

Special feature

★ The revolutionary life and times of Ruth First, and her legacy

Red Alert 

The revolutionary life and times of Ruth First, and her legacy

By Cde Ronnie Kasrils

'In the Party's lead-up to its historic centenary next year; it is most appropriate to select, as one of the topics, the revolutionary life and times of Comrade Ruth First', says Cde Ronnie Kasrils

Born in Johannesburg on 4 May 1925, Ruth Heloise First was an outstanding revolutionary, who through practical experience became focussed on developing ideas to drive social action. This can be seen in her range of endeavours as scholar, investigative journalist and researcher; political activist, orator and organiser; and up to her death membership of the South African Communist Party - although she

changed dramatically with each successive phase of her astonishing life. She was interested in organisational methods and the development of critical ideas as drivers of social action. She had the courage and sharpness of intellect to break with conventional wisdom. A heroine of the ANC, SACP and liberation movement; she was a dangerous thorn in Apartheid's flesh and marked down by the regime for elimination. She was assassinated by their hit squads on 17 August 1982 at the age of 57. Her creative ideas and scholarship, along with her inspirational life, are of inestimable value to this day.

In order to understand Ruth in context, I aim to highlight:

An understanding of the role of the individual in history as a basis for reflecting on Ruth First's life and contribution in the realm of her ideas and action;

Her family background and the early formative years that shaped her;

Her activity in the Young Communist League (YCL) and graduation at the University of Witwatersrand (Wits) by 1946;

Her career as an investigative reporter and editor of the liberation movement's journals for a decade and a half;

Her activism in the 1950's including membership of the underground South African Communist Party (SACP) and her work with the African National Congress (ANC) and Congress Movement, including being one of the 156 Treason Trialists along with her husband Joe Slovo;

Her clandestine work following the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960, and among other things support for the ANC's military wing, Umkhonto We Sizwe (MK), leading to a harrowing detention of 117 days in solitary confinement; and subsequent exile in 1964;

The exile years in Britain 1964-1977, as an internationally acclaimed Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM) figure, and university lecturer; publishing nine books with a focus on Africa;

The final chapter of her life, 1977-1982, as professor of social research in Maputo; and activism with Frelimo, ANC, MK and SACP; to her untimely and tragic death;

And finally, a consideration of what Ruth's life teaches us in the critical challenges we face in South Africa and the region today.

Marxism teaches that the masses make history, without ignoring the crucial role of the individual in the development of revolutionary ideas, scientific discoveries and inspiring great social forces in altering the world. Ruth took to heart Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* and the conclusion: 'Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.' Throughout her life she sought the dialectical inter-relationship between theory and practise. She was both analyser and activist, set on testing ideas in practise, and made an inestimable contribution in the field of ideas. She was a fierce antagonist of dogma and the substitution of sloganizing and mechanical schema in place of rigorous thinking; in the first place challenging her own mind. She was not afraid of ruffling the feathers of fellow comrades.

Mandela's generation, of which Ruth First was an integral part, referred to themselves as being 'products of the struggle.' This reflected their understanding of the material conditions and ideas that shaped them; gave them strength and determination; and enriched their understanding of what needed to be done to overthrow white supremacy and attain freedom and equality for their people. Shared understanding and objectives brought them together as an organised collective of individuals with enduring personal ties, from different ethnic, class and racial backgrounds.

Ruth First was one such person and whom we seek to understand in her historical context: growing up in a world at war against fascism and within her geographic space as a privileged white South African – a drama contextualised within a country deeply divided along race and class lines; colonised for almost three centuries up to the time of her birth; and coming under an even more brutal and rigid apartheid system as she attained adulthood.

Clearly her upbringing and awareness motivated her to see what most whites chose not to see and led her to seek the truth; to understand and to act, which required high moral principles and courage.

Ruth's parents were members of the Communist Party. The household was characterised by intense political debate.

Ruth First was born in Johannesburg, into an upwardly mobile, secular Jewish middle-class home. Her parents, Julius and Tilly First, were members of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), so it can be said she was a Bolshevik Baby. Julius and Tilly had arrived in the country as children in the opening decade of the 20th Century, with the wave of Jewish immigrants, to meet and marry by the time

the CPSA was established four years before Ruth's birth. They hailed from Latvia and Lithuania respectively, then part of the Czarist Russian Empire where Jews suffered from severe discrimination as generally despised second class citizens. Such immigrants were working class, artisans and small traders, having survived poverty and bloody antisemitic, xenophobic pogroms. Many, but by no means the majority, were fervently religious, but very few were Zionists seeking salvation in Palestine. If anything, the USA was what most dreamt of as a country to emigrate to; with South Africa among other destinations.

The founder members of the CPSA were a mix of radical white workers and socialists from Europe, among them S.P. Bunting, Ivor Jones, Bill Andrews, Solly Sachs and Julius First. By the time of Ruth's birth, Tilly was a member, along with the first Africans to rise to prominence, J.B. Marks, Johannes Nkosi, James La Guma and Johnny Gomez, demonstrating the young Party's growing outreach, with T.W. Thibedi, the first black person to be elected to the Party's central committee.

Julius First founded a furniture factory which in later years when the Party was banned served as a refuge for comrades avoiding the police or as the venue on weekends for illegal Party meetings.

Ruth grew up in a household in which intense political debate between people of all races took place. Her parents had participated in the early Party discourse around the role of the white working class; the 1922 white miner's revolt; the Communist International (Comintern) 'Black Republic' thesis which led to an upsurge in African membership; the purge within the CPSA during the 1930s; revival of Party activity during World War Two and its support for Russia. Inevitably these events impacted on Ruth – hearing her folks going over such arguments with comrades as she was growing up. But, of course by then, when she was a teenager, the robust debates had changed with the influx of black workers into its ranks – and the Party was strategizing on the link between national liberation and socialism - which crystallised when she had become a prominent member in the 1950's. She had listened attentively and must have observed how different were the views expressed, and how the Party's positions could change.

The Political-economy of South Africa had undergone a seismic transformation by the time Ruth was born; the consequences of which shaped the times. The discovery of gold, a mere 39 years previously, and as a consequence the Mining Revolution profoundly changed the country and its people. Johannesburg at the time of Ruth's birth was a young, brash city, fast growing and urban, a melting pot of people, with harsh exploitative conditions facing the black population, many living in shanty towns on the periphery, with the dominant Mining Houses, Randlords and pro-British influence ruling the roost. The South African War essentially between Boer and Brits for control over resources and wealth; the emergence of an African proletariat and the challenge to white supremacy and capital by the awakening giants of black labour, trade unionism and African nationalism, shaped the responses of revolutionaries of all stripes. The dual cleavages of class and colour in the country was reflected in the existence of the leading proponents of class and national struggle, initially set on different paths, which converged in the struggles to come—namely the CPSA and the ANC. The leading comrades of Ruth's generation were central to the debate about the road to national and social emancipation; two stages or one; alliance with the ANC or not; and

development of Colonialism of a Special Type (CST) and the National Democratic Revolution (NDR) as the road to power.

‘Ruth’s contribution in winning over those of the ANC such as Mandela, Sisulu and others, cannot be overestimated.’

At the height of the struggle in the 1950s, in which she played a central and significant role, issues were resolved not from any ivory tower, not through purist notions, but through the harsh school of practical struggle which saw the routes of Class and National response converging into a unique alliance between communists and nationalist revolutionaries—an achievement not seen to such a degree in other anti-colonial struggles. I would go as far as stating this was one of her most influential of achievements. Her handling of such relationships—a woman tutoring the foremost African revolutionary males of the day in theory and standing shoulder-to-shoulder in struggle—is testament to her insight, courage and ability.

A YCL foot soldier, a revolutionary.

Ruth’s attainment as a foremost revolutionary theorist, teacher, writer and activist was honed through the tempestuous times of the 1940s-1950s. From the young orator rallying public support against fascism during World War Two, she was the foot soldier duplicating and distributing leaflets during the 1946 African Mine workers strike. Following the banning of the CPSA in 1950 she was part of the trusted circle reviving the Party in its clandestine form as the SACP. As journalist she was searing and tireless in exposing the brutality of the apartheid regime; and was at the frontline reporting on the Defiance Campaign. She was a leader of the Congress of Democrats (COD), which she helped establish in 1953—the small grouping of whites aligned with the ANC, Indian Congress, Coloured People's Congress, and the South African Congress of Trade Unions (Sactu). But for a government banning order she would have attended the historic Congress of the People at Kliptown in 1955. From the shadows she assisted in formulating the Freedom Charter. Together with husband Joe Slovo, whom she wed in 1949—and who had become a top advocate—she was part of the 156 accused in the marathon Treason Trial (1956-1961).

Ruth matriculated at Jeppe Girls, receiving an education designed like schools of its type to churn out white youngsters loyal to British ruling class traditions and ideology – something she was inoculated against. By the time she started a sociology degree at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in 1942, she had joined the Young Communist League (YCL). Among her fellow university students were Nelson Mandela, Eduardo Mondlane—later President of Frelimo, the Mozambique liberation movement—JN Singh and Ismail Meer, who became leaders of the South African Indian Congress; and later Joe Slovo, studying law after a stint in army service in Italy.

Lifelong communist Norman Levy, then aged 14, describes the impact she made on him, when he attended his first YCL meeting in 1944 when Ruth had become national secretary: ‘I still see her image as she was at that first meeting’, he writes fifty years later, ‘eighteen, curly-haired, short and ill at ease, pursuing her points at breakneck speed. She was earnest, self-conscious, and miserable with caring, but it was her energy and directness that marked her out from others.’

Among some thirty 'others' present were the leading theoretician and scholar Lionel Foreman, Paul Joseph, Lucas Masebe – YCL national chairman, (possibly) Ahmed Kathrada, and the young man her age she married five years later, Joe Slovo. Despite appearing to Norman as 'ill at ease' he points out that 'Ruth and Lionel were the stars, however, and whatever fired them also drove the others.' (Norman Levy: *The Final Prize – My life in the anti-apartheid struggle*; South African History Online, 2011, pp. 14-15; in my view one of the finest memoirs of the genre – RK).

I heard from one of her many admirers of the time, I think it was either Wolfie Kodesh or Ronnie Press, that racist students and alternatively those of 'Trotskyist' leaning, waxing irate over Ruth's merciless denunciations, would chant 'Ruth First, Truth Last!' To which her supporters would respond: 'Ruth First's Truth Lasts!'

She graduated with a BA (Social Studies), from Wits in 1946, obtaining first class passes in sociology, anthropology, economic history and so-called native administration. She was never destined to be an ivory tower academic, but was driven by Marx's maxim: 'understand the world and change it.' After a short stint as a researcher for the Johannesburg City Council, also teaching African workers in the Party's evening school, she was drawn into journalism, working for the CPSA journal, the *Guardian*. That crusading, socialist weekly became increasingly supportive of the ANC-led liberation movement, with communists keeping it running. For a decade it survived consecutive banning orders by adroit name changes, and its devoted editorial staff, with its most famous masthead *New Age*. The head office was in Cape Town under editorship of Lionel Foreman until his untimely early death, followed by Brian Bunting, editor-in-chief until the final banning in 1962, when draconian laws made publication impossible. By then *New Age* had briefly endured as *Spark*. Ruth headed the Johannesburg office; Govan Mbeki was in charge in Port Elizabeth and M.P. Naicker manned the Durban premises. These journals reflected the Leninist definition of a newspaper as an organising weapon.

It was Ruth's expose of what came to be referred to as the Farm Labour Scandal, working with rural struggle stalwart Gert Sibande, and her protégé Joe Gqabi, that demonstrated her research-based, investigative journalism, writing skills and steely determination. This brought to the surface the cruel system run by the police and magistrates, consigning luckless pass law offenders to work as virtual slave labourers on white farms such as the Bethel potato farms. Researching and skilfully breaking the story, and fuelling a protest campaign, epitomised what a weekly newspaper like *New Age* was capable of. Her writing on such topics as the defiance campaign, the mobilisation and consultation leading to the adoption of the Freedom Charter, the women's anti-pass protests, migrant labour system, bus boycotts and slum conditions are considered among the finest pieces of social and labour journalism, and the upsurge of resistance of the 1950s. Her methodology, utilising often clandestine methods of acquiring evidence from facts on the ground, was the forerunner of her much later work in Mozambique, of participatory research at the grass roots.

Concurrently she edited the monthly journal, *Fighting Talk*, which provided penetrating political analysis as well as carrying literary contributions. This latter role illustrated Ruth's ability to draw in cultural figures like Nadine Gordimer, Barney Simon, Drum writers and poets, and jazz musicians. Both she and Joe were extremely sociable, developing life-long friendships, and their home in Roosevelt Park, Johannesburg, was the scene of many joyful

parties, where black and whites had rare moments of chilling out together – while agitated police would glare from outside and take down the registration numbers of the cars. As experienced by many struggle households of those times, police raids, banning and arrest of parents, unsettled the children. This was no exception with regard to the Slovo family experience. By then they had three talented daughters—Shawn, Gillian and Robyn—all attaining successful careers as prolific writers and film makers in later life. (Note – among their works: Shawn wrote a film about her mother called *A World Apart*; one of Gillian’s many novels, *Ties of Blood*, is based on the family history; and Robyn produced a movie scripted by Shawn about MK called *Catch a Fire*; and much else besides).

Ruth was often tasked by the Party to travel abroad to participate in meetings of the international democratic youth movement, experiencing at first hand conditions of socialist development in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and China, which she enthusiastically conveyed to a liberation movement eager to learn about alternatives to capitalism and racist rule. Her reputation grew by leaps and bounds and she became trusted and admired in Congress circles.

The stormy struggles, and state repression of the 1950s, saw the unique unity of the ANC-SACP alliance grow, indicative of how close the parallel cleavages of class and colour had become, and was to be further cemented in later year. Ruth had remarked of this development of the ANC, that an organisation that had basically had annual conferences up to the emergence of the Youth League Turks, had become a revolutionary, militant, mass movement challenging the state and white supremacy.

Following the Sharpeville massacre, on 21 March 1960, and the state of emergency, Ruth managed to avoid arrest and seek refuge with her young daughters in Swaziland, whilst husband Joe was detained with hundreds of others. When the emergency was lifted, they were reunited back home, with the situation becoming more challenging and demanding further sacrifice.

‘During the initial Sabotage Campaign, which involved also the production and distribution of necessary leaflets and literature, Ruth was involved’

December 16th, 1961, heralded the birth of uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) in which Joe Slovo—later in Chief-of-Staff in exile—was dual commander, on behalf of the SACP, with Mandela. . Walter Sisulu’s radio broadcast message from underground was partly her writing. Following the Rivonia arrests, she worked in stealth alongside Bram Fischer and Hilda Bernstein, to assist and link those in hiding. Whilst Joe was abroad on a mission arranging training and weapons for MK, thus missing being arrested at Rivonia, time was running out for Ruth. She was arrested in August, 1963 under the 90-day detention Act, and held in solitary confinement for 117 days—which later became the subject of a book with that title. This was an arduous experience of mental torture which she battled to survive but emerged without providing a shred of information to her tormentors.

She had been told by a security officer: ‘You could have been charged in the Rivonia case. But we didn’t want a woman in that case.’ Fortunately, her mother was available to care for the children. Tilly’s husband Julius First, who had helped finance the purchase of the Party’s underground Rivonia farm headquarters, had fled into exile. Ruth had no option but to follow

on an exit visa with her mother and the children, meaning they were forbidden to return to South Africa. They would join Joe in London, for with the effective smashing of the underground inside South Africa, there was no alternative but at least to live, and work in exile, to fight another day. Only none thought it would be as long as another 25 years.

In these difficult conditions, where the utmost strength and dedication was required to hold onto the dream of a free South Africa, a busy new chapter commenced in Ruth's active life; and lasted from 1964-1977 in Britain. The Slovo family set-up home in the borough of Camden Town, with Julius and Tilly as neighbours; and the young girls having to restart their schooling in new, strange surrounds—not easy for parents and children. They were, however, a close family unit, and it was clear to observe as I did—working closely with Joe—what a secure and loving home Ruth and Joe were able to create despite both parents being so politically and academically active with much travelling required from both of them—more especially Joe, with his Party work abroad. The home in Camden Town drew many friends, and as in Johannesburg, was a centre of social and political activity.

'...a leading figure in the Anti-Apartheid Movement...'

Ruth was , often a keynote speaker, and held in the highest regard by the British Left, intelligentsia and increasing numbers of youthful activists. For six years she commuted between London and Durham, in the north of England, where she lectured in developmental studies. She mixed well with leading left academics together with her comrade and colleague Harold Wolpe, developing new theories about South Africa's economy; among them Marxist Professor, Ralph Milburn; British Communist Party author on Africa, Jack Woddis; the American writer William Pomeroy; South African exiles Ronald Segal and Ros Ainslee; and Vietnam solidarity organiser Tariq Ali. She showed an interest in the rising New Left thinking, and activity, and unlike many in the exile ranks sought to interact with them to test and refresh her Marxism and understand their viewpoint.

This drew criticism from within the Party and she was cold-shouldered by some. It is not true, however, that she was ever suspended from the Party. She became critical of the Soviet Union, questioning its bureaucratic nomenclature, and the 1968 intervention in Czechoslovakia. She was affronted that there were so few women in the Soviet central committee which at times numbered several hundreds of members; and certainly, in sixty-nine years of the USSR's history not a single woman served on its Politbureau. On one occasion she hammered me on why in wartime there had been heroines like the anti-Nazi sniper who had a count of 309 kills to her credit, Ludmila Pavlichenko. She was a particular hero of mine from my military training in Odessa in 1964, yet apart from a single woman cosmonaut, Valentine Tereshkova, there were none to be seen in top political positions. I readily admit that at times Ruth gave me a hard time but came to realise that if she spoke harshly it was because she was ready to be severely criticised herself. I sulked over the Pavlichenko tirade but then she surprised me with a charming presentation of a Woody Guthrie recording of his song in praise of 'Miss Pavlichenko well known to fame'.

Ruth regarded herself as a 'late bloomer' regarding feminism but never became fervent about identity politics. She certainly motivated and encouraged young women in their activism—and they were greatly inspired by her; but then so were the young male cadres. If anything, Ruth did not want to be consigned to women's politics. Throughout her political life she was in the forefront of the movement and not by way of tokenism owing to her gender.

There are some who mistakenly view her as a ‘dissident’ or ‘dissenter’ or ‘individualistic free thinker’ because she was unafraid of raising awkward questions or breaking new ground, when others remained stuck in a groove, simply repeating old slogans. Ruth’s was the Marxism as developed and advocated by Marx. A dialectical understanding that theory needed developing with ever changing conditions; ‘ask questions and doubt everything’; enrich theory through praxis—unity of theory and action. In order to ‘understand the world and change it’ one had to keep up to date with an ever-changing world and not remain steeped in the past.

Ruth was a prolific writer and editor.

Ruth’s period in Britain saw her writing at its most prolific. Apart from numerous articles in *the Anti-Apartheid News*, the ANC’s *Sechaba* journal, and other publications. She would have contributed to *The African Communist*, but unfortunately her *nom de plume* has not been verified. My sense is that she probably penned articles on the Sudan, Kenya and Libya, and other African issues including military coups and challenges of development. Research in this regard needs to be pursued.

She was instrumental in establishing *The Review of African Political Economy* in 1974 focusing on the political economy of inequality, exploitation, and oppression. The journal was the brainchild of a group of young British and South African Marxists with links to Tanzania. One of them, Katherine Salahi (then Levine), has explained to me the benefit of having Ruth on board:

‘...apart from anything else, she was the only one in the collective who had any publishing experience. And of course, her political nous was key. She was a vital part of the collective from early on, incredibly supportive and generous with her time both politically and practically, and steered us towards a more professionally produced publication than we were capable of in our ignorance. She also brought South African academics – Gavin Williams and Robin Cohen - into the working group. Archie Mafeje was on the advisory group and they clashed on the pages of the journal...I have memories of her helping stamp, label and stuff envelopes; she was never above getting her hands dirty.’ (Email: August, 27th, 2020)

Ruth authored and edited several books which reflect her passion for Africa. These saw her travelling to the continent on numerous occasions to collect information on the spot. Her work gained for her an international reputation as a leading authority on Africa.

She researched and edited the writings of both Nelson Mandela and Govan Mbeki, published respectively as *‘No Easy Walk to Freedom’* in 1967 (not to be confused with Mandela’s later autobiography) and *‘The Peasants Revolt,’* published that same year. That was an extremely busy one, in which from 1966 she had collaborated with Kenya’s Oginga Odinga, a socialist who opposed Jomo Kenyatta’s corrupt one-party rule, in editing his autobiography *‘Not Yet Uhuru’*, published in 1967. Her 1964 detention in South Africa was published under the title *‘117 Days’* (1965) and is deeply moving. It became the subject of a TV documentary in which she played herself. With fellow South African exile, Ronald Segal, she edited *South West Africa: Travesty of Trust* (1967). In the 1970s, she published *The Barrel of a Gun: The Politics of Coups d’état in Africa* (1970); followed by *Libya: The Elusive Revolution* (1974); and, with Jonathan Steele and Christabel Gurney, *The South African Connection: Western Investment in*

Apartheid (1972). It was during this time that she became absorbed in contemporary feminist works, resulting in an outstanding biography: *Olive Schreiner* (1980) which she wrote with Anne Scott. Most prescient, given the situation in present day South Africa, was this observation she made of the coups in west and north Africa in *Barrel of a Gun* of the corruption and selfishness of African elites: 'It grows through politics, under party systems, under military governments, from the ranks of business, and from the corporate elites that run the state, the army and the civil service.'

In 1977, Ruth jumped at the chance to work in Africa, when Frelimo, with which she was closely-aligned, sought her out to run the Centre for African Studies at the Eduardo Mondlane University in Maputo, Mozambique. Drawing together a dynamic group of young intellectuals she engaged in the training of students in research techniques; and directed several large field studies on relations between agriculture and the state. Her best-known project researched the lives of migrant labourers who worked on the South African gold mines. The results of this study, which pioneered a form of participatory grassroots research, was published the year after her death as *Black Gold: the Mozambican Miner, Proletarian and Peasant* (1983).

This exciting new chapter in her life, from 1977 to 1982, saw her closely involved with the ANC in Maputo, addressing meetings and assisting young cadres involved in reconstructing the underground within South Africa. She was a keen member of the SACP structures and as ever encouraged comrades in their work to follow Lenin's exhortation of 'the concrete analysis of the concrete situation,' and as ever to be open minded and 'question everything.' Ruth was in her prime; and living in an apartment with Joe. Everyone assumed he would be the prime target for the murderous Apartheid regime. The life of this extraordinary woman was cut down by a cowardly parcel bomb, which she opened in her office on 17 August 1982. It was part of a growing number of assassinations by apartheid hit-squads; and followed the murder the year before of her *New Age* protégé, Joe Gqabi in Harare. There was an outpouring of grief internationally, with 3 000 attending her funeral in Maputo.

In his funeral oration, Moses Mabhida, General-Secretary of the SACP, declared: 'The bomb that took Comrade Ruth's life was intended to deprive our movement of the services of one of its most gifted militants. We openly acknowledge the exceptional gravity of the loss to us caused by her death. But we equally proclaim that her immense contribution to our movement will never be lost but will help to guide our actions and inspire our militants in the years to come.'

He ended with the words: 'We want to say, 'Farewell, Comrade Ruth and we want to assure you *that the struggle you so loved will be carried out with all determination and intensity.*' (my emphasis)

We still grieve for the life of Ruth First; who would have been 95 this year; one in which three of her close comrade-in-arms died: Denis Goldberg, Andrew Mlangeni and John Nkadimeng. The latter two worked with her in Johannesburg and Andrew Mlangeni was one of the comrades who hid out at her father's factory when the police were on his tracks. She worked with John Nkadimeng in Maputo.

Whilst we pay tribute to her, as we honoured those heroes recently, can we say in all honesty that the assurance given by Moses Mabhida, at her graveside 38 years ago, is being carried out by the Movement she gave her life for? To repeat the commitment: *'that the struggle you so loved will be carried out with all determination and intensity.'*

'...Ruth would have been thrilled about... the ANC's insistence on the elevation of women to high government posts ... [but] she would have raised her trenchant voice against the corruption; mismanagement...'

Whilst there is much Ruth would have been thrilled about, including the ANC's insistence on the elevation of women to high government posts, and presence in parliament, without question she would have been appalled at the state of the ANC and country today. I have no doubt that she would have raised her trenchant voice against the corruption; mismanagement; appalling conditions of unemployment, poverty and living conditions of the

poor; the violence against women. Given her analytical mind, that analysis would not have simply stopped at the Zuma years of plunder, but certainly have interrogated the decisions taken that brought the demise of the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), the introduction of the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (Gear) policy, and lurch into the grip of corporate capital's free market, neo-liberal economy. She would certainly be involved in a bold Marxist discourse about an alternate socio-economic model; not only for our country but for Africa and the world. And that would include not only such issues facing women and the poverty-stricken, but a planet and eco-system endangered by climate change and environmental destruction. What would have alarmed her, too, would be the failure of our country to act more decisively on the situation in Zimbabwe, and the rising threat of ISIS terrorism in the north of Mozambique.

Whilst one cannot think for the dead, at least the living—in learning from invaluable lessons and legacy—must carry on the struggle she and her generation were so committed to, with determination, intensity and integrity. In so doing to be guided by such ideas that energised and propelled her: 'understanding the world to change it'; 'asking questions and doubting everything'; and proceeding from the 'concrete analysis of the concrete situation!'

On the anniversary of her death, as I was preparing this lecture, I heard an African-American artist and activist, Faith Ringold, a supporter of the Black Lives Matter rebellion sweeping the USA stating: 'It's harder to be a woman than black.' On that same day the Wits student, Kwasa Zozo, was brutally murdered by her boyfriend. Ruth's struggle to change the world continues. Her life is exemplary for men as well as women, young and old, who wish to understand the world and change it ✨

Material for further consultation

To read a collection of writings by Ruth First, visit The Ruth First Papers at <http://www.ruthfirstpapers.org.uk/>

For excellent biographical details, and further references:

South African History Online

Ruth First, validating dissent and building a democratic consensus, Raymond Suttner, Daily Maverick, 28 August 2017

- *Cde Ronnie Kasrils is a former member of the SACP Central Committee and Political Bureau. This article is based on a lecture he presented to the Jack Simons Party School on 23 August 2020. The session was held virtually through technological connectivity, bringing together members of the SACP members and the public from across the country and abroad. The video recording of the session is accessible from the SACP TV/YouTube Channel archives:*
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LDKkBIJaRFA>

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