

# THE ALAN PATON AWARD

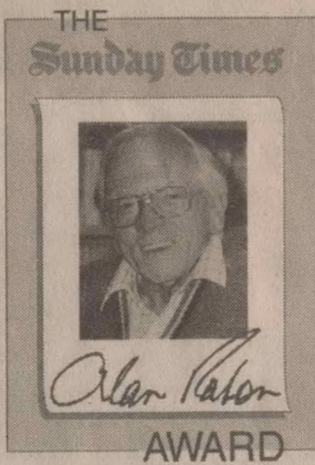
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Being the 'Sisulus' biographer as well as their daughter-in-law was a balancing act that Elinor seems to have achieved without falling down — and when it comes to the heroic couple it's a fine line that divides the historian from the praise poet.

"It's dangerous being a biographer when you are too close to your subject. It is quite intimidating," Elinor admits, but says she made an effort not to censor herself.

Her relationship with the Sisulus also gave her privileged access that an outsider could never have gained, and she is grateful for this.

"In the political movement, there tended to be a focus on ideology and not enough on the peo-



## THE SHORT-LIST

The finalists in the 50th Alan Paton Award for non-fiction are:

- Hilda Bernstein: *A Life of One's Own* (Jacana Life)
- Jonny Steinberg: *Midlands* (Jonathan Ball)
- Gavin Evans: *Dancing Shoes is Dead* (Doubleday)
- Es'kia Mphahlele: *Es'kia* (Kwela)
- Elinor Sisulu: *Walter and Albertina Sisulu* (New Africa Books)
- Ismail Meer: *A Fortunate Man* (Zebra)

The winner will be announced on May 10

# Child of the 20th century

Hilda Bernstein's new work is as personal as it is a history of the Soviet Union in the 1900s, writes ANDREW DONALDSON

HILDA Bernstein is not amused with the saying that if you're not a communist at 20 you haven't got a heart, and if you're still one at 40 then you haven't got a head.

"That's nonsense," she says. "Idealism is always important, no matter what age you are." And Bernstein's life is one that has been shaped by idealism — and her heartfelt commitment to public life and the causes she has embraced is exemplary.

In a review of her *A Life of One's Own*, Joe Podbrey describes her as "the century's child, a product of the 1900s".

Her life is, if anything, the history of the 20th century, and her book — a unique and heart-warming account of her father and her sister's separate lives in the Soviet Union — is, if anything, a history of modern Russia.

She was born in London in 1915. Together with her sisters, Olga and Vera, and her parents, Simeon and Dora, they were, Bernstein always believed, "an ordinary English family". They were not, of course.

Bernstein's father was born in Odessa and had emigrated to England in 1900, probably, Bernstein writes, to escape conscription in the tsar's army.

He married Dora — also born in eastern Europe — and raised a family in London, but decided after the Russian Revolution and World War One to return to the land of his birth to work for the Soviets. He did so in 1925, after working at the Soviet Embassy in London for a while.

But Bernstein would never see her father again — he would die in 1932 after contracting typhoid fever in Georgia.

That year Bernstein and her mother emigrated to South Africa, where she worked in advertising and later publishing and journalism. Her sisters stayed behind in London.

As a member of the SA Labour Party League of Youth, Bernstein became active in organisations involved in the struggle for national liberation.

She became the first communist to be elected to public office in South Africa on a "whites only" vote, and from 1943 to 1946 she was a Johannesburg city councillor. She was also a regular commentator on South African affairs and contributed various articles to journals and periodicals in Africa, Britain, and Europe. Her long association with the ANC was particularly close because of her activities in the ANC Women's League.

In 1946 she and her husband,



CLOSE TO HOME: Hilda Bernstein's book focuses on family

Picture: TERRY SHEAN

Rusty Bernstein, were charged with sedition arising out of a mine workers' strike. She was banned in 1953 and prohibited, among other things, from writing and being published.

In 1960 she was detained after the Sharpeville shootings and, in 1964, after the Rivonia trial, she and her husband fled the country, crossing into Botswana on foot before making their way to London. There she worked as a journalist and started a new career as an artist and printmaker. She was also an active member of the ANC's external mission.

But it was as a writer that she really made her mark. Her books include *The World That Was Ours*; *The Terrorism of Torture*; *For Their Triumphs and For Their Tears*; *Steve Biko*; *Death Is Part of the Process*; and *The Rift: The Exile Experience of South Africans*.

"I have, I suppose, written all that I can on South Africa," she says of *A Life of One's Own*, her first book not primarily concerned with South Africa or "the struggle". "This one, obviously, was more personal than all the others, being about my family."

And, in a sense, this one has two notable co-authors — her father and her sister.

Simeon wrote copiously to his wife, Dora, and much of his correspondence makes up the first part of the book. From his letters, it is dismayingly apparent that his

initial idealism at helping establish a socialist country is ground down by disillusionment.

Although he did not live to see Stalin's purges, the coming terror would not have been out of kilter with his experiences in Russia.

Bernstein's sister Olga did live through some of the worst excesses of Stalinism. Her experiences make up the second part of the book.

On her first trip to the Soviet Union, she was lucky to meet Simeon, and the reunion was a happy one. When her father died, she travelled back to Russia to find out more about his death.

According to Bernstein, Olga had none of her father's revolutionary ardour, but nevertheless stayed on in Russia to teach English. She made new friends and eventually settled in with a lover, but was trapped in Russia when World War Two broke out.

Olga was a talented writer of vignettes of life in Moscow at the time — and, again, much of her writing is reproduced here, providing a fascinating idea of pre-war Russia and, later, a country ruined by the Germans.

But it is her writings on the mass arrests under Stalin that are perhaps the most vivid, and for a supposedly apolitical person, Olga's accounts in this regard are chilling.

She finally returned to London in October 1947.

Bernstein says it is strange that both her father and her sister had lived for years in a country they wanted to leave, but could not. There was, she adds, not only a generation between them, but also a deep ideological divide — while he was committed to forging a new society, she felt indifferent to it and was at times hostile to the way it functioned.

"Their history is also the history of other people. It may be a history that is terrible and hard to comprehend, but it is part of the lives of others that follow," she says. "In a sense, we can never live a life of one's own. Hence the title."

She closes her book with the words, "What right have we to forget?" With that in mind, I ask about our attitude towards South Africa's past. Her answer is blunt: "It's a shame, but we don't seem to care about it."

She is as blunt when it comes to her own history, which she feels is drawing to a close.

She laughs at questions of future projects. "Are you serious? At my age? It's too much like hard work to write something else... But, well, I still read. My mind is still very much active."

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## ART

**C**HURCHILL MADIKIDA has seized the opportunity afforded by The X Gallery at Johannesburg Art Gallery — spearheaded by David Brodie and intended to provide a platform for emerging artists — to exhibit a multimedia installation that holds promise, even if it is not altogether convincing.

Madikida, a Wits art school graduate, is concerned about communicating issues he feels are inadequately represented in mainstream culture. His focus is on Xhosa initiation rites, his ideas conveyed through sophisticated media like video. While his main interest is highlighting the trauma of botched operations, he supports the concept of the ritual as important to the culture.

His installation occupies two areas. In a video in the first, Lullaby to Saluka, the artist croons a lullaby to Saluka, who represents ancestors. The video footage consists entirely of shots of the artist's face, which is covered in traditional white clay. Several prints derived from the video are mounted on one wall. In the centre of the space is a mobile stretcher bed bearing a plaster woman covered by a red and white blanket. Her head has been replaced by a horse's skull, while her hands and one leg have been amputated. Drips, syringes and scissors serve as accessories. Underneath the bed is a jackal's head.

On the other wall a red and white blanket serves as backdrop for heads, male and female, with papoose-like bodies. In the middle is an anthropomorphic plaster head with huge, projecting tongue, presumably representing Saluka. Its senses are curtailed by earmuffs, goggles and a face mask. A large, bandaged phallus emerges from the centre of the blanket.

Inferences can be made about the meaning of the work, but without reading his text, Madikida's ideas are indecipherable. The links between media and imagery are tenuous.

Struggle for Hearts, the second part of the installation, is equally abstruse. In video footage the artist, breathing noisily, eats and regurgitates pap continuously. The video has an air of angst but it does not specifically refer to circumcision. Again, in the centre of the room is a bed with a blanket-covered form, this time created by strategically placed wire



Part of Churchill Madikida's Lullaby to Saluka installation at the X Gallery

hoops and lit from within.

At the opening the artist and a friend put on a performance involving a great deal of running around and whistle-blowing, obviously relating to circumcision, but as all verbal communication was in Xhosa, the performance was incomprehensible to most of the audience.

While Madikida will no doubt hone his talents, he has much to learn about communicating with viewers. Translating social meaning about rituals from one culture into the language of another is a difficult task, and to complicate matters he seems to want to conceal as much about his sacred material as he wants to reveal.

The exhibition closes on May 12.

**Ashley Johnson**

## BOOKS

**H**ILDA Bernstein and her husband Rusty were part of the legendary group of SA political activists in the 1960s dubbed Rivonia's children. A major chronicler of those times and those people, she has, in **A LIFE OF ONE'S OWN (Jacana, R160)** turned her attention away from SA to the experience of her own family in a tale where the past is indeed another country.

Her father, Simeon, and older sister Olga travelled to Russia in the early 20th century, and it is their extraordinary story that she has excavated.

It is only a tracing — evidence is slim, based on a few surviving memories and letters. She weaves their personal lives into the broader tapestry of Soviet revolution and upheaval, Stalin's purges, and the devastation of the Second World War.

Hilda was born in London to Jewish immigrant parents. Her father, Simeon, left Russia in 1900 — possibly to escape conscription into the tsar's army. As a member of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, precursor of the Communist Party, he became acting Consul for the Soviet Embassy in London in 1918.

In 1925, when Hilda was 10, he was recalled to the chaos of the Soviet republic, and she never saw him again. Aware that his middle-class family would not survive the rigours of life in postrevolutionary Russia, he did not send for them; instead, Hilda and her mother emigrated to SA.

After Simeon's death in 1933, Olga went to the Soviet Union to get the death certificate the family needed to claim on his insurance policy. There she met a US engineer who, unable to find work during the depression in the US, ended up designing the Moscow underground system. Olga lived with Henry for the next 12 years, caught up in the maelstrom of events, finally returning to England after the end of the Second World War.

With disarming candour, Bernstein describes both the idealism and the despair of Russian communism.

That is one of the remarkable aspects of this anecdotal history — that such a committed communist now feels free to explore enthusiasm for the Russian experiment's hope of human transformation, and critical disillusion with its terrible shortcomings, individual suffering, physical deprivation, and political persecution.

This is a significant contribution to the growing body of confessional literature. Despite the fact that it cries out for sensitive editing, which could have shaped the narrative and completed some of the missing links, it is a compelling read.

**Heather Mackie**

## THE CRUCIAL CD COLLECTION

**S**TEVE Earle's 2002 release, *Jerusalem*, included John Walker's Blues — a fine, nonjudgmental song about John Walker Lindh, an American boy raised on MTV, who joined the Taliban because he'd "seen all the kids in the soda pop bands, and none ... looked like me".

Needless to say, the album caused controversy, but Earle, a genuine maverick in an extraordinarily conservative industry, a jailed former drug addict, raised a Texan and vehemently opposed to the death penalty, was used to controversy. It had been a more or less constant companion since **GUITAR TOWN (MCA/Universal)** challenged country music orthodoxy 16 years before.

Earle was not by any means the first, of course, and will surely not be the last, but there did seem to be more artists than usual prepared to take on the mainstream during what Earle called "the great credibility scare of the mid 1980s". He is probably the one among them who has stayed closest to the truth for the longest.

His record company was divided. Some saw the album as a welcome, long overdue return to the twin roots of a country-rock hybrid that was increasingly neither of its components. Most — remember, it was made in Nashville — considered it needlessly provocative, lyrically and musically.

*Guitar Town* is the sound of a good ol' boy (Gettin' Tough) — "I was born in the land of plenty, now there ain't enough" — and a triumphant first full album for a 31-year-old songwriter who was warned that he would not get far on "\$37 and a Jap guitar". It is the

updated sound of the Hillbilly Highway, the mythical southern road along which Earle's ancestors flocked as they left the land for dead-end jobs in dead-end towns.

It is an angry album, full of frustration, bitterness, disillusionment and regret, but also defiance. Like Earle, his characters are a resilient bunch, and their often faint hopes are galvanised by the combination of hard-edged rock 'n roll fuelled by resonantly twanging guitar, and gritty country slightly sweetened by sweeping steel.

There was merit at the time in descriptions that had Earle pinned for a proudly southern Springsteen whose heartland rock had picked up modern echoes of Hank Williams along the way. But it was by no means all and anyway, Earle would not stay that way for long. *Guitar Town* was an explosion of musical honesty alright, but it was also just the first step in a highly distinctive and distinguished career that shows no sign of abating.

**Richard Haslop**

■ *The Nocturama winners are Michelle Waddell of Killarney, Tobie Willemse of Wierdapark and Tim Huggins of Arcadia. Your CDs are on their way!*

## DANCE

**S**PIRIT OF THE DANCE is a phenomenal international success that has grown out of the popular Irish step-dancing of the 1990s. The Irish International Dance Company's casino-cabaret style programme has a formula popular enough for six troupes to perform around the world at any given time.

It is a big old colourful show, mixing straight-backed Irish line dancing and Scottish reels with a Viennese waltz, Latin-American salsa and Rhinestone rodeo. The finale is a stunning Bob Fosse-based number, with the dancers in bowler hats and white gloves. Eight SA dancers strutting their stuff with the company hold their own in the split-second timing, costume changes and dance routines.

Spirit of the Dance's repeat season in SA follows its record-breaking tour last year, and runs back to back with the company's next production, *Spirit of Broadway*, opening at Johannesburg's Civic Theatre on May 13. Spirit of the Dance ends at the Civic on May 11. Book via Computicket.

**Heather Mackie**



BOOKS

# Lost in Mother Russia

Joe Podbrey

A LIFE OF ONE'S OWN  
by Hilda Bernstein (Jacana)

**H**ilda Bernstein is the century's child, a product of the 1900s. She has been through the political mill as a communist activist and then being hounded by the apartheid police. Bernstein has experienced the disillusion felt by other political devotees and has outlived, literally, the Soviet system and seen it come to nothing. During the Forties she was elected the first and only Communist Party city councillor in Johannesburg and was an outstanding spokesperson for the party. Her husband Rusty was arrested during the Rivonia episode. On his release on bail they both escaped to Britain, where they have lived since. Rusty died recently.

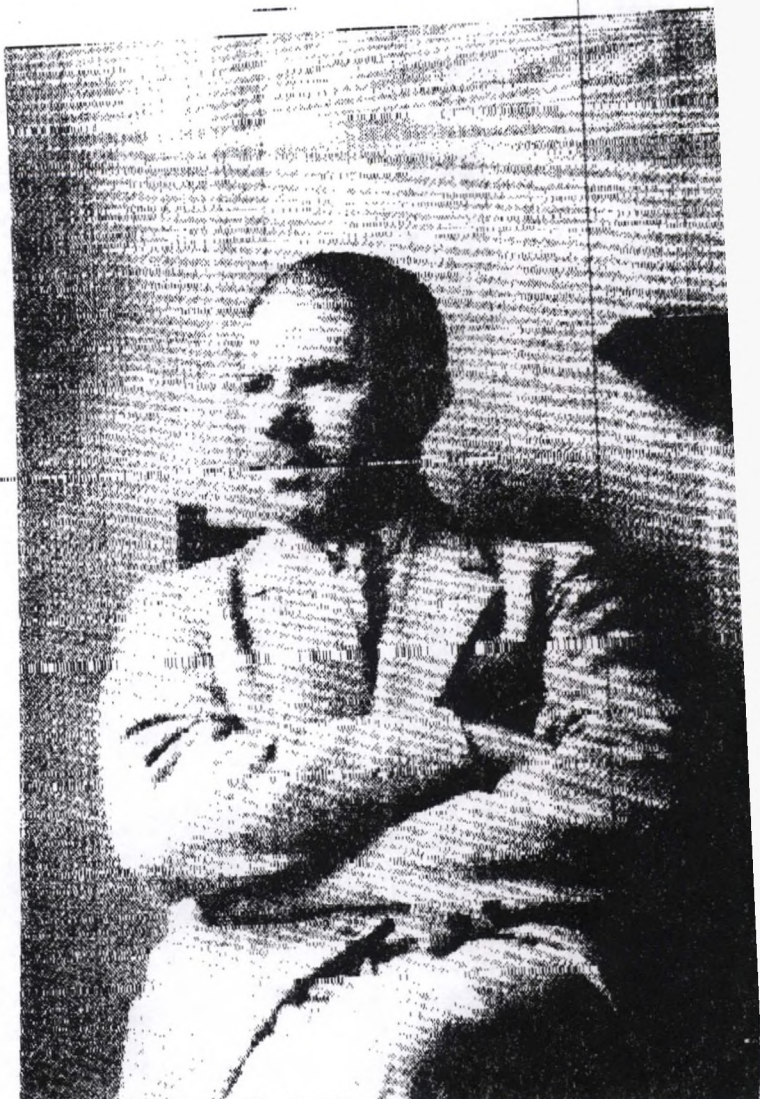
Bernstein was born and brought up in England with her two sisters. Her father, Simeon, was an immigrant from the Ukraine, but never abandoned his fiery fervour as a revolutionary. He neither sought nor acquired British citizenship, although he did anglicise the family surname from Schwartz to Watts, a tribute perhaps to a new and promising environment.

After the Russian Revolution he returned to Russia to work for the Soviets. Bernstein never saw him again. Although he desperately wanted to return to his family in England, he was a Soviet citizen and the oppressive bureaucracy prevented it. We can feel for him even as we marvel at his blind devotion.

Bernstein's father wrote copious letters, which are reproduced in this book, and it is plain - and heart-breaking - to discern the slow and painful disillusion that inevitably engulfed him. He did not live to see Stalin's infamous purges of his former comrades - men such as Zinoviev, Kamenev and Bukharin - but so disenchanted was he with the Soviet dictator that they would hardly have surprised him. Simeon's desperate frustration in not being able to rejoin his family was plainly unbearable. When it became apparent that they would never be reunited, Bernstein and her mother came to live in South Africa.

But her sister Olga - the "good looking one in the family" - left for the Soviet Union, determined to meet up with her father. This she did and the meeting was a happy one. Olga decided to stay in Moscow for a while and became a schoolteacher of English. But when she tried to return to Britain World War II broke out and she too was trapped in Russia. She succeeded in making a new life for herself and established some close friends, including a man called Henry.

Olga was an exceptionally talented letter writer and in this book much of her correspondence is reproduced, painting a fascinating picture of pre-war Russia and later, when so much of it was devastated by the Germans. Life was not easy for the Russians, to say the very least, and Olga suffered with the rest. She emerges as a courageous and warm person who never gave way to despair, although the temptation to do so must have been very strong. Her letters, descriptive and em-



phatically readable, mark her as someone who cared deeply for other people, lacking neither determination nor passion. Some of her descriptive passages are outstanding.

But Bernstein's book is much more than a mere family history. It is almost a pocket version of the history of the Soviet Union and of the terrible war that engulfed it. Her description of the Moscow Metro underground, built under the express orders of Stalin, is particularly good. The author has done her homework and, for her readers, young and not-so-young, it is good - splendid really - to be reminded of what took place there a mere 60 years ago. Of course, many families were engulfed by those terrible years but, regrettably, their stories will perish with them. Thankfully, the Watts family archives will survive.

*A Life of One's Own* is a family narrative that we are glad Bernstein shares with us. And it makes a significant contribution, on a personal and intimate level, to what we know of the land once called the Soviet Union.

**Hilda Bernstein's father, Simeon, wrote copious letters that show the slow and painful disillusion that engulfed him**

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Bernstein's book is almost a pocket version of the history of the Soviet Union



# NELSON MANDELA

Dear Hilda

It is a great honour to be able to send this short message to you on the occasion of the launching of your book.

I shall not pretend to already have read the book. You and Rusty were such stalwarts of the struggle against apartheid and for the establishment of a non-racial democracy in South Africa that I can say without having read the book that yours is a story worth telling.

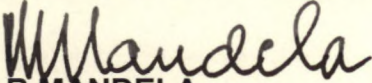
People marvel at the nature of our transition and the kind of society that we could build here in South Africa. We are often referred to as a miracle nation. Indeed, our achievements of reconciliation and nation building were remarkable. That miracle was, however, built by real men and women in action and struggle.

You and Rusty were integral parts of that struggle and the making of our miracle. The non-racial character of our struggle was to a very large measure consolidated by the contribution and participation of committed democrats like yourselves.

You know what role you have played in the chapters of my own life story. I look forward to reading the records of your life, one that is inextricably woven into the fabric of the story of South Africa's quest for freedom and democracy.

We recently mourned the death of Rusty. The publication of your book will, I am sure, help to console us. It will bring to life in words part of the story of one who helped to bring to birth democratic South Africa. And it will help us to understand the courage that you brought to our struggle.

Best wishes, Hilda. And congratulations on the publication of your book. And above all, thank you for what you and Rusty have meant for the struggle for freedom and democracy, and what your lives signify for our future.

  
N R MANDELA

Mrs Hilda Burnstein  
London, UK

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