

Old comrade crafts a fine memory of our past

MEMORY AGAINST FORGETTING: MEMOIRS FROM A LIFE IN SOUTH AFRICAN POLITICS 1938-1964

by Rusty Bernstein (Viking) R128

Review: Alan Lipman

This is a finely crafted volume: the lucid, analytic record of someone who was engaged, who was embedded in the politics of South African resistance from the late-1930s to the 1960s. If on entering a new century, you wish to touch the core of those momentous decades, get this book, devour it.

Be prepared, though, to be devoured by your growing insight into spirited mass opposition to the dying years of Smutsian post-colonialism as well as the initial forays of National Party bigotry, corruption and brutality.

Whether or not you lived through that agitated period, whether you share Bernstein's resolutely left-wing perspective or not, you will find his recollections as gripping as they are historically informative, as forthright as they are revealing, as scholarly as they are readily accessible. You will be introduced to the troubled times of a remarkable couple, comrades Rusty and Hilda Bernstein; the latter, a woman whose analogous dedication and achievements also warrant full attention.

For me the term "comrade" has long had, still has, revolutionary connotations.

To address another or be greeted in this manner is to express individual and social solidarity in a potentially worldwide, historically rooted striving to shift humankind from exploitative injustice and cruelty to cooperative fellowship, to humane social relationships. Though I later wandered down more libertarian ways than he, in my mind's eye Comrade Rusty has, over some 50 years, been a frequent exemplar: since we met as ex-servicemen after the second world war, since I worked in his draughting office as a student architect, since we were briefly together in an underground Communist Party group, during our years of mutual exile abroad.

Now he re-visits us, ever the analyst, theoretician, activist, the stimulating and helpful companion. Again he fires my insurrectionary imagination, as, surely, he will ignite those who treat themselves to this quietly didactic book.

Among the facets of a sustained political life which Bernstein illuminates, the most constant is his propensity for incisive analysis, for epitomising EM Forster's memorable invitation, "only connect".

This is a pervasive thread, through events leading to and surrounding the post-1948 Votes for All assembly and the Suppression of Communism Act of 1950, the Congress of the People and proclamation of the Freedom Charter in June 1955, the Sharpeville massacre of March 21 1960 and the subsequent state of emergency.

Throughout these and the many similarly significant episodes in which he participated, often centrally, Bernstein searches ceaselessly for connections, for broad explanatory contexts. Perhaps the most impressive of these is the complex of inter-related events assembled in his chapter To Put Up or Shut Up, in his depiction of how, in 1960-61, the ANC and other organisations came to abandon their long-standing principle of non-violent opposition. Here he juxtaposes such seemingly disparate issues as the then astonishing rift in Russo-Chinese relations, Chief Albert Luthuli's Nobel Peace Prize, the government's referendum for withdrawal from the Commonwealth and the abortive strike called in protest by the disenfranchised black resistance movement.

Taken together, the ramifications of these are teased out to disclose subtle interdependencies, to highlight changes in political, social and economic contexts that call for major shifts of policy. In this instance, those shifts focus on the pressing necessity for meeting brutal force with force. Initially that was interpreted to mean widespread sabotage: acts that do not imperil human life. Umkhonto weSizwe was born. Increasing state repression led to less and less fastidious action.

Shortly afterwards, the author, with Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu,

Govan Mbeki and others, stood accused at the Rivonia Trial. Following the petty-minded and vindictive fictions presented by the prosecution, he alone among his comrades was acquitted. Isolated and depressed he bowed to the now urgent need for escape into exile with his family.

If there is a need for the feminist contention that "the personal is political" to be affirmed, this book does so. Despite the author's reticence about such matters, one is reminded repeatedly, and always poignantly, of the effects of his wife's and his enforced separations from their four children, from each other.

There are constant calls on neighbours to care for the children after late-night arrests, there is the bewilderment of little ones witnessing the forcible removal of parents from home, there are necessary secrets between spouses. There are the constant disjunctions imposed on daily life by a viciously vengeful police state, not least of which was the demoralising difficulties of earning money during willfully prolonged trials, spells in prison and 90 punishing days of solitary confinement.

Intentionally or otherwise, Bernstein provides a template against which to gauge many taken-for-granted truths. Were, for instance, trade unionists in the hands of bloody-minded agitators intent primarily on despoiling the country's economy? Was the ANC led by a cabal seeking principally to supplant its fellow white citizens; worse, to banish or murder them? Did the Communist Party advocate gory revolution, a national bloodbath? Were members of these and cognate organisations naïve dupes, ignorant natives all too ready to be manipulated by demagogic ogres?

The testimony of this book gives no credence to these raw caricatures, nor to the marginally less crass beliefs often associated with them. Quite the contrary. Bernstein's pages are peopled with dedicated democrats; activists with informed social visions that they tested and re-assessed in what he terms their "tradition of consultation and majority consent".

That, then, is what Comrade Rusty has been up to of late -

(S.A.) 27.6.99.



Rusty Bernstein's memoirs: a finely crafted record

PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN HOGG

shoring up memory against casual as well as consciously suppressed forgetfulness. For this, much thanks.

There are, though, areas which are not enlightened by his strobe-like focus. None more than the damaging distortion of socialist theory and action that the German analyst Rudolf Bahro was later to depict as "actually existing socialism". An absent but always pressing question hangs over much that Bernstein

records. How, over the years he covers, did otherwise humane, perceptive comrades come so persistently to defend the patently indefensible, the corrupt, murderous history of socialist construction?

This is no abstract matter. It affected the crippling ideological schisms and day-to-day practices that weakened the political left, the public isolation of that left before, after and even during the second

world war, the credibility of women and men who were manifestly committed to unearthing the realities that underpinned their and our alienated world.

It was used to devalue the goals and efforts of too many thoughtful, courageous people. It cries for thorough analytic attention.

● Alan Lipman is *The Sunday Independent's* architecture critic



Memory Against Forgetting by Rusty Bernstein

REVIEWED BY JOE POBBREY

It can be argued that Rusty (Lionel) Bernstein became a Communist and an ANC adherent because, like Joe Slovo, Ronnie Kasrils and others, his Jewish background inspired him to detest racial oppression and to ally himself to the victims of an unjust society.

This may well be so, but there is no such acknowledgment in his newly-released autobiography.

By his own account, he drifted naturally into left-wing politics and what he terms "scientific socialism". Such transformations do happen and it is often difficult to pinpoint the moment when one decides to become politically active. Bernstein does not ascribe his revolutionary fervour to his Jewishness. He recounts listening to debates and argu-

ments about Zionism and the need to support Israel among his Jewish associates, but that is as far as it goes. His fervour is entirely for South Africa.

In old South Africa such a political animal was unusual

As it happens, Bernstein's particular *bête-noir* would appear to be Percy Yutar, a Jew who served the apartheid government slavishly by prosecuting Nelson Mandela and all the leading lights of the ANC, including Bernstein, and demanded the death sentence for at least four of them.

Bernstein's entire life was consumed by left-wing politics and he never for a moment strayed into compromise or

rationalisation. He was dedicated to the Communist Party and, in turn, the African National Congress.

In the South Africa of old, such a political animal was unusual. He was prepared to forgo the blessings of being an endowed white man to whom all the doors of privilege were open. Ultimately, he did so.

Memory Against Forgetting is a powerful narrative of a man devoted to a struggle against oppression, injustice and what he perceived to be the menace of capitalism, in the quest for a society based on the Marxist principles of socialism. One may quarrel with his concept of a just society, especially in view of what happened to the Soviet Union, but there can be no denying the nobility of the struggle itself.

For the Bernstein family, it meant house arrest, harass-

ment, imprisonment, persecution, a hair-raising escape from South Africa and a virtual lifetime of exile. Bernstein himself was charged in both the Treason Trial and the Rivonia Trial; in both instances he was acquitted after years of anguish.

Paying tribute to his fellow warriors

The book is a touchingly honest autobiography. It depicts his life from childhood to political awareness, including a stint in the army during the war, and follows his development as an activist for a cause which, as far as South Africa was concerned, triumphed after some 45 years of darkness.

Bernstein played a considerable part in that victory. He was one of the authors of the famous Freedom Charter and in later years he ran a school in

Tanzania for the ideological training of new young recruits in MK.

He pays due tribute to his fellow warriors against apartheid, such as Braam Fischer, Walter Sisulu, Yusuf Dadoo, Dennis Goldberg and in particular his wife Hilda, who was such a prominent figure on the South African political scene.

In his foreword to the book, well-known journalist and biographer Anthony Sampson, heaps praise on the Bernsteins and goes on to say: "This book convincingly describes how their humanity and sense of outrage drew them into a movement which would soon require extraordinary courage and self-sacrifice, with no prospect of material rewards."

Bernstein writes with great fluency, never becoming self-righteous or pretentious. The passion for his cause is never overstated. As a contribution to the history of modern South Africa, it earns a place of distinction.

OBSERVER
27 FEB 2000

A good man in South Africa

BARBARA TRAPIDO

Memory Against Forgetting
by Rusty Bernstein

Viking £10.99, pp377

RUSTY BERNSTEIN was a talented member of that small, heroic band of white South Africans who, for 30 years, fought alongside black South Africans against a minority, racist regime. To do so took enormous courage and self-sacrifice, but also intelligence and skill.

An indefatigable writer of pamphlets and policy statements, Bernstein was delegated in 1956 to draft the Freedom Charter, a key ANC policy document, by making a painstaking synthesis of the submissions received from ordinary black South Africans. Written on scraps torn from school exercise books and old envelopes, these offerings expressed the aspirations of the country's disenfranchised majority, covering land reform, education, employment, civil rights, family life and electoral hopes.

Bernstein wrote the rousing preamble and conclusion which commits the ANC firmly to non-racialism. Its assertion that 'South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white' ran counter to the pan-Africanist slogan 'Africa for the Africans' and became unexpectedly controversial.

He tells the story of his own political awakening, through an accidental encounter with a group of door-to-door collectors from Medical Aid for Spain during the war against Franco. He conjures the atmosphere of Johannesburg, with its hole-in-the-corner, left-wing bookshops, its first 'continental' café run by German refugees, its young, pro-Nazi blackshirt Afrikaners and its radicalised returning soldiers.

He conveys vividly the sense of ful-

filment derived from first entering a 'native' beerhall to sell twopenny weeklies to black workers. He was close to the 1946 miners strike, in which miners were literally bludgeoned back to work, and to the squatters who spilled on to patches of municipal wasteland, since no provision had been made for the huge numbers of newly urbanised black workers servicing the needs of white industry.

Bernstein was one of the 156 accused in the 'Treason Trial' which ran from 1956-1959 before all were finally acquitted. Though it had the effect of eroding livelihoods - Bernstein, for example, was an architect whose practice petered out - it was the high point for anti-apartheid activists, since the state had unwittingly made possible what was almost impossible outside - it gave opportunity, over three years, for the political leadership, black, white and Asian, to confer and connect in the same physical space.

Then came Sharpsville and the State of Emergency. Banning orders and house arrests began, along with 90-day detention and the emergence of a new breed of Special Branch policeman trained in torture techniques by the CIA. The loss to the liberation movement through gagging, imprisonment, exile and intimidation was enormous.

Resources were meagre and the chain of command in what were all by then illegal organisations developed cracks which resulted in alarming security lapses, just at a point when the decision had been made to begin acts of sabotage against strategic targets. Some among the leadership were airing the idea of guerrilla war, though many were against it, when the police closed in on the Rivonia House in 1963 and seized the smoking document known as 'Operation Mayibuye'.

Bernstein was the only one of the Rivonia defendants who was acquitted. He was immediately re-arrested, but bailed by default, thanks to a prominent rugby fixture which guaranteed the absence of all Special Branch persons from their desks that afternoon.

The book touches on his hair-raising nocturnal escape into Botswana, complete with twisted ankles and kidnap attempts, but this is not only a personal story. It's a valuable historical document which comes at a time when the contribution of people such as Bernstein is in danger of being written out of the liberation story.



STANLEY TRAPIDO

THE GOOD WHITES

MEMORY AGAINST FORGETTING

By Rusty Bernstein
(Viking 375pp £10.99)

★
RIVONIA'S CHILDREN

★
By Glenn Frankel
(Weidenfeld & Nicolson 363pp £20)

RUSTY BERNSTEIN, COMMUNIST colleague of Nelson Mandela, who stood trial with him in 1964, has lived a long time. His involvement in radical politics began in 1938 and, in this memoir, he chronicles the history of the South African underground from within, thus providing an invaluable document on an organisation which, by its nature, left few documents. His memoir reveals him as a modest, courageous and able man whose understated style nonetheless leaves the reader marvelling at the ease with which South Africa's long and painful transformation has come to be perceived as the achievement of Mandela alone. In this respect, the book's title, taken from Milan Kundera, is pertinent.

Bernstein was a competent administrator, journalist and pamphleteer, an architect by profession and a craftsman who made furniture with secret compartments to mislead the security police. Every committee on which he served made heavy use of his skills. While there have been accounts of intimidation, anxiety and terror endured by white rebels who worked with the ANC, Bernstein's story is unique in dealing analytically, as an insider, with the causes of those disasters.

By the mid-Fifties, the ANC, acknowledging the failure of its respectful petitioning style, resolved to issue a charter to guide its new politics of mass opposition. Bernstein wrote the Jeffersonian document which became the

Freedom Charter, the ANC's principal manifesto for forty years, enshrining the principle of multiracialism. Its author now reveals the accidents, haphazard decisions, stretched resources and occasional incompetence that accompanied the idealism behind this new, more hazardous politics.

By 1960, as legal avenues for political action were closed, it became harder to undertake clandestine activities, let alone embark on armed resistance. Bernstein, along with other leading members of the executive, was doubtful about the wisdom of such a course, but pressure was considerable. Newly independent African states were particularly free with exhortations to armed revolt and, within South Africa, there was a massive surge of support for violent opposition to an increasingly authoritarian state. Far-reaching policy decisions were thrust upon a decreasing and over-stretched political class; Mandela was serving a prison sentence; harassment and arrests were intensifying and the organisation was losing members to prison and exile. When the need for a 'safe house' became pressing, the Communist Party bought an isolated, rural house at Rivonia but, as Bernstein explains, its original purpose as a hideout for individuals needing safe passage arrangements was soon lost. The chain of command became confused, the house was over-used and, with the security police extracting information by torture, it became a house of peril.

Throughout these hard times, a bonding took place which often made it difficult to distinguish between the cause and loyalty to friends, but Bernstein describes how, having found himself bounced into a guerrilla movement operating from an anarchic 'safe' house, he voiced his intention to make the break. Attending one last meeting, he was, unluckily, present when the police swooped on the Rivonia house. Solitary confinement

was followed by the 'Rivonia Trial'. Bernstein was eventually acquitted and fled the country with his wife while on bail: a harrowing journey, tracked by the security police, who were intent on kidnap.

Frankel, former *Washington Post* correspondent in South Africa, sets out to tell a parallel story: that of the Bernsteins and two other



Sharpeville, 1960

white activist families. He investigates what drove these high-minded people to risk middle-class livelihoods, personal liberty and the emotional well-being of their children, in the face of the state's increasing brutality and coercion. While the material of the book is not new, the story is grippingly well told, as Frankel recreates the moments of high risk and terror. He evokes the cold despair of knowing that a spouse's lateness might mean arrest and solitary confinement; the dawn police raids, the loss of livelihood that came with banning orders. Frankel calls these activists the 'last humanists' and asks what propelled them towards a course so hazardous.

For black South Africans, he believes, the answer is simpler. The cruelty of a political system which maintained white privilege and the exploitation of blacks made resistance inevitable, but why those few whites? Frankel finds his explanation, not altogether satisfactorily, in the fact that they were Jewish; non-observing Jews, but their alienation from Judaism, he asserts, was itself a part of Jewish culture. Surely it must then be argued that so was the culture of those Jewish farmers of Bethal whose brutal abuse of prison labourers was exposed by Ruth First, the Communist journalist, and by the Reverend Michael Scott? And what about the Jewish Attorney-General, Percy Yutar, who, when prosecuting Mandela and his fellow-accused, tormented them so much in court that his conduct earned him the contempt of the presiding Afrikaner Nationalist judge? South Africa's Jews were capitalists and communists, state lackeys and courageous resisters, aesthetes and scientists, pimps and gunrunners, cricketers and klüberjas players, agnostics and cabbalists. Thus, Frankel's theory won't quite suffice, leading, as it does, to a cuddly version of the protocols of Zion.

Bernstein's book is a useful supplement in this respect, since it provides the context, from the Thirties onwards, in which these habits of resistance were formed. He explains the street activities, the response to the 1948 Afrikaner Nationalist election victory and the massive five-year Treason Trial with 156 defendants. He deals with Sharpeville and the symbiotic, and broadly supportive, collaboration between the banned ANC and the banned Communist Party, which has puzzled so many commentators. We need to place matters in the context of the times, in which lynching and segregationism were not unknown in the USA, and Britain was remembered for having sacrificed African rights to the interests of big capital in the 1910 Act of Union. Support from the world's liberal democracies was simply not there. Most were comfortable with leaving the government of South Africa to a repressive white minority. Since the Soviet Union was alone in offering its moral support to the country's liberation movements, the underground activists, black and white, were making a realistic choice, a twentieth-century choice, in accepting it.

ANTHONY SAMPSON

Patriot At Home in his Bitter Paradise

DOG HEART, A MEMOIR

★
By Breyten Breytenbach
(Faber & Faber 208pp £9.99)

AS THE AFRIKANERS in South Africa say goodbye to political power, so their writers flourish as never before, showing a mastery of the English language which carries off prizes and outshines the Englishman's more timid use of his own language.

Afrikaner writers like J M Coetzee, André Brink or Rian Malan share certain characteristics: a strong sense of guilt; a fascination with family and ancestors; a wonderful ability to describe the open countryside of their upbringing. They love to dwell on family farms, uncles, aunts and grandparents, and to conjure up a vanished sense of order, before confronting the horrors during and after the apartheid era.

Sometimes the breast-beating and examination of the Afrikaner soul become self-indulgent and self-conscious, as if these authors are playing up to the image the world imposes on them. But they are all driven to express their predicament, which gives their writing energy and intensity.

Breyten Breytenbach's experience is most distinctive. As an exile in Paris with an Asian wife, he soon found himself in conflict with apartheid governments which could not allow him even to revisit with his wife. He felt a desperate need to bring down the system. He joined an ill-organised resistance group intent on sabotage, was caught, imprisoned and, after some bargaining, released.

His political standpoint is confusing and changeable, his writing enriched by the ambiguity. 'It's obviously one's manifest destiny to be double', he says in this book, quoting from Baudelaire, who said that one could only be an artist on condition that one was double. In this memoir, describing his homecoming and visits to his relations, Breytenbach seems to be relishing his dualities: the radical exile still attracted to the predominantly conservative countryside, the campaigner against apartheid confronting the violence and predicaments of the post-apartheid country.

He is fascinated by the contrast between the settled life of the rural Afrikaner families and the racial contacts and mixtures that lurk behind them. 'What I want to write [about]', he explains, 'is the penetration, expansion, skirmishing, coupling, mixing, separation,

Facing the Evil

In their struggle against apartheid, South Africa's blacks had the support of many whites, a large percentage of them Jewish, who put their personal lives on the line for the cause

David Seligman

HE [MANDELA] ONE DAY ... HAD tried to hug his own grown-up daughter and she had rejected him. "You are the father to all our people," she told him, "but you have never had the time to be a father to me." This was, he said, his greatest regret in life, that his children and the children of his comrades had paid such a high price for their parents' commitment to the cause.

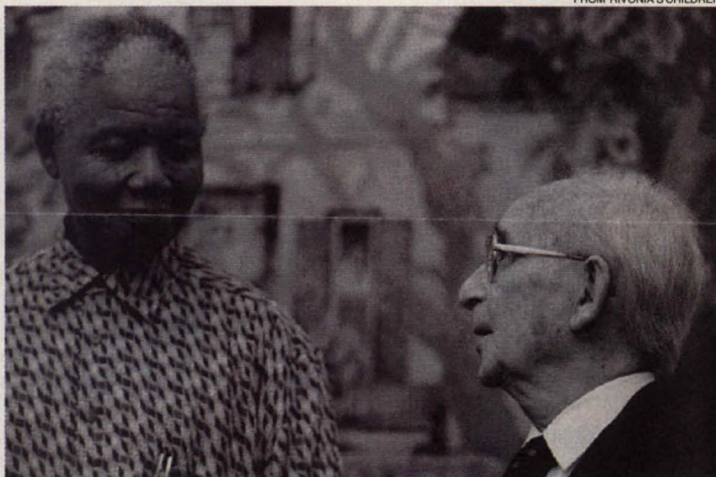
NELSON MANDELA HAD NO choice. The anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa was overwhelmingly the fight of black people. But they were joined by a small number of whites, and it is on this group, and the price that they and their families paid for their activism, that Glenn Frankel focuses in "Rivonia's Children." He does this not because their sacrifices were greater than those of their black comrades, but because they *chose* to make those sacrifices. This they did by virtue of their strongly held political and humanitarian beliefs, which would not allow them to ignore their consciences and enjoy their privileged status, as did the vast majority of white South Africans.

Frankel, editor of the Washington Post Magazine, was that paper's correspondent in South Africa in the mid-1980s. He acknowledges that he draws heavily on earlier books on the subject, at the same time that he researched contemporary sources as well as conducted interviews with all the major players in the fight against apartheid. He focuses on three white families, all from Jewish backgrounds.

The clandestine activities of Ruth First and Joe Slovo, Hilda and Rusty Bernstein, and Harold and AnnMarie Wolpe, and the sacrifices that they made, placed their families under constant, debilitating risk and pressure. When Slovo's children were already grown, he wrote: "The very nature

of our activities in conspiratorial work left little scope for intimate frankness about what we were doing and why. Fear and a sense of insecurity, our arrests and frequent absences must have seemed, in the eyes of the children, acts of voluntary preferences; they must have felt that they came a poor second to the cause."

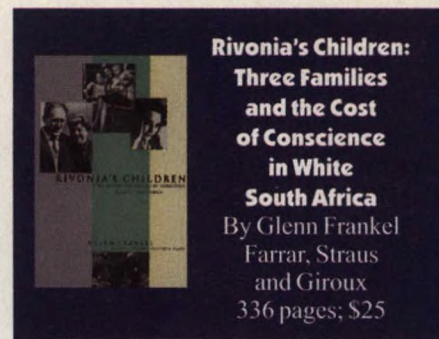
The main theme of "Rivonia's Children," though, is not the human-interest dimension, but the struggle against the apartheid regime during the 1950s and 60s.



'COURT JEW':
Former prosecutor Percy Yutar (right), and the man he helped send to Robben Island, meet again, in 1995

What had started off decades before as passive resistance was transformed into an armed liberation struggle after the National Party election victory in 1948, when apartheid was institutionalized and virtually all forms of opposition became illegal and ruthlessly repressed. As Frankel surveys this process, he introduces the principal players, like Mandela, Govan Mbeki (father of Thabo, the newly elected president of South Africa) and Walter Sisulu, a leading activist and Mandela confidant.

Frankel draws attention to the naïveté concerning security that these opponents of the regime displayed in the early days of



their activities. They simply underestimated the effectiveness of the Special Branch, later the Bureau of State Security (BOSS), and the extent to which the police infiltrated the opposition groups. I remember meetings of the Congress of Democrats, an anti-apartheid group, when I was a student at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg in the mid-1950s: Outside, the police would take down the license plate numbers of all the cars, while inside address lists of members were freely circulated.

The major breakthrough for the police was the 1963 raid on Lilliesleaf, the farm in Rivonia on the outskirts of Johannesburg. Lilliesleaf was to be the command center for anti-government operations, but its location was betrayed. The raid netted not only a trove of incriminating documentation, but also some of the most senior leaders of the African National Congress (ANC), the Communist Party and the National High Command of Umkhonto We Sizwe (The Spear of the Nation), the military branch of the struggle. Frankel writes: "In the end, they delivered not only themselves but enough documentation to destroy their own networks and convict themselves of high treason, sabotage or any of a dozen other offenses."

Anybody reading any account of the anti-apartheid struggle will notice the extent of Jewish involvement. Frankel notes that some 75 percent of Jewish immigration to South Africa after World War I was from Lithuania, where there had been a tradition of radical politics. Among these immigrants were members of the secular, Yiddishist, anti-Zionist and strongly socialist Bund. It is little surprise that many of the founding members of the South African Communist Party were originally members of the Bund. In this tradition, it was to be expected that most activists were indiffer-

ent or even hostile to Jewish causes.

In the Rivonia trial, the Jews involved included all four white defendants, Rusty Bernstein, Denis Goldberg, Bob Hepple and Jimmy Kantor. Arthur Goldreich and Harold Wolpe, who had also been arrested, escaped from the Marshall Square police cells in Johannesburg. Joe Slovo and Ruth First were not involved in the trial; he had already left South Africa when the arrests took place, and she succeeded in leaving the country after a period of detention. The defense team also included a number of Jews, such as Joel Joffe, the coordinating solicitor, who, some years after moving to the U.K., became chairman of Oxfam, and was elevated to the House of Lords in January; and attorney Arthur Chaskalson, today president of South Africa's Constitutional Court.

IRONICALLY, THE PROSECUTOR, Percy Yutar, was also a Jew, and Frankel devotes much space to him and his background and motives. Yutar is dismissed as a "court Jew," out to ingratiate himself with the non-Jewish white leadership and to achieve his ambition of becoming attorney general. He was a president of the Ortho-

dox Wolmarans Street Synagogue in Johannesburg for more than a decade. Many in the community felt uncomfortable with his role, finding it difficult to reconcile the ferocity of his prosecution with their reading of Jewish tradition. Witnesses depicted him to Frankel as devious, arrogant, hys-

Frances Bernstein reflected on her parents' activism that 'if you had a conscience, you really didn't have a lot of choices'

terical under pressure and, despite his vast experience in the South African courts, not overly competent. Yutar's initial indictment carried charges on four counts of sabotage and insurrection, but the charges were so sweeping and vague that the judge dismissed them. The defendants, however, were immediately rearrested and a more comprehensive list of charges drawn up.

Whatever the Jewish community thought of Yutar, it was certainly not about to take the side of the Rivonia defendants. The South African Jewish Board of Deputies, the community's leadership forum, argued that there was no community consensus on what it called "political matters" like apartheid, and that there could not be a "Jewish position" on such issues, and thus failed to take any position on the arrests and the trial. Unofficially, Jewish leaders warned that any attempt to stand against the apartheid juggernaut would serve only to reawaken the neo-Nazi anti-Semitism within the National Party. Frankel points out that many Jews shunned politics altogether, devoting themselves to community affairs and Zionism.

FRANKEL'S DESCRIPTION OF THE trial, based on Joel Joffe's book "The Rivonia Story," conveys the conflict between the defendants' ideological stand and the prosecution's attempt to depict them as criminals. Yutar told Frankel that he had ensured that the defendants would receive life imprisonment, rather than the death sentences, by framing the charges as sabotage instead of treason. Both charges, however, carried the death penalty, and Frankel further points out that Yutar repeatedly argued during the trial that the accused had committed murder and treason. He also conducted a vitriolic cross-examination of novelist Alan Paton, the one defense witness who testified against imposing the death penalty.

The case against Kantor was dismissed, as was that against Bernstein, but the latter was rearrested on different charges. All the remaining accused were convicted, and sentenced to life imprisonment.

And what of the families that Frankel highlights? Joe Slovo went into exile in 1963 to organize training and operations for Umkhonto We Sizwe. He became minister for housing in Nelson Mandela's government of national unity, in 1994, but died the following year. His wife, Ruth First, went to London after her release from her second 90-day incarceration, and later moved to Maputo, Mozambique, where she was killed by a South African police letter bomb in 1982. The architect Rusty Bernstein was released on bail, and he and Hilda absconded to the United Kingdom, where they still live. Harold and AnnMarie Wolpe also reached the U.K., where they lived until their return to South Africa, with two of their three children, after the release of Mandela in 1990. (Harold died in 1996.)

Slovo and First's daughters, Shawn, Gillian and Robyn, returned to South Africa when the policemen responsible for killing their mother appeared before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. After listening to the officers' justifications Gillian commented, "I thought that coming here would give me and my sisters some sense of completion, and that the applicants [for amnesty] would tell the truth. I've been quite shaken up in that belief because we have not been told the truth." She felt that she would never feel the same about South Africa because "I have looked too deeply into its malevolent heart. I have seen that its evil had a human face."

Frankel interviewed all the children and comments on all of them. One of them, Frances Bernstein, told him about her parents: "They didn't so much choose to take those risks and do those dangerous things as much as they took a step that led down a path that ended up doing things that were riskier and riskier. If you had a conscience, you really didn't have a lot of choices." She was proud of her parents. But she was wounded somehow — in the heart.

Frankel ends with Hilda Bernstein's thoughtful comment: "The meaning of life is not a fact to be discovered, but a choice that you make about the way you want to live." ●

David Seligman, born and educated in Johannesburg, was an executive producer with the BBC/Open University before moving to Israel, where he is an educational media consultant.

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PHILIPPA BOSTON talks to Rusty Bernstein about his role in the struggle to win freedom for black, Indian and coloured people in South Africa

Fighter who helped to change the world

South African exile and anti-apartheid activist Rusty Bernstein, a man who at one time knew the walls of the Pretoria jail better than those of his own home, now lives in a tranquil corner of Kidlington, just outside Oxford. He had never thought to write his memoirs until a colleague reminded him how few first-hand accounts there were of the struggle to end apartheid in South Africa.

Many of the main players are dead. Virtually all information had to be destroyed or communicated only by word of mouth. His memories of the period from the late 1930s until his exile to England in 1964 are unique.

I asked him how he came to find himself up against the secret police in the 1950s.

"You start by saying, 'I feel I ought to lend a hand to this good cause' and then gradually you get more and more involved until there's no way of going back without disowning your whole past," said Mr Bernstein.

His first active involvement in politics came in late 1930s Johannesburg, when he joined the Communist Party and helped with fundraising for medical aid for the Spanish Civil War. During this time he met and married his wife, a fellow Communist and a tireless campaigner for civil rights.

Memory Against Forgetting catalogues the increasing unrest of non-white citizens of South Africa up to 1955, when, in one of the many memorable passages of the book, representatives of all the numerous factions of anti-apartheid activity secretly squeezed themselves into 40 schoolroom desks in rural Stanger, where Chief Luthuli was confined, and, by the light of a single storm lantern, united as the Congress of the People. It fell to Mr Bernstein, as a long-time writer of magazine articles and political pamphlets, to write *The Freedom Charter*, giving a political voice to the disenfranchised.

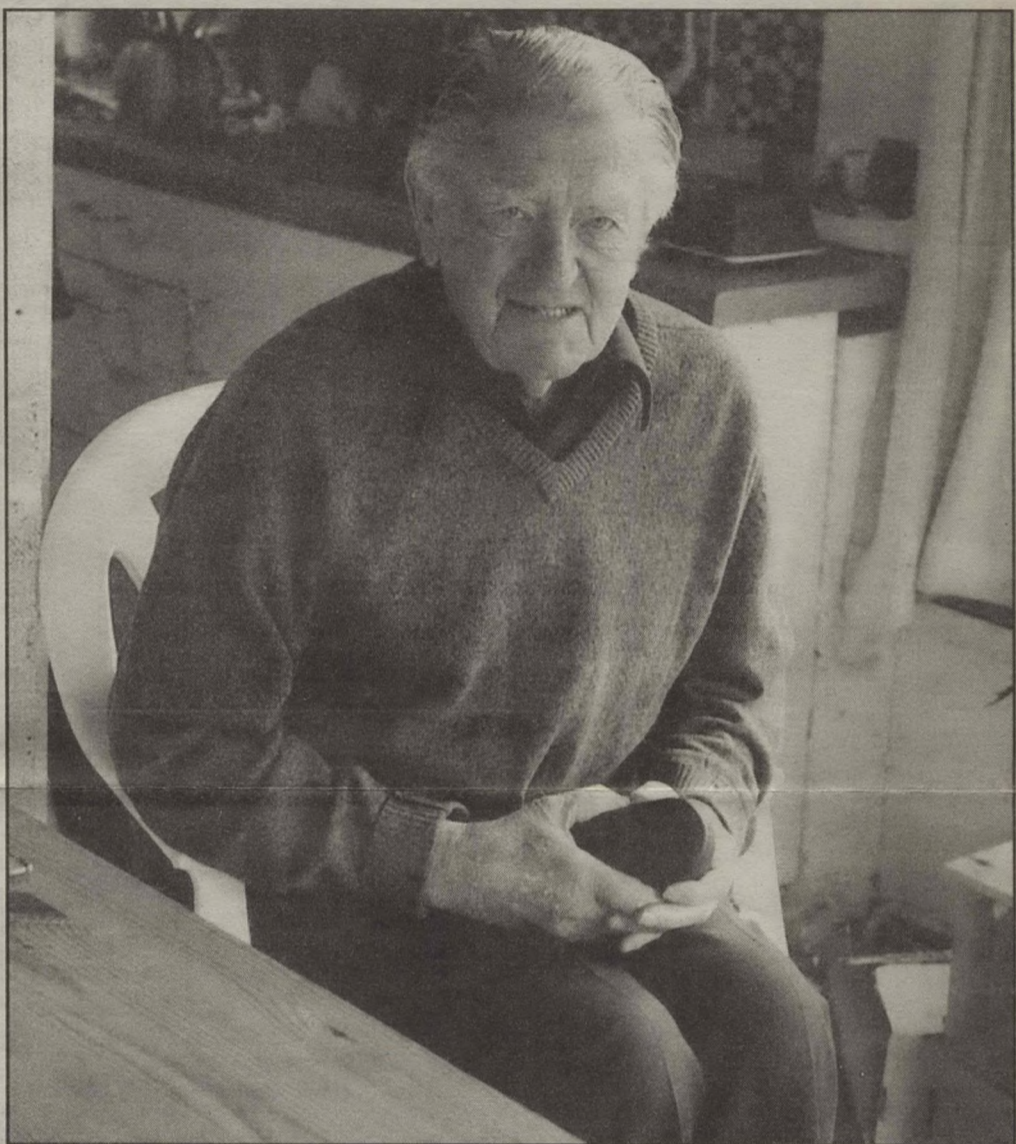
The following year, he was one of 156 suspected anti-government activists involved in what became known as the Treason Trial. The trial lasted until 1959, when all 156 defendants were acquitted. Mr Bernstein's book describes how the defendants, who had previously respected and communicated with each other from a distance, due to the segregation laws, now became friends and formed bonds which would remain for life.

Amazingly there is much to laugh about in this tale. Their capacity to outwit the authorities reads like a real-life Jack and the Beanstalk. Some of the prosecution exhibits at the trial, such as the canteen boards bearing the legends "Soup with meat" and "Soup without Meat", are hilarious. There is also that fairytale sense of the giant getting more and more infuriated by Jack's antics, which eventually leads to the giant's downfall. In 1959, Mr Bernstein found himself acquitted, but out of a job, with four children to support. In 1960, in the wake of the Sharpeville Massacre, the government declared a State of Emergency, banned both the ANC and the PAC (Pan African Congress) and gave the police the power to detain suspects without trial.

The Bernsteins were soon both arrested and imprisoned without charge. Mrs Bernstein was released after three months, when she and some other mothers went on hunger strike. He was released some weeks later.

At this time their children were aged three, eight, 11 and 17. How was family life affected and how did it feel to be in such a dangerous position? Mrs Bernstein said: "Gradually it became more and more dangerous and more and more difficult, but it didn't happen all of a sudden, so you were well-immersed in what appeared to be legal and safe activity before you realised you were up to your waist in something else as well."

Driven underground and increasingly



Change in the air... Rusty Bernstein, who now lives quietly in Kidlington

disillusioned with peaceful protest, the ANC and Communist Party formed a military wing called Umkhonto We Sizwe, led by Nelson Mandela and Joe Slovo. When the police raided the Umkhonto headquarters at Rivonia in July 1963, they recovered a half-charred document giving details of a military campaign, never formally agreed or adopted by Umkhonto — vital evidence in the subsequent Rivonia Trial. Treason, if proven, was punishable by death.

Mr Bernstein, who had arrived at the Rivonia house ten minutes before the police, was once again arrested. Although the only defendant to be acquitted, he was immediately rearrested, but managed to get bail and the couple escaped on foot over the border into Botswana and ultimately to England.

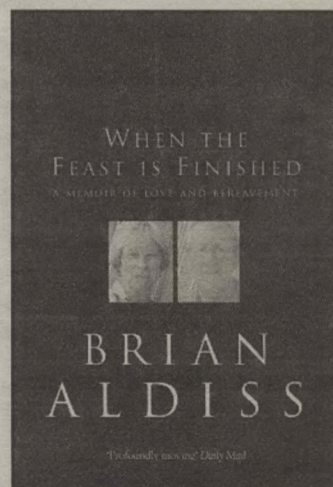
The other defendants in the trial, including Mandela, were all given life sentences.

Mr Bernstein looks deeply content when talking about returning to South Africa in 1994 to help in the first one-person one-vote election which returned Mandela as President — the realisation of so many dreams and towards which he had dedicated so much of his adult life. "There has never been another day like it," said Mr Bernstein. "You could feel the change in the air. You could see people changing in front of your eyes. We're uniquely lucky in that we were part of a movement which did change the world in the direction which we wished to change it and that we lived to see it."

● *Memory Against Forgetting* by Rusty Bernstein is published by Viking at £10.99.

Local author

BRIAN ALDISS



When The Feast Is Finished (Little, Brown, £7.99) is sci-fi author Brian Aldiss's account of the last weeks of his wife Margaret, who died of cancer at their Oxford home. His fragmented, emotionally intimate narrative, interspersed with diary entries, was written in the hope that it may comfort other bereaved relatives

Masterly account of 'cost of conscience' for Rivonia activists

RIVONIA'S CHILDREN

by Glenn Frankel (Jonathan Ball) R110

Review: Milton Shain

With our new constitutional and democratic liberties, it is easy to forget the draconian character of the old South Africa when apartheid laws controlled all dimensions of public and private life.

For its primary victims, "separate development" was merely a re-definition of oppression; it was, moreover, a cynical means to divide and rule.

For the system's beneficiaries, it was a means of addressing the so-called colour question while maintaining cheap labour and political power. When necessary, this meant brutal repression, as in the Sharpeville massacre of 1960.

Some liberally inclined whites saw this outrage and the subsequent state of emergency, including the outlawing of the ANC and SACP, as a reason to emigrate; others turned to armed struggle. Among the latter were a group of selfless and brave individuals engaged in varying brands of activist fervour, Marxist and non-Marxist.

It is their story that is reconstructed with masterly precision by Pulitzer prize-winner and *Washington Post* staff writer and editor Glenn Frankel. Of particular concern to the *Post's* onetime southern African correspondent are the lives of Rusty and Hilda Bernstein, Joe Slovo and Ruth First, and Harold and AnnMarie Wolpe and, as he puts it in the book's subtitle, the "cost of conscience".

The dramatis personae, however, include a veritable who's who of South African activists. Using memoirs, contemporary accounts, newspaper clippings, trial records, documents and extensive oral testimony, Frankel has woven a remarkable story, full of pathos but ultimately edifying and inspiring.

In 1961 Lillesleaf farm in Rivonia, on the outskirts of Johannes-

burg, was purchased "as an incubator for a revolution". It was, explains Frankel, set up as the secret headquarters for the underground communist party and as a safe house for political fugitives. One July afternoon in 1963 the special branch carried out a successful raid. As a result Nelson Mandela and nine comrades were charged with sabotage.

Following a trial which ran from October 1963 to June 1964, life sentences were imposed on eight of the accused. The trial itself must surely rank as one of the great show trials of South African legal history; political theatre at its most profound.

On the one side were heroes of the struggle; on the other, representatives of a malevolent and illegitimate state, bent on destroying popular opposition.

It was during the trial that blacks saw in stark form the presence of at least some whites in the fight for liberation and that Mandela delivered his now-famous "it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die" speech from the dock.

Frankel has dramatically captured a heroic and uplifting drama: the trauma of families split apart by a vicious security system; the dramatic escape of Harold Wolpe and Arthur Goldreich, aided by the indomitable AnnMarie Wolpe; the unwavering principles of Bram Fischer, and the talents and warmth of Hilda Bernstein.

We are introduced to the flamboyant James Kantor, brother-in-law of Harold Wolpe, Ruth First, the Rosa Luxemburg of the resistance movement, and many others, including shadowy special branch figures. We also see in operation the arrogant prosecutorial skills of the ambitious state prosecutor, Percy Yutar.

Essentially, however, the story revolves around the Bernstein, Wolpe and First/Slovo families where the "cost of conscience" was indeed massive.

One of the many issues judiciously considered by Frankel is the disproportionate number of Jews in the liberation struggle and the ex-

tent to which "Jewishness" was a factor in their political activism.

On the surface it was of no consequence. Many Jewish activists were "openly hostile to Judaism and Jewish causes" and "Jewishness quickly ceased to be part of their self-identity". But, adds Frankel, many of these radicals came from a left-wing Lithuanian-Jewish tradition: "... even as rejectionists they were firmly within the larger family of their contentious and self-contradictory faith".

That sort of assertion is difficult to prove. A final answer explaining the disproportionate involvement of Jews (however defined) in the struggle may never be possible.

Frankel reminds us too that very often the Jewish establishment was embarrassed by its radical co-religionists. Neither can we ignore the fact that the state prosecutor was Jewish.

Rivonia's Children is a magisterial tale, inspiring and thought-provoking. Frankel is a consummate writer, concerned with motives and, perhaps more importantly, with implications.

Quite clearly those whites who challenged the apartheid order contributed to the notable degree of racial reconciliation in the new South Africa.

To quote Frankel: "The fact that even a small group of whites was willing to put aside their privileged status and fight alongside blacks for racial justice meant to Mandela that people could not be judged solely by their skin colour; all whites should be given the chance to participate in the new society."

For that alone, the Rivonia trialists and their families deserve the recognition and appreciation of white South Africans.

Of course, ultimately, all South Africans benefit from racial reconciliation.

● Milton Shain is the author of *The Roots of Antisemitism in South Africa* (Witwatersrand University Press)

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