

**Address at unveiling of plaque in memory of Ruth
First at the Ruth First residence**

11 August 2007

Ms. Gillian Slovo, daughter Cassie, the warden of the Ruth First residence, Ms. Larissa Klazinga, Ms. Juliana Jangara, Ms. Kwezilomso Nbandzayo, colleagues, friends

Welcome to this function to unveil a plaque in memory of Ruth First.

The thoughtful and exciting programme of activities of the past week organised by the women of the Ruth First Residence to commemorate the life of Ruth First has wonderfully brought alive the life of an outstanding and inspiring South African woman, intellectual, scholar, writer, journalist, activist and indomitable fighter for democracy and social justice – her critical intellectual tradition; her imaginative depth and breadth of scholarship, journalism and writing; her fearless and incisive critique; her elegance; and her persona as a revolutionary white, middle class woman who had to navigate the challenges of liberation politics, re-establish herself in exile away from her beloved country and simultaneously take care of a home and see to the needs of three daughters.

I first met Ruth First in the late 1970s as a social science undergraduate and student activist at the University of Natal. The encounter was, of course, through her scholarship and writing, which profoundly influenced the theoretical and political outlook of my generation of student activists. One article in particular, published in 1997 in the *Review of African Political Economy*, was especially influential and was the launch-pad for many of my generation to *Das Kapital* reading groups and to Marxism. Her arguments in this article also facilitated the intellectual and political shift of many of my generation away from the politics of 'race' of the Black Consciousness movement to the politics of 'race' and class of the African National Congress and the South African Communist Party.

In 1997, while preparing to deliver the annual Ruth First Educational Trust lecture at Durham University, I was struck by Gillian Slovo's description of her mother as 'Ruth the critic, the outsider who questioned orthodoxy'.

Regrettably, I did not have the pleasure of meeting Ruth in person, but this description of Ruth applies very well to another outstanding South African intellectual, scholar and activist, the late Harold Wolpe who, as a beloved intellectual and academic mentor and as a comrade and

friend, was to profoundly shape my thinking and life. And while Harold Wolpe was anything but a natty dresser, I believe that intellectually and politically he and Ruth First were kindred spirits and it is possible to experience something of her through him.

Ruth First's intellectual adventure was to investigate, through a dispassionate, yet unquestionably moral scholarship, the mutual interpenetration of past and present, social structure and conjuncture, events and processes, and human action and agency.

Her concern was the hidden structures and the conditions that both frustrate human aspirations but also make possible struggles and the triumph of justice; a search, if you like, for the mechanisms of social reproduction and transformation.

While, I suspect, she would not have insisted that rational, critical and imaginative social inquiry must necessarily serve purposes beyond cognitive ends and human social understanding, she, herself, valued intellectual inquiry as a means to more effective political and social action in the service of social justice.

However, in as much as Ruth First valued and sought to promote knowledge for social justice, she also embodied a

passionate commitment to honest, critical and independent scholarship. Like the wise little Italian who perished prematurely in Mussolini's jail, her life's work displayed an insistence that intellectual enquiry has to 'produce knowledge for politics, without cutting itself off from the objective and scientific investigation of the world' (Buci-Gluckman, 1980: 15).

She well understood – much more acutely than many of her comrade intellectuals - that if this is not the case we become trapped in a situation in which, as in the case of Stalinism, research 'becomes a mere political instrument, never producing any knowledge for politics since it is already a political ideology' (Buci-Glucksmann, 1980:15).

Ruth First's fiercely independent critical intellect meant that she was firm in the view that 'neither the theory nor the analysis of the liberation movement can ever be regarded as settled but are continuously open to theoretical and empirical testing' (Wolpe, 1985:75). Political commitment did not mean conjuring apologetic justifications for dubious strategies and policies or producing highly sanitised official histories of organisations and movements.

There was little point to research if the object was simply to confirm the theories, strategies and policies of the

liberation movement. Instead, research had the vital task of investigating these strategies and policies as well as the theoretical foundations and empirical analysis that informed them. Such research could well demonstrate that the strategies and policies rested on shaky foundations with possible dire unintended consequences, and thus had an invaluable social function.

Permit me for a moment to turn to the economic and social structure and conditions of the town in which we find ourselves commemorating the life of Ruth First. The past and present of Grahamstown has been profoundly shaped by colonialism and apartheid. Thirteen years into our democracy the legacies of colonialism and apartheid remain stark, and there is a considerable distance to be travelled for human and economic and social rights to extend beyond rhetorical pronouncements and to become substantive for the historically disadvantaged and socially marginalized inhabitants of this town.

During the past thirteen years of democracy in South Africa there have been some important economic and social gains. Yet the reality is that South Africa continues to be one of the most unequal societies on earth in terms of disparities in wealth, income, opportunities, and living conditions. The Presidency's *Development Indicators Mid-Term Review* released in late June 2007 reveals that the

Gini coefficient, which is a measure of income inequality, increased from 0.665 in 1994 to 0.685 in 2006 (2007:22). This indicates that the social grants that are provided to 12 million people and new jobs that have been created have been insufficient 'to overcome widening income inequality' (ibid.).

The percentage of income of the poorest 20% of our society has fallen since 1994 from 2.0% to 1.7%; conversely, the percentage of income of the richest 20% of our society has risen since 1994 from 72.0% to 72.5%. At the same time, the per capita income of the richest 20% has risen much faster than that of the poorest 20% (Presidency, 2007:21). 43% of South Africans continue to live on an annual income of less than R 3 000 per year (down from 50.5% in 1994) (Presidency, 2007:23).

The cleavages of 'race', class, gender and geography and their social consequences, all of which were an anathema to Ruth First and against which she struggled all her life, are still all too evident. Hunger and disease, poverty and unemployment continue to blight South Africa's democracy. Millions of citizens continue to be mired in desperate daily routines of survival while, alongside, unbridled individualism and crass materialism, and a vulgar mentality of "greed is cool" runs rampant in our society.

Patriarchy and sexism continue to stifle the realization of the talents of girls and women and the contribution they can make to economic and social development. The rape and abuse of women is a pervasive, morbid ill that destroys innumerable lives and wreaks havoc in South Africa. HIV/AIDS exacerbates the fault-lines of our society, intensifies our social challenges and has over the past decade reduced life-expectancy from almost 60 years to about 47 years.

The obdurate reality is that 'for millions of people the promise of human rights and the vision of a just and caring world remains an illusion. (S)tarvation and greed; power and powerlessness...combine in a conspiracy of the powerful against the weak that invariably deepens the faultlines that exist' in our society. Many of the inhabitants of this town and this country '...see a world where disparities in wealth, resources and opportunities have grown, (and) where human rights norms and values seem invariably to yield to the dictates of the rich and powerful; which expresses shock and outrage at arbitrary killing but at the same time is complicit in the killing of many more thorough hunger and disease – which could have been avoided' (Kollapen, 2004).

Ruth First's work epitomises incisive and informed critique and a fearless unveiling of the 'logic of inequality and the repression that it involves' and the 'search for human agency, for the means through which inequality can be undone' (Hammami, 2006:32). In this she offers a wonderful example to intellectuals, scholars and students who seek to 'respect, protect, promote and fulfil' human dignity, non-racialism and non-sexism, and social equity and justice – in short, the rights the Constitution of South Africa proclaims as the goals of our society.

Ruth First symbolises good: intellectually, politically and personally. Her life is a legacy of courageous critical scholarship, commitment to social justice and a humane society, and intellectual and political action towards these ends. Her life challenges Rhodes University to confront how, through our teaching, research and related activities, we can cultivate good; how we can educate men and women that can ensure that our political, social and intellectual life will not be banal, self-centred and mired in desperate attempts at simply survival, but rich, vibrant, incorporating question of social justice and intellectual and political actions towards a humane society.

An early twentieth century thinker and activist has written

Man's dearest possession is his life; and since it is given to him to live but once, he must so live

as to feel no torturing regrets for years without purpose; so live that, dying he can say: All my life and all my strength was given to the finest cause in the world - the liberation of mankind.

I am not certain that this can be a call to all. But Ruth First would have been familiar with this thinker and appears to have taken this proposition to heart. Yet selfless sacrifice comes at a price, and apart from the observation that she was destroyed by killers determined to preserve an unjust social order there has been little commentary on the other personal and social costs that were associated with her pursuit of her commitments.

For one, 'Ruth the critic, the outsider who questioned orthodoxy' was an insider 'outsider', and within liberation movements there are sometimes political consequences associated with fiercely independent scholarship and thinking. For another, there are profound impacts on families and friends who must live with the consequences of political involvement.

Nonetheless, wherever she may be, Ruth First can rest content in the knowledge that she indeed gave all her life and all her strength to the cause of human freedom; and that despite a growing amnesia about the past she

occupies a special place in the hearts and minds of her country women and men.