1986, pointedly remembers Ruth First critiquing her writing (Dolny 2010). Of course, mentorship was not always smooth and there were political debates and issues that ran concurrently to the examples of mentorship. There were some CEA researchers who believed that Ruth First was too ideological and somewhat harsh in her critique of colleagues. This was especially true when the subject was South Africa, rather than workers in Mozambique. Finally, there were also colleagues who believed that Ruth was forcing them into projects that did not utilise their expertise. Criticisms acknowledged, the general spirit that came from the young researchers, as well as from Aquino de Branganca, was that Ruth First nurtured, sometimes intensely and other times gently, the work of other researchers at the Centre of African Studies. John Saul was at Universidad Eduardo Mondlane at the time and he spoke to this very issue.

Besides, even when one looked back at moments of inter-personal tension one had had with her it was also with the realisation that such tensions were not arbitrary ones, that almost invariably something important, intellectually and politically, was at stake. The seriousness of her engagement, the intensity of her concern, could never be doubted. Nor, if you were struggling to be as serious yourself, could such moments cast any doubt upon her personal concerns, her compassion, her continuing solidarity in the next round of whatever struggle, public or personal, was in train. (Saul 1982)

We have previously referred to Ruth First speaking at the 1982 Social Science Conference that she hosted with Aquino de Branganca. Ruth organised the conference and brought in extraordinary scholars of southern Africa from throughout the world. The conference was to be her last act. Just one day after the meeting adjourned, Ruth

First was murdered via a letter bomb sent by the South African government. She died instantly, and her colleagues Aquino de Branganca, Bridget O' Laughlin and Pallo Jordan were seriously injured in the attack. Ruth First, of course, was not the only comrade murdered by the apartheid regime, and she was not the only academic. But her death was both ironic and unique because many who knew Ruth First and Joe Slovo imagined that it would be Joe Slovo who would be assassinated. The apartheid regime killed Ruth First because they knew that ideas are important. They killed Ruth First because she organised an international conference that questioned the authority and actions of the South African state. Shortly after Ruth was assassinated, Joseph Hanlon, a journalist who had interviewed Ruth years earlier, explained that while most academics would not understand, the murder of Ruth First was a warning for academics. They should not attend conferences like the one Ruth organised, and they should not support or practise research or teaching that calls for socialist transformation (Hanlon 1982). Finally, the South African government killed Ruth First because she mentored young comrades in connecting ideas and actions with the goal of democratic socialism in South Africa. Her close friend, colleague and comrade Gavin Williams summarised it best in his 2010 speech at Rhodes University.

Ruth First has come to be an icon of the revolutionary hero. This is to make too much of her. It is also to make too little. There is a danger that her real achievements, her bravery and her integrity, will be hidden behind the mirror. Ruth combined during her life the practical politics of the movement for liberation with commitments to investigating, researching and explaining. (Williams 2010: NP)

Conclusion

It would be inappropriate to atomise Ruth First's life. However, focusing on her work as an educator portrays a breadth, politically, personally and pedagogically, that is seldom expressed when Ruth is remembered. It is important to note that there is little written about Ruth First. What is published often comments on her style and her boldness, and sometimes addresses her thinking outside of the South African Communist Party. Without contradicting or lessening Ruth's pledge to the struggle against apartheid and justice throughout Africa, this small contribution provides a window on how teaching and mentoring were part of that commitment.

References

- Author's interviews
- Myrtle Berman, 2010
- Helena Dolny, 2010
- Ronald First, 2011
- Judith Head, 2011
- Rica Hodgson, 2011
- Ronnie Kasrils, 2011
- Martin Legassick, 2011

Jeanne Penvenne, 2010
 Albie Sachs, 2011
 Danny Schechter, 2010
 Gavin Williams, 2011
 Ros De Lanerolle, ND. Interview by Kate Carey, available in the Ruth First Papers, ICC, University of London.

Broadcasts

Radio Mozambique – July 1982: Coverage and recording of the Social Science Conference

Speech

Saul, John. 1982. Memorial for Ruth First, London.

Publications

De Braganca, A and O’Laughlin, B. (1984) The Work of Ruth First in the Centre of African Studies: The Development Course [online]. Available through Mozambique History Net: www.mozambiquehistory.net/people/aquino/writing/mozambique/19840000_aquino_bridge_t.pdf, 159.

Gerry, C. (1982) A tribute to Ruth First. *Labour, Capital, and Society*, 15(2): 3-4. Hanlon, J. (1982) Why South Africa had to kill Ruth First. London: New Statesman.

Harlow, B. (2009) Flushed with elation: Ruth First at the University of Dar es Salaam [online]. Pambazuka News 454. Available at www.pambazuka.org/en/category/features/59662.

Heilpern, J. (1967) Bye, by blue sky. London: Nova, 31-33.

Williams, G. (1973) Letter of reference, 29 June 1973. Available in the Ruth First Papers, ICC, University of London.

Williams, G. (1982) Walter Rodney Lecture, Boston University, 8 November 1982.

Williams, G. (2010) Portrait of a modern woman: Ruth First: Academic, scholar and teacher. Lecture given at Rhodes University, 17 August 2010.

Wolfers, M. (no date) In SWAM – Campaign to stop the War Against Angola and Mozambique, 6 (10, 11).

Zug, J. (2007) *The Guardian: The History of South Africa’s Extraordinary Anti-Apartheid Newspaper*. East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press.

Notes on the author

Alan Wieder lives in Portland, Oregon and is currently working on the final edits of *Ruth First and Joe Slovo in the War Against Apartheid* that will be available in June from Monthly Review Books in the United States and Jacana Publishers in South Africa.

Address for correspondence
 alanwieder@gmail.com