

**PORTRAIT OF AN ACTIVIST: RUTH FIRST AND THE SOUTH AFRICAN STRUGGLE**

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It is twenty seven years since Ruth was killed: a lifetime, and simultaneously like no time at all. But it *is* objectively a long time, especially in a country like South Africa where the political and social sea changes have been so enormous. A generation that never even knew apartheid is coming to maturity.

Yet Ruth, in the scholarship in her name, in the roads and buildings named after her, still stands in South Africa, her legacy given its place in the society she fought so hard to achieve.

And what a legacy it is. There is Ruth as academic, Ruth as activist, Ruth as friend and comrade. And mother.

To which of course must also be added: Ruth as writer (not quite the same as academic) and Ruth as wife and partner – because Ruth's passionate, and sometimes stormy, marriage to my father, Joe Slovo, was inextricably bound up not only of who Ruth was and the contribution she made, but also with who Joe was and the part he ended up playing in the liberation of South Africa.

All these different Ruths: and this for someone who was only flesh and blood, a woman who experienced many of the same joys, and the same frustrations as other women of her time. But she was also amongst that small band of her generation in South Africa who chose to swap the privilege of her white skin for the far greater privilege of belonging to the struggle for human dignity and justice in this country.

When I think – why Ruth? Why did she make these choices? - Why did she become the person she did? then I am immediately led to think about her parents – our maternal grandparents, Tilly and Julius First.

Tilly and Julius were both Jews whose families came from far away in eastern Europe – in Tilly's case in Lithuania and in Julius's in Latvia.

They were part of a migration that took place in the first quarter of the twentieth century - Jews who fled their homelands to escape persecution and economic privation. Tilly's mother was pregnant when she had started out her journey: so Tilly was born on the way to South Africa.

Julius was older than Tilly when he arrived. His early memories included Cossacks riding through his Latvian village, burning and pillaging and (and he used to insist this was true and he was such a modest man I have no reason to doubt him) he also remembered how in 1905, just before the first failed Russian revolution, he actually heard Leon Trotsky giving a speech.

Why did they end up in South Africa? I'm not sure- that's part of their history that was buried with them. In that mass migration that occurred, there was often no intention involved. Perhaps somebody from their village, or some relative, who had already made the journey wrote to tell them that there was a good living to be made here or to send a ticket. Or perhaps the boat they took just happened to be heading for South Africa. –remember they had no one to guide them other than the ones that had gone before, and often no idea of which country would welcome them. Or perhaps they were amongst the group of immigrants who having docked in England or Germany, were soon packed off by Jewish aid organisations. These “well meaning” established Jews wanted to help the new wave of impoverished immigrants, but they also wanted to make sure that not too many poor Jews settled in *their* adopted country in case this influx reflected badly on them. I think, that in my grandfather's Julius case, this is happened: in London where they first

docked, Julius's father was given a crash course in tailoring before the family was given their marching orders and their passage south.

So that's how Ruth's parents come, at the turn of the century, to that land of opportunity. That land of opportunity for whites, I should say.

It took them a while to establish themselves. In Tilly's case, her parents were never that well off: they scratched a living with a cow in the yard for milk and cheese and a few vegetables. Because Tilly's mother stayed at home, she never fully integrated into South African life.

Tilly, who was educated in a Johannesburg school until the age of 13, once told me that, by the time she was grown up, she had so lost her fluency in her mother tongue of Yiddish, that she was barely able to communicate with a mother who only ever spoke Yiddish.

It seemed extraordinary to me that a person could, so readily, lose her mother tongue. And yet, when in disbelief I told my father what Tilly had said Joe said that it had also happened to him. Even though he had been an exclusively Yiddish speaker until the age of nine, by the time he was an adult he had also lost his mother tongue and therefore any meaningful communication with his Yiddish-only speaking father.

This kind of language shift – in one generation - tells us something about the personal costs of migration. It was as if, in having to move not only country, but also continents, their language – by which I mean their mother tongue - and alongside of this - large elements of memory, history and the past that run along with language - had to be forgotten so that they could fit themselves into the new. And in my grandparent's case, they both both discarded religious belief and so that part of Judaism that centred around the synagogue had no appeal.

But there was another Jewish tradition, that both my grandparents did follow: and that was a tradition of political activism.

Many of the immigrants who came from the Pale, (that band of Jewish settlements in eastern Europe) were fleeing anti-Semitism and the economic hardship that attended it. But their number also included those who had been trade unionists and political organisers and who'd had to leave because of political persecution. These people brought with them, into South Africa, a tradition of political involvement.

Look at the white activists of Ruth's generation, and you will find that they were disproportionately Jewish. I'm thinking here of people like Harold Wolpe, and Arthur Goldreich, and the Hilda and Rusty Bernstein.. and there were more. The explanation for this lies partly in the political background of the immigrants. Although most Jews did what most whites in South Africa did - closed their eyes to what was going on around them so that they could reap the benefits of apartheid - there was still a small heroic band who, having experienced oppression, refused to be complicit in the oppression of others.

In his biography, my father described what life was like in the Jewish boarding house in which he lived:

“There were very few Yiddish books in circulation,” Joe wrote “ and there was little or no reading. A typical night would begin with a heated pre-dinner political discussion. The original topic was invariably diverted by the staggered arrival of lodgers who joined in. The dinner tables were cleared by 8pm..... and nightly schools of rummy, poker and klabberjas ... would go into session until the early hours of the morning....” and then Joe goes on to describe how “Sunday morning outings often ended up on the broad pavement outside Cohen's café around the corner in Beit street, where small groups debated horse racing, dog racing and the world situation.”

Both Ruth parents were interested in the world situation. And they were more than interested in the situation in their adopted country. Our grandfather, Julius, who went with his brothers into a furniture business and did relatively well, joined the Communist Party young.

Tilly, our grandmother, had a different trajectory. She had left school at 13 so that she could earn the money to put her brother through an accountancy course. She was only a girl after all, whose life aspiration must therefore be to marry and have children: her career was not therefore considered to be of any importance. So she would get up early to iron her brother's shirts and make his lunch, and then she would go out to work, at first in a shoe shop and later in a place that sold furniture on higher purchase to poor white miners.

Her eyes were opened when she was in that furniture job. In 1922 the miners went on strike. It was partly a racist strike – they were protesting against the mine owner's attempts to put more African miners into “white “ jobs. But when Tilly saw how her boss repossessed the miners' furniture as soon as they failed just one week's payment (and this despite the fact that he knew that when the strike was over, the miners would start paying again), her eyes were opened. She began to understand how hard ordinary people worked, and how little they gained from it, and thus began her journey into Communism.

She was an amazing woman, my grandmother. Ruth's mother. Her mother had only ever spoken Yiddish - but by the time I came onto the scene, Tilly had strangely adopted the accent not of a white South African, but of a British Queen. She was a woman who lived well into her nineties – and this with only one kidney. She had never had the chance to finish school and yet, when I was a student and would boast about the novels and history books from the 1940s and 1950s I was reading, Tilly would inevitably cut me down to size by saying: “oh yes. I remember that one. I read it when it first came out.” . She was a hard

woman to have as a mother, I think: she could be cold and she could be judgmental. She was a stiff task master, difficult to satisfy. And Ruth was her beloved daughter.

There's a story Tilly used to tell about Ruth.

Ruth was about seventeen, Tilly said, when she had climbed the Johannesburg City Hall steps to give her first public speech. At that time, the Party used to hold rallies on the steps, arguing for change, and these rallies were often also attended by Brown shirts whose aim was to use violence to break up the meetings. And there was Ruth, in this fevered and frightening atmosphere aged 17, and delivering a passionate speech.

Having set this scene Tilly would then tell me how, after Ruth had finished, a comrade who was standing next to Tilly, turned to her to congratulate her on how well her young daughter had done. In reply, Tilly then enumerated the ways in which Ruth could have improved her performance.

I think there was a double purpose to Tilly's story. It was her way of indirectly expressing pride in her daughter (a kind of – as-long-as- I'm-critical I can also boast about her how wonderful Ruth was) , but it also pointed to an aspect of Tilly's character and of her aspirations that were never fulfilled. Tilly felt passionately about politics and about the evils of racism, and yet, she was always secondary. So much so, that when she first tried to join the Communist Party, she was rejected on the grounds that her husband was a capitalist (and this was that same capitalist, Julius, who was actually treasurer of the Communist Party). And Tilly, because of her brother's needs, had been made to leave school : her daughter, Ruth, in contrast, got to go to university. As a young girl Tilly would have wanted badly to achieve what, with her help, her daughter managed to achieve.

Tilly was a woman ahead of her time: she would have loved to make her own impact. But because of the times she lived in, and especially because of the unequal position of women, she never managed to. All her ambition, all her beliefs she poured into her daughter – and this included looking after us her grandchildren when Ruth was out trying to change the world. . If Tilly could not make her mark, then Ruth would. And if Ruth was going to do it, Tilly would make sure she did it better than anybody else.

To establish their own sense of their own identity, children often feel the need to rebel. But Ruth was born into a family who were already rebels. Many are the funny stories of Ruth's school friends, who coming home on a play date, were forced to sit and listen to Tilly's lecture on the inequities of apartheid and the need for communism. Ruth found her own way of adapting to this. She didn't, as her brother did, decide that politics was her parents thing and that she would have nothing to do with it. She became an activist in her own right, surpassing Tilly's achievements as only a daughter of Tilly ever could. But she also had a different attitude to politics.

Her involvement in the movement was her life, but she stopped herself and she stopped her husband Joe (and later he would he heard to say what a mistake this was) from talking politics to us, their children. There were external reasons for this restraint– the actions in which were involved while we were growing up were mostly illegal and not for the ears of , or the repeating, by children. But a more important reason was that Ruth, who had disliked the manner in which her own mother had indoctrinated her, was opposed to telling children what they should think. She did not want to hand to us, a set of ready made political beliefs. She wanted us to decide for ourselves. . In this she was unusual for her time – as she also was in other ways.

She had inherited her mother's critical mind but, unlike her mother who was faithful to the Soviet Union and Communist Party almost until the end of her days,

Ruth would never easily swallow a party line. What made her who she was, and what made what she did even more remarkable, was that she always asked questions and that she always drew her own conclusions. She expected other people to do this as well, and despised those who did not.

It sometimes drove Joe mad. He said once, in exasperation after Ruth had been particularly outspoken: “ your mother is so impossible,” he said. “she is so critical of the Party and the Soviet Union that , if not for my position in the Party, she would have been expelled years go.”

It made for a very feisty marriage – and for a tempestuous family life.

When it came to politics, which after all was their life blood, our parents had two main ways of communicating:

Number one way was to leave the table so as to go huddle in the garden and discuss something secret. . Number two was to turn the dinner table into a battlefield of ideas. They would argue about everything. About strategy, about the Soviet Union, about China, about the armed struggle, about Hungary, about Czechoslovakia about Vietnam – you name it, and they would argue about it. And always it would be Ruth who seemed to come (sometimes literally) from left field. She took nothing for granted. Not herself (and I’ll say a bit more about this soon), not orthodoxy , not received ideas. Nothing.

Someone told me a story recently that I hadn’t heard before. It was centred on a discussion that took place amongst ANC comrades in Mozambique. It must have been 1979 because they were discussing the forthcoming elections in the then-Rhodesia and trying to decide who would win. Most of the comrades said that ZAPU- the ANC’s ally - would, without a doubt, win. But Ruth said that no, that ZAPU would not win because ZAPU was tribal and corrupt and people wouldn’t vote for it: she said, the other liberation movement, ZANU, would be the victors.



And, she continued, to much vocal disagreement, ZAPU , because of how they operated, didn't deserve to win. When one of the comrades, highly offended by this display of what he saw as absolute disloyalty, said that Ruth should back ZAPU because they were the ANC's traditional allies, Ruth answer him with a brief: "yes, but alliances can change."

ZANU did of course win the election, and ZAPU faded away and alliances did change . But the point of this story is not to argue that Ruth was exceptionally prescient or unusually politically attuned: but that she would never let blind belief dull her intelligence.

This quality could make her difficult. When she had strong opinions on anything – and she had strong opinions on most things - she did not hold back.

Here's how Madiba saw it. He wrote to her from Robben Island in 1975,

"I saw pictures of a woman's indaba in Paris, ' he wrote, ' and the eye was immediately caught by a photo in coat and slacks, resembling a face once very familiar at cor. Commissioner and Von Nieligh. Bespectacled and hawk nosed and with a sheaf of papers as usual, she sat almost flat on the floor and even looked humble and soft and nearest to me than she had ever been before. Seeing that picture after so long evoked pleasant memories and made me forget about her flashes of temper, impatience and barbed tongue. Does that ring a bell?"

It certainly does ring a bell. Everyone who ever met Ruth, and including us her children, would have stood witness to that same impatience and that same barbed tongue. And as well they would have been witness to her sharp mind. For Ruth was quick and she was deep: if she impatiently interrupted people in mid stream it was only because she had guessed what they were going to say and was already debating it. It was a quality that could intimidate – especially men (and dare I say it, even perhaps a man like Madiba?).

And Ruth also had a secret that only those who knew her well knew, was that she was as critical, more critical in fact, of herself than of anyone else. Her mother's harsh voice had rested inside of her, making her impatient with her own failures and driving her on to do better.

What she had started on the Jo'burg city hall steps aged 17, continued throughout her life: she was a much in demand public speaker especially after we came to England. But never did she ever take her skills and knowledge for granted. A more confident person might have, as the years rolled by, decided that they had given so many speeches, they could do them off by heart. Not Ruth. She always prepared thoroughly. In that pre personal computer era, she had her own unique technique of sticking her paragraphs together. She would use pins – the straight kind used for sewing – to pin them one to the next. It's one of the images that has rested in my mind – those strong, slightly gnarled fingers with their huge rings (she had a taste for chunky silver jewellery) pinning bits of paper to bigger bits.

She also had three daughters and a house to run: and so she used to do most of her preparation and her writing late at night and in the early hours of the morning. The sound that ran through our sleep, and sometimes also our waking up, was her hammering at her portable Hermes typewriter.

But Ruth's life was not all work. On the contrary – many of my early memories are also of Ruth at play. She wasn't like Joe – he always had an easy sociability, cracking jokes with the best of them, and playing the guitar badly but with total confidence. In contrast to her quick tongue, and her courage to always say what she thought no matter how unpopular it proved, Ruth was also always much shyer than Joe. She wasn't, at least in my memories as a child, socially extrovert. But she had friends – women friends – and good friends, and she valued, and put great

effort, into them. And I can't help feeling, from memories and the things I've since learned, that she also knew how to attract the men.

Those activists like Madibas, and the Walter Sisulus and the Kathradas and so many others, including Ruth and Joe, lived on a precipice then (and I'm talking here of my memories of South Africa in the late fifties and early sixties). They were taking risks, breaking laws, making plans in the full knowledge of how personally dangerous these plans might prove ... but if they worked hard and risked a lot, they also partied hard. My memories of our house in Jo'burg was that it was like party central: huge, boozy rumbustous affairs (one of which Shawn immortalised in her film *A World Apart*) in which the uninvited guests were always the police who broke down doors and jumped through windows in an attempt to catch the guests breaking the laws that forbade black and white people from drinking together.

You have to remember what white South African society was like then. . It was extremely constrained, as if the effort of keeping down the majority of the population had translated itself into strict puritanical (at least on its surface) conduct. Not so the company my parents kept: it was multi racial and it was wild. I remember a close friend of my mother, a Bohemian, not particularly interested in politics, who came from Bulawayo seeking the bright Jo'burg lights, telling me how she soon worked out that the only white people worth knowing were the politicals because they were the only whites having fun.

I fell down a short set of stone steps in our house during one of those parties (my sisters always insisted, although I was only seven, that I was drunk) and cut my forehead open. My memory of that was not of the pain, or shock, but of being

taken to the bathroom to have the blood staunched with sticking plaster while some drunken Jazz musician continued through my screams to chat up my mother.

It was not something of which Ruth would have disapproved. She cared very much about herself as a woman and about the way she looked. In this she was unusual – not necessarily for her time – but for the company she kept. Amongst many of her comrades, worrying about the way you looked was considered frivolous, the revolution being the only thing worth worrying about. Not so Ruth. She wanted the revolution but she also wanted her Italian shoes, her tailored frocks, her French perfume and her hair permed. I remember reading Helen Joseph's account of being picked up by special branch and thrown into jail with a whole lot of other women comrades. Ruth got a special mention because Helen said, and somewhat grudgingly I thought, you had to admire a woman who, roused out of bed by the police in the middle of the night, still managed to find the time to pack her lingerie.

Here, I think, are echoes of Ruth's mother : Tilly had also once been a snappy dresser. But there was something also about Ruth's stubborn individuality at play. She cared about what she did, and she also cared about the way she looked. Through most of her adult life she fought with her frizzy hair, going to the hairdresser in an effort to train and restrain it. It was as someone in England once said about Ruth: she looked class, but she talked red, and both of these were something that she continued throughout her life. Madiba recognised in his 1975 letter from which I have already quoted. Having described the photograph of Ruth he'd seen, he went on to say:

“By now I expected to see a matronly ouma, ravaged by more than a decade of hard thinking, hard work, unfulfilled expectations. I never suspected that today you'd appear so trim and young.”

So to her children, memories of her ever clacking typewriter, and those unending furtive discussions, and those impassioned speeches were cut through with the sight of Ruth, immaculately dressed, clicking her way out in the high heels she always favoured.

There was a vanity in her of which she was deeply conscious. She writes about it in her account of her 117 days detention. Almost at the point of dissolution she writes that , as he was driving her to The Grays, one of her interrogators said “ Why no l... ‘ and stopped himself.” And then she writes: “I knew what he was asking. Why had I put on no lipstick, no make-up that morning? This was the first time even in my detention, apart from the first day when I had no make-up because my suitcase was locked away, that I had permitted anyone to see me without make-up. I had simply forgotten that morning.”

Before I return to this period of Ruth’s life I want to emphasise one point and it is this: any understanding of Ruth must take in the reality of what it was like to be a woman then who operated in a man’s world. In all senses.

In Ruth’s day, especially in South Africa, white women simply did not go out to work: Ruth in contrast was variously a journalist, an editor, a writer, a teacher. And in her day, although the ANC had enlightened gender politics, in word at least if not entirely in deed, the vast majority of activists, especially at Ruth’s level, were men.

I am of the generation that came to adulthood in England in the 1970s, with the women’s liberation movement as one of our most important influences. Not so for Ruth. She predated this time – and she forged ahead despite it. I have a strong memory of one of her comrades talking about this. ‘what is the matter with Ruth,’ this comrade said: ‘that she spends so much of her time and energy with the youth and not with the women’s committee?’”

Well perhaps in that sense there was something the matter with Ruth : she might perhaps have found the solidarity that could have lain inside women's committees slightly threatening. But I don't believe that was even half the picture. What Ruth was doing I think is what she always did: she was refusing to be ghettoised. Just as she would not let her white skin hold her back from taking part in the struggle for justice, so she did not let her gender limit her interests and involvement. Women, and their committees, were the supports - the youth, certainly in the 70s was where real, hard political organising was at and that, therefore, was where Ruth was also going to be.

And yet... ... she paid some of the costs of being a woman in that man's world. That I think is a partial source of her personal prickliness. Although she never let it stop her, she was like many women, full of learned diffidence. She prepared so well because, unlike many men, she never had that ingrained confidence that is drummed into boys early on in life, and later reinforced. Perhaps there was even an aspect of this that fuelled her political activity: perhaps her experience taught her some of what it was to be black in South Africa and therefore formally disempowered.

And she was woman also, who'd had three children. It took her a long time to be able to slough off the guilt that the impact her political involvement had on us.

Ruth's writing was mostly about events in the political, the external, world. She was most comfortable, in many ways, in impersonal subjects (this again being unusual for a woman of that time).

But in one book *117 Days* – her account of her time in solitary– there stands Ruth as she was in 1963. Those were bad days in South Africa: the leaders of the ANC had either been arrested in Rivonia, or, like Mandela were already in gaol, or like Oliver Tambo in exile, or like Ruth had been picked up and held under the 90 Days laws.

I re-read Ruth's account of her detention the other day and what came to me was her amazing honesty and the way she was prepared to really look at herself. She writes unblinkingly about the impact solitary had and, in particular, she writes about the moment she cracked. She writes this not with self pity or self justification, but with as keen an eye to her own fragilities as she would have applied to other people or to other revolutions.

More than three month into her incarceration, and intent on finding out what the security police knew about her activities, Ruth began to give a statement. As soon as she realised where this was going to lead her – to betrayal of her comrades and herself - she stopped. But the very fact of her own weakness brought her to this point of wanting to take her own life.

This is what she writes:

“I don't know why my reactions were so appallingly slow, “ she writes, “but although I had decided at the outset that I would play out a small measure of the rope, it took the slow progress of the interview for me to realise fully that I was winding it fast around me.”

And later she writes. “I was appalled at the events of the last three days. They had beaten me. I had allowed myself to be beaten. I had pulled back from the brink just in time, but had it been in time? I was wide open to emotional blackmail, and the blackmailer was myself.” And then she writes:

“I was in a state of collapse not for fear of what would happen to me physically, of numberless peeling days in detention, but for the gnawing ugly fear that they could destroy me among the people whose understanding and succour I most needed, and that once they had done that I would have nothing left to live for.”

There stands Ruth in all her honesty. She'd never particularly wanted to write 117 Days, she thought it was too personal, but once persuaded that it would help the world understand what was happening in South Africa, she looked her demons in the face. In doing so she also acknowledged the extent to which she craved the good opinions of others.

In his recent afterward to the South African edition of 117 Days Albie Sachs writes of Ruth:

".. she made us feel proud to belong to a movement that had personalities like her in its ranks. We always wondered what she would think of this or that, whether a major new political initiative or a new film or novel or a painting or even a dress or jacket."

All of this was true, but in her account of her detention, Ruth revealed how much she also cared about what other people thought of her.

There has been a recent publishing craze, at least in Britain, of personal, even confessional, accounts of difficult past lives. The more extreme the experience the more the publishers salivate at the prospective sales figures. But Ruth's account had a very different quality to it. She looked at her self –yes – and writes about the difficulties of her experience but she remains always, the sophisticated thinker she was who never forgot the nature of the system and the men who had imprisoned her.

She triumphed over these men. She writes how, having in her despair tried to kill herself, she then pulled back. They never got a statement from her. "At last," she write: "I permitted myself my first scent of victory. I determined to shake off the all devouring sense of guilt at my lapse. I had been reeling towards a precipice and I had stopped myself at the edge. It had *not* been too late to beat them back. I had



undermined my own resistance, yet I had not after all succumbed. In the depth of my agony I *had* won.”

Two stories came to mind when I read that. The first was told to me by one of Ruth’s comrades who was similarly incarcerated in solitary before being released and leaving, like Ruth, for England. The security branch did to this man, what Ruth had feared they might do to her – they spread a rumour that he had cracked and given away his comrades. It was a rumour that partly stuck when he got to England – doors started closing. And then Ruth came to his rescue. She knew not only from her own experience the kind of pressures that were put on detainees but she also knew that the security branch worked to sew the seeds of exactly this kind of mistrust. And she knew her friend and comrade and, true always to the things she thought, she trusted this knowledge. She stood up for him forcefully and in the end succeeded in getting him accepted back into the fold.

The other story was told to me by a young woman activist who had been badly tortured in jail and who, having left South Africa, went to Mozambique where she met Ruth. This woman told me how Ruth, more than anybody, helped her to begin to come to terms with what had been done to her. Ruth listened, she said, and she understood and this was in contrast to the prevailing mood at the time that personal difficulties and reactions should be bitten down on, the resulting anger being used to further the struggle against apartheid (what I call the “don’t mourn, mobilise” attitude to life and politics). But more importantly, when the young woman had wondered out loud whether maybe the men who brutalised her might not have really been so bad, that maybe they hadn’t understood what they were doing, Ruth had immediately said – never, ever think that. They did know what they were doing and they did understand. This Ruth knew because she had also been in close contact with that same brutality and had had to face not only who she was, but also who they were.

The last sentence of her book on her detention is often quoted and for obvious reasons. She wrote:

“We left Marshall Square eventually, and by the time I got home it was lunchtime, though Viktor (one of her interrogators) had brought his release order early that morning. When they left me in my own house at last I was convinced that it was not the end, that they would come again. “

And they of course did come again: in the form of the parcel bomb that killed her.

But does this mean - as the description of Ruth that heads up the outline of this week's activity says - that Ruth has a lot to teach us about sacrifice?

I'm not sure that it does.

Even saying this I can hear how silly it must sound to you: what greater sacrifice is there, after all, than to give up your life for a cause?

But Ruth didn't lay down her life: it was taken from her. Hers was never the politics of the empty gesture. She didn't want to die. She wanted to live –at the time when she was killed more than ever.

The last time I saw her in London she made this very clear. She told me- and I think this was also her way of saying that now we, her children, were grown up, she was a free agent – how she'd had a conversation with her mother, our granny, Tilly. Julius was, by then dead, and Tilly was living a dull kind of existence – full of that sense of the duties to be done that had always bound her life. Tilly had said something to Ruth about what she ought to do even though she didn't want to: and Ruth had answered that life was short, and that Tilly should stop

being a victim and instead grab what she did want and, even at 84, live life to the full. Ruth's sense of triumph when she told me this sprung, I think, from two different places: she was pleased that she had finally said to her mother what she had always wanted to say – that if Tilly wanted to come out of the shadows then the only person stopping her was Tilly herself. At the same time, looking back, I think Ruth was talking about herself and about the way that, in Mozambique, she had found a vibrant kind of peace.

But I have fast forwarded almost to the end of Ruth's life – and I'd like to go back for a while to that long period– around 15 years - of her exile.

She was nearly forty when, fresh from detention, she took us to England. Joe was already in London– he had gone the year before and then the arrests in Rivonia meant he couldn't come back. There are letters from her to him, where she writes about how terrible it feels to be leaving the country, and leaving behind many of those who weren't lucky enough to be able to go. But she had little choice – banned from journalism and banned from associating with almost everybody she held dear, with many of her closest either in prison or in exile, she also had to leave..

And so she did what her parents had done before her: she moved continents (and her parents as well, they also came with us). We arrived in England in 1964 : March 15<sup>th</sup> to be exact, something I remember because it was my birthday : and what a grey dull, wet, cold day it was. Remembering those months, those years, of heavy skies that didn't seem to ever lift, I think how difficult my mother must have found it. She had to do as her parents had done before her: she had to set up her life in a new place, although in her case, at least she knew the language. But other than that, England was a complete sea change for Ruth. She was isolated from the country she loved, with three daughters for whom she had to make a home, and also – because Joe was working full time for the ANC – never the most extravagant of paymasters – most of the economic burden fell on her. She

worked as a journalist and she wrote books and she started to teach. And all this time, she, unlike her parents, did not forget her mother country. She was a tireless campaigner and much in demand as a speaker.

When I look back on those early days in England, I think about how uncomplaining she was. There were a whole raft of new things she had to learn to do: to keep house, for a start, without domestic help. She was, now I remember it, a bit of an eccentric cook – always open to the latest fads which included a huge succession of strange chicken casseroles cooked with olives. Her sense of style, she poured into the house she and Joe had bought in Camden Town. In particular she used to go wild with the bathroom – painting its outside wall (which was always getting damp and so always having to be re-painted) a succession of lurid purples and dark reds and dark greens.

That same house now has a blue plaque on its outside wall. Madiba unveiled in 2003 and it is an English Heritage tribute to both Ruth and Joe. It's a mark of acceptance: a kind of welcome to the establishment. But it's a mark also of much the idea of Establishment has broadened in England since we arrived. Back then it wasn't easy for Ruth to find acceptance. Not only was a foreigner, she was also a Communist: many were the career doors that slammed in her face. This didn't bother Joe so much – his eyes were focussed on the ANC and he travelled increasingly to Africa. But for Ruth, who craved acceptance, life in England must have been emotionally taxing.

Life did however also have its rewards. The old dead hand of fifties Britain had begun to lift by the time we got there. The New Left was being born – and Ruth was soon in her element. Here was a whole new generation of leftists who, although they kept tight to the ideals of socialism, rejected the centralised despotism of the traditional Communist states. These were people who would not be shocked when Ruth, for example, criticised (and I remember her doing this, and creating quite a storm) the way that the liberation of women in the Soviet Union

entailed women wearing suits that were as stern and as double breasted as the men...i.e... women who had won their equality by pretending to be men. London was soon a centre for leftists of all nations, of American draft dodgers and Latin American fugitives and of Africans from all nations, either in exile or passing through. Although Ruth concentrated politically on South Africa, she had also always been an internationalist. And so she remained: writing about other countries in Africa, and making connections with people all over the world. Just to give you a flavour of how advanced Ruth was, think about what it must have been for a white woman to spend time in Libya or Yemen especially in those days. And yet she did and she was welcomed and appreciated, and out of those study visits, she wrote some of the most forward thinking texts of her time.

She did make a good life for herself in England, and yet the alacrity with which she jumped at the opportunity to go first to Tanzania and then to Mozambique shows how strongly she preferred to be in Africa. It was as she once wrote: "I am an African."

She loved Mozambique and there she seemed to truly come into herself. She even stopped perming that unruly frizzy hair of hers. Having been in opposition all her life, she relished the opportunity to help the Frelimo government turn a country away from the dead yoke of colonialism. Having been both an activist, and also a theorist, she was in her element combining theory and practise: she loved the reality of training her students not in the dry arts of isolated theory, but how to use that theory to benefit their country and hers as well. She was happy there. She was free, not least of being a mother since we were now all grown up. In Mozambique, as well, I think she learned how to ease her mother's critical voice that had always rested inside her.

She is buried in Maputo – besides, among others, the MK soldiers who lost their lives in the Matola raid. There is an argument, made by many in the ANC that the

fallen should be returned to South Africa. But to us, Ruth's daughters, Maputo, in that country that she loved, seems the right resting place for Ruth.

One last image:

I remember her alive, in Mozambique, standing on the beach at Ponto D'oura looking across the sands to the place where South Africa began, and where, one day, she was convinced of it, she would go.

She never got there. They killed her. For what reason? Because they saw her as a traitor to her race? Because they wanted to either kill or demoralise her husband? Because they feared the sharpness of her intellect? Because she was a living reproach to who they were?

Some combination of all these, I suspect. They killed her because they were killers and because she was Ruth.