



*Hilda Bernstein*

15/04/1915 - 8/9/2006



1915 - 2006

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*Hilda Bernstein*

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House, Trafalgar Square, London WC2N 5DP*

*Friday 29<sup>th</sup> September 2006  
11 for 11.30am.*

*Tributes will be paid by Minister Ronnie Kasrils and other  
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## HILDA BERNSTEIN

# Giving a voice to those who had been silenced

HILDA BERNSTEIN, a stalwart of the liberation struggle, who died last Friday at the age of 91, was a talented writer and artist who used her talents to give a voice to those who had for so long been kept in silence.

In a message of condolence, the ANC joined many across the country in mourning the passing away of Hilda Bernstein, "a stalwart of our movement and an untiring fighter for the cause of the oppressed and exploited".

"Like her many family, friends and comrades, the ANC is deeply saddened by this loss. Like them, we nevertheless draw solace from the profound and selfless contribution she made throughout her long and rich life to the cause of freedom, democracy and equality," it said.

Bernstein was one among the few white South Africans of her generation who were prepared to stake the relative comfort of a life of privilege in pursuit of her principles and political conviction. Her commitment to the struggle for national liberation and class struggle, including her preparedness to stand for public office as a member of the Communist Party, was an indication of her willingness to defy the norms of an oppressive society, even in the face of arrest, banning, censorship and exile.

Through her writings, Bernstein exposed in unflinching detail and honesty many of the iniquities of the apartheid system. She also chronicled the struggles and sacrifices of the South African people, providing an inspiration for all those engaged in struggle and leaving for future generations a rich documentary legacy.

Having been actively involved in democratic and non-racial women's formations over many decades, "Cde Hilda was a pillar in the struggle for women's emancipation and a champion of the involvement of women in all elements of the struggle".

Hilda Bernstein was born in London, one of three daughters of Simeon and Dora Schwarz. Her father was a Bolshevik, who left the family for good when Hilda was ten years old to return to the Soviet Union. Hilda left school to work, before emigrating to South Africa in 1933 aged 18.

She soon became caught up in the intense political turmoil caused by the rise of fascism in Europe, and joined the youth branch of the Labour Party. By 1940, becoming increasingly aware of apartheid, she left for the Communist Party of South Africa, the only organisation with no racial segregation. She served on both the district committee and national executive, and in 1943 her effective public speaking got her elected for three years to the Johannesburg city council by an all-white electorate. As the only communist to achieve this, she was able to use her position to publicise the injustices of apartheid.

She met Lionel (Rusty) Bernstein through shared political involvement, and they were married in 1941.

During the 1950s she started to organise with women. In 1956 she was one of the founders of the first multi-racial women's organisation, the Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW), which was to be a stepping-stone for some of its members to later become outstanding leaders of the ANC. She played a key role in organising the historic women's march to the Union Buildings in 1956.

She also helped to found the South African Peace Council and was its national secretary until being banned.

As with so many others, Bernstein met with a succession of government attempts to stop her political activity, starting in 1946 with a conviction for assisting an illegal strike of black mineworkers. In 1953 she was banned from 26 organisations and from attending any meetings; in 1958 her renewed banning orders included a ban on writing or publishing (she was a regular writer for periodicals in South Africa, other African



countries, and Europe). In 1960 she was detained during the state of emergency following the Sharpeville massacre. She continued political work clandestinely.

In 1963 her husband Rusty was arrested at Rivonia and charged together with Nelson Mandela and others. He was acquitted, rearrested, recharged, and then released on bail. Soon after his release, Hilda fled from home as the police came to arrest her. She and Rusty crossed the frontier on foot to Botswana, ultimately arriving in London. The story of the Rivonia arrests, trial and their escape was dramatically told in her book "The World that was Ours".

In exile, Bernstein continued to be active in the ANC, including in the women's section, and also the Anti-Apartheid Movement and the British peace movement. Her public speaking and writing skills were used extensively for all these causes throughout Europe, the USA and Canada.

Bernstein also forged a new life as an artist and writer. She had many one-person shows of her etchings, drawings and paintings in London and elsewhere, and exhibited extensively in group shows of print-makers and women artists in the UK, USA, Europe and African countries. Her work has been hung several times in the Royal Academy and is in both public and private collections throughout the world. It has also been used on book jackets and illustrations, on posters as greetings cards for the Anti-Apartheid Movement.

Hilda and Rusty Bernstein came back to South Africa to take part in the first democratic elections of 1994. In 2004, Hilda Bernstein received the Luthuli Silver Award for her "contribution to the attainment of a free and democratic society" in South Africa.

In its message, the ANC drew attention to Bernstein's involvement in women's struggles, saying "we are called upon to draw on the example of Hilda Bernstein as we open up a new front in the struggle for gender equality".

"As we pay tribute to an extraordinary South African, freedom fighter and communist, let us draw inspiration from what Hilda Bernstein stood for and how she lived her life. Let us pay her the ultimate tribute, by taking forward the struggle that she pursued with determination and vigour throughout her many years," it said.

Much of what she wrote remains as a timeless reminder not only of the struggles fought, but the tasks ahead. The concluding paragraphs of her book, "For their Triumphs and for their Tears", first published in May 1978, still resonate with the challenges of today:

"In South Africa black women, the most vulnerable of all people within the apartheid state, have been forced to embark on a struggle that takes them beyond their own specific oppression. The struggle of South African women for recognition as equal citizens with equal opportunities is primarily the struggle against apartheid, for national liberation. Nor is it a question of putting one first, then taking up the other. The victory of this struggle against apartheid is the absolute condition for any fundamental change in the social status of women; the participation of the women in this struggle is the absolute condition for its success. The participation of the women is an expression not only of their desire to rid all South Africa of the curse of apartheid, but also of their deep concern for their own status as women.

"Thus under the conditions of apartheid South Africa's oppressed women cannot limit their objectives to those of simply trying to establish their legal rights in a modern industrialised society, nor can they hope to emerge with a few privileges in a male-dominated world. Instead they participate in the movement to destroy the whole basis of racial exploitation, and to open up the prospect of free development for both women and men. This is based on the understanding that the liberation of women is not simply a matter of amending laws or changing male attitudes, but of the fundamental restructuring of a society towards the aims of freedom and justice for all...

"The women of South Africa, always an integral part of this struggle, remain a key to its strength and mass development. They have come a long way: they have a long way to go."

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text a lot?

Obituary

## Hilda Bernstein

Activist and author, she fought against apartheid in South Africa and in exile

Denis Herbstein

Monday September 18, 2006

Guardian

The partnership of Hilda Bernstein, who has died in Cape Town aged 91, and her husband, Lionel "Rusty" Bernstein (obituary, June 26 2002), featured long and enduringly in the struggle against apartheid, both in South Africa and in their English exile. Perhaps Hilda's most unprecedented accomplishment was to persuade white voters to elect her, a communist, to the Johannesburg city council. But that was 1943, before Hilda and communism were red-carded by the Afrikaner nationalist referee.

Hilda Bernstein was an all-rounder - she could "talk the talk" (through her books and rousing oratory) and "walk the walk" (she was a founder, in 1956, of the non-racial Federation of South African Women; and had a conviction, in 1946, for involvement in a black mineworkers' strike). But alongside her feminism was a devotion to her home and her four children. A colleague at the Johannesburg publishers where Hilda edited a family magazine, recalls her rushing home early to make naartjie (mandarin) marmalade.

Hilda Watts grew up in London's East End, the daughter of Jewish Russian emigrants. Her father, Simeon Schwarz was a Bolshevik and was made the Soviet trade attaché in London in 1919, but was recalled to Moscow in 1925, never to return. His widow, Dora, emigrated to Johannesburg with Hilda, the youngest of the three daughters, in 1932. Hilda was quickly active in the youth branch of the Labour party, but in 1940 joined the Communist party. A fine public speaker with an exceptional organisational ability, she was elected to the council by the voters of Hillbrow, the most (or only) avant garde of the suburbs, and certainly helped by South Africa being an ally of Moscow. But it gave her a further insight into the woeful plight of urban Africans, particularly the migrant gold miners.

Throughout the 1950s, Hilda worked tirelessly to better the condition of African women, despite being banned from 28 organisations. She helped organise the march in 1956 in which 20,000 women converged on the Union Buildings, the seat of government in Pretoria, to demonstrate against the pass laws. And she was a founder and national secretary of the Peace Council until it, too, was banned. But there were ways to carry on the work clandestinely, but when, in 1958, her writing and magazine work was banned, it was a serious financial blow.

She had married Rusty, an architect, in 1941. He had drafted the Freedom Charter, the founding document of the liberation struggle. But his ability to pay the bills for a growing family was likewise hindered by political intrusions, notably the four years, 1956-60, as a defendant in



the Treason Trial, and then his and Hilda's detention in the State of Emergency that followed the shootings at Sharpeville in 1960.

And yet they managed. In her book *The World that was Ours* (1967), she recounts that their house in Observatory "breathed and murmured with people and sound - people coming to swim, to talk, to borrow books, the children's friends of all ages; people who never rang the bell or knocked, but called a greeting as they came in." The house "shines brightly at us from one side of the mirror; on the other are the homes and lives of our friends and comrades in the [black] locations".

Rusty was the sole accused in the 1964 Rivonia trial to be acquitted. Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and other ANC leaders were jailed for life. He was immediately re-arrested, then surprisingly bailed, giving the couple the option of quitting a hopeless political stage. And yet the decision was agonising. As the police closed in, Hilda still did the housewifely thing, and took the clothes out of the washing machine and then slipped out through a secret passage in the back garden. They were taken across the border into the then British Bechuanaland and arrived in England in their forties.

Rusty worked as an architect, while Hilda launched a career as a graphic artist. She created book covers, and African National Congress and Anti-apartheid Movement posters and greeting cards, and combined that with shows of her etchings around the world. She also chronicled the big story with books on the women's struggle, *For Their Triumphs and Their Tears*, 1978; the murdered activist, *Steve Biko, No 46 - Steve Biko*, 1978; and a series of interviews on her countrymen and women's experience in exile. Her novel *Death is Part of the Process* (1983) won the Sinclair prize and was made into a BBC drama. Those who heard her at meetings were left in no doubt about the seriousness of events in South Africa. After the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, in 1968, she left the Communist party.

They moved from London to Herefordshire in 1981 where guests enjoyed the conversation and the cuisine, though non-smokers endured a ban on the weed as unalterable as an edict from Pretoria. They returned for a visit to South Africa in 1994 to work for an ANC victory.

They were living in Kidlington, near Oxford, when Rusty died. Soon after, Mandela, on a visit to Britain, drove over to talk about old times. In 2003, Hilda returned to South Africa and lived in a flat in the Cape Town seaside suburb of Sea Point, near her son Keith.

Last week her doctor told her there was not long to go. She phoned her children in Europe to say goodbye. She is survived by children, Toni, Patrick, Frances and Keith, seven grandchildren and four great grandchildren.

· Hilda Bernstein, political activist, born May 15 1915; died September 9 2006  
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## Hilda Bernstein Fought Apartheid With Her Heart

By Glenn Frankel  
Washington Post Staff Writer  
Wednesday, September 13, 2006; C01

The first time I met Hilda Bernstein, who died of heart failure Friday at age 91, she dumped a manila envelope full of old shirt collars on her kitchen table, each one covered in intricate handwriting. These were the notes that her husband, Rusty, had smuggled out to her in his dirty laundry from an isolation cell in Pretoria, South Africa. He spent 88 days in solitary confinement before he was charged with sabotage and put on trial alongside Nelson Mandela in 1964.


Hilda and Rusty were left-wing activists who worked closely with Mandela and other black leaders for more than two decades in the struggle against the system of white domination known as apartheid. Their generation is dying out, but before they finish leaving the stage, it's worth recalling what they endured and the lessons their lives teach about courage and what it takes to oppose an evil regime and create a new nation.

The Bernsteins were among a handful of middle-class, middle-aged whites who had nice homes, good jobs and servants, yet risked it all by fighting for racial equality even after South Africa descended into a police state. They led double lives, maintaining an outward routine of bourgeois respectability while participating in increasingly dangerous underground political activity. And they paid a huge price: Some were imprisoned, others exiled and still others killed.

The Bernsteins were among the lucky ones, relatively speaking. Rusty was acquitted at the legendary Rivonia Trial, at which Mandela and seven other comrades were sentenced to life imprisonment. Rusty was rearrested immediately, but a few days later was released on bail due to a miscommunication between police and prosecutors. He and Hilda fled the country and settled in Britain, where they lived for more than 30 years with their four children.

I first went to visit them at their modest home in a small town outside Oxford in 1996. I wanted to write a book about them and their comrades. Soon after she fled South Africa, Hilda wrote her own account of their ordeal, "The World That Was Ours." Hilda's description of the tension and heartbreak of juggling family life and political activism at a time when the secret police were tightening the vise on their lives was gripping, and I

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wanted to learn more.

At bottom I had one enduring question: What was it that compelled them to put their lives and their families in jeopardy? It wasn't hard to understand why Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki and their black comrades, brave as they were, had risked their lives for their own people. But Hilda and Rusty could have looked the other way, as so many other whites did, and continued to enjoy the comforts of being a member of the privileged elite in a country where the color of your skin dictated all of your life's choices and opportunities.

When I rang their bell, I was expecting to meet dour, saintlike figures occupying some sort of sacred fourth dimension beyond the reach of mere mortals. But Hilda and Rusty were warm, humorous and self-deprecating people without a hint of moral superiority. Hilda was a tiny woman with a pixie haircut. By that time, Rusty's curly red hair had turned completely gray. And they were brutally honest about their personal shortcomings and those of the movement of which they had been a part. They worried that they had inflicted emotional damage on their children by taking risks for a political cause.

"I don't quite understand it myself," Hilda said, when I asked why she had stuck with something so difficult and dangerous for so long. But as time went on, some of the strands of their bravery became apparent.

Part of it was their abiding friendship and commitment to Mandela and their other comrades. Hilda said that she had no idea when she began that things would deteriorate so badly -- "it all happened so gradually, and each step along the way I held out hope that things would get better." Part of it was the fact that they were communists who had faith that history was on their side. And part of it, I suspect, was that many of them were Jews and recent immigrants to South Africa who felt alienated from the white mainstream.

Hilda was born in London in 1915, the youngest of three daughters whose parents had immigrated to Britain from czarist Russia. She moved to South Africa in 1932 seeking work, got involved in Communist Party organizing there, and met and married Lionel Bernstein, a fellow activist who was born in Johannesburg in 1920. She worked as a writer in advertising and journalism and served as a City Council member in the mid-1940s. Besides "The World That Was Ours," she wrote or edited three other works of nonfiction and a prize-winning novel. She was also an artist and a singer.

In the 1940s, political activism had been something of an adventure, a chance to break out of the suffocating confines of white society. People such as Mandela and Sisulu were regular visitors to the Bernsteins' home. The Bernsteins were first charged with sedition in 1946 for supporting a strike by black miners, but pleaded guilty to a lesser charge. After that they were rounded up periodically and their house raided for banned literature. The government outlawed the Communist Party in 1948, but Hilda and Rusty maintained their participation clandestinely and tightened their ties with the African National



Congress, the leading black organization fighting apartheid. Rusty was one of the 156 defendants in the marathon Treason Trial of 1956. The case against them collapsed after three years.

In 1960, the government banned the ANC and began tightening restrictions on activists of all kinds. Rusty was "banned" -- put under house arrest and regular surveillance. In response to the crackdown, Mandela and his allies formed an underground movement and launched a sabotage campaign. Their stated purpose was to "bring the regime to its senses," but the turn to violence had the opposite effect. Armed with new anti-terrorism laws, the government cracked down harder. Mandela was tracked down and imprisoned in 1962. The following year, Rusty and 17 others were arrested at the Communist Party's secret headquarters in Rivonia, a suburb of Johannesburg.

Rusty was held without charge for nearly three months and not allowed to see a lawyer or his family. He knew he was likely to be charged under the new anti-sabotage law that stipulated hanging as a possible punishment. His smuggled notes to Hilda reflected his despair. "I feel as though I am down here amongst the dead," he wrote to her. He said his love for his family "is slowly breaking my heart, because involved in it is tremendous sorrow for the awful mess I have made of all your lives."

Rusty told me he promised himself that if he ever got out of prison he would put his family first and forgo active politics. The state had no evidence that he had been actively involved in the sabotage campaign, and Rusty was one of two defendants freed after the Rivonia Trial.

After escaping to Britain, he and Hilda continued to participate in the anti-apartheid movement, but they fulfilled their promise to their family by keeping a lower public profile. Hilda resigned from the Communist Party after Moscow put down the Czech revolution in 1968. Rusty never did resign, but he told me he had long recognized that Lenin and Stalin had perverted the notion of communism as an idealistic movement.

After Mandela was released from prison in 1990 and South Africa became a multiracial democracy, Rusty and Hilda received honorary university degrees and a small government pension. After Rusty died of a heart attack in 2002, Mandela came to Oxford to visit Hilda. She decided to move back to South Africa, and spent her last days in an assisted-living facility in Cape Town.

"The meaning of life is not a fact to be discovered, but a choice that you make about the way you live," she once told me. Hilda chose to remain faithful to her friends and her cause and her deepest beliefs.

*Glenn Frankel is The Post's former Southern Africa bureau chief and the author of "Rivonia's Children: Three Families and the Cost of Conscience in White South Africa."*



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## COMMENT & ANALYSIS

### What we can learn from Hilda Bernstein

Pregs Govender: COMMENT

26 September 2006 06:00

In school in the 1960s the history we were taught was written from the perspective of the coloniser and the missionary. From this perspective, the colonised peoples of the world had no history. We were taught that all our countries – Africa, Australia, Asia, the Americas – were “discovered” by the colonisers. Before the coloniser, we were all “backward, primitive” peoples. Africa was characterised as the “heart of darkness”. “His story” was the story of the great man and his wars of conquest.

The generation of 1976 searched for the truth. “His story” kept well hidden. To imagine an alternative future we needed to learn about our past. We learnt that the “heart of darkness” narrative concealed the story of Patrice Lumumba, assassinated by the secret service agencies of Belgium, Britain, apartheid South Africa and the United States. The first democratically elected prime minister of the Congo, Lumumba, was replaced by men of greed, such as Mobutu. Contrary to Lumumba’s vision of utilising the wealth of Africa to eradicate poverty, Mobutu allowed the colonisers to continue to plunder the wealth of the Congo.

Among those who told the truth about apartheid South Africa was Hilda Bernstein. Unlike most other truth-tellers, Hilda wrote about the women of our country. To write “her story” requires a different eye, a different consciousness, an ability to see those made most invisible, to hear those most silenced, to value those most devalued. In her book, *For Their Triumphs and Their Tears*, I learnt about the contribution of women such as Annie Silinga, Lilian Ngoyi, Ruth First and Mary Moodley. Their lives, like the women I began working with in the Natal Organisation of Women, such as Victoria Mxenge and Florence Mkhize, inspired me. I felt blessed to live in the same country as these women, to be part of the same movement, to be able to claim these women as my ancestors.

In *The Rift*, Hilda shares part of her motivation in writing stories about people, both known and unknown: “I wanted to record something of the lives of our people and let them speak a few words before it was all lost.” Hilda wrote as an activist-intellectual – many of those she wrote about were her comrades. In Hilda’s portraits women raised the challenge of the endless search for balance between the personal and the political. They raised it not as a challenge that



Anti-apartheid activists Hilda and Rusty Bernstein. Rusty was the only one found not guilty at the infamous Rivonia Trial

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only women needed to address, but one that men needed to address; that society and the state needed to address.

In one of Helen Joseph's accounts of the Federation of South African Women (Fedsaw), she notes: "In 1954, Fedsaw was started by Ray Alexander and Hilda Bernstein -- two very brilliant women -- Hilda was the only member of the Communist Party who ever got elected into the City Council. She was also a commercial artist who was busy bringing up a family." Helen also notes that: "We were so involved in the general struggle that women's rights got pushed aside to an extent. We firmly believed that when we got our freedom, it would be universal freedom. I think we were very naive about this."

In Ayi Kwei Armah's book, *The Eloquence of the Scribes*, Armah addresses a central challenge for those who record our lives: "If we limit our appreciation of tradition from impotence to power without taking care to explore the weaknesses inside achieved power ... the downward journey of power into impotence, of health into decay, of integrity into corruption ... we risk being unable to break through the futile cycle of heroic achievement, degenerating into abject disintegration."

I pay tribute today by revisiting the words and lessons shared by one of our most eloquent scribes. The last book Hilda Bernstein wrote, *A Life of One's Own*, is about the lives of her father and her sister. In learning about her father's death, in adolescence, Hilda, who had last seen him when she was 10 years old, writes: "All I could say as I wept was, 'I wanted to see him again; I just wanted to see him.' Now I understand why, all my life, I have had a longing to be loved. Only many years later did I realise that his death saved him from a harsher fate. At least he did not know the bitter disillusionment of seeing his dream of a brave new world end in the disaster of the Stalin era. Nor become another victim to add to the statistics of loyal, dedicated communists who were sent to die in the camps as 'enemies of the people'."

In trying to understand why it was that good people were silent, Hilda writes: "Party discipline, the absolute submission to the party leadership had instilled this attitude and the party loyalists could see no possibility of changing things. They believed that as long as they stayed in their posts, they would help to change the situation within their leadership. It was no new dilemma, and arises -- less starkly -- within our own democratic societies."

Hilda explores what enabled some to discern what was happening: "Once you are outside the magic circle the perspective changes. The inconsistencies give rise to doubts that sully the ideals. And doubts give rise to questions; and questions mean you start measuring what you are supposed to believe against what you actually see."

Hilda concludes her book with an incisive paragraph: "What I have written is only an episode in the private lives of two people -- insignificant and of no historical importance. I have taken some small spots from a vast panorama. This panorama is part of Russia's horrific period of Stalinism, the aftermath of the First World War, and the epic history of the Second. No one's life is a vacuum. Their history is your history, as your lives will be the ground from which your children will grow. A history so terrible and so beautiful, so base and so heroic, may seem strange and hard to comprehend, but it is irrevocably a part of your life too. What right have we to forget?"

In South Africa today, when the vision and values of an entire movement are reduced to two individuals, we have to revisit the question of the nature of leadership and of power. Hilda's words warn us away from the cult of the great man as leader; from reducing union, organisation or party to conduit for such cult. Her words can guide us towards nurturing and respecting the

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
leadership and power within every single human being that was the hallmark of the best tradition of our movement. "What right have we to forget?"

*Pregs Govender is an activist and former ANC MP. This is an edited version of her address at the memorial service for Hilda Bernstein held in Cape Town on September 16*

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21 September 2006 15:34

## Hilda Bernstein

### Anti-apartheid campaigner

**Published: 20 September 2006**

**Hilda Watts, political activist, writer and artist: born London 15 April 1915; married 1941 Lionel Bernstein (died 2002; two sons, two daughters); died Cape Town 8 September 2006.**

Hilda Bernstein was a woman of many talents who devoted most of her long life to the promotion of equality for all South Africans regardless of race, colour, or gender. Small, attractive and feisty, she was one of the few survivors from among the leaders of the legal Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), which was banned in 1950.

As Hilda Watts she was the first, and only, member of that Party to be elected to public office by members of an all-white constituency or ward. She shared the view of her comrades that her election to the Johannesburg City Council in 1943 was a bit of a fluke - a product of the wartime popularity of the Soviet Union and of local politics. She was in 1945 one of two women elected to the central committee of the CPSA - the other was the late Ray Alexander, with whom she worked closely in the establishment of the Federation of South African Women.

During almost 40 years in exile in London and Oxford, she worked tirelessly for the African National Congress and the Anti-Apartheid Movement as an organiser, lecturer and writer.

Born in London in 1915, she was one of the three daughters of Samuel and Dora Watts, who were both Russian Jewish immigrants. Her father, a Bolshevik, was born Simeon Schwarz. When Hilda was 10 he responded to an order from the Soviet Communist Party to return to Russia to help build the revolution. Hilda never saw him again - he died there from typhoid seven years later.

Her mother never understood how he could have put politics before family, but 40 years later Hilda was herself, with her husband and political partner, Lionel "Rusty" Bernstein, whom she had married in 1941, to face the same dilemma. She had moved to South Africa with her mother in 1933, and had progressed politically through the membership of the white Labour Party to the non-racial CPSA in 1940.

Hilda Bernstein's most important political work inside South Africa related to the establishment of the non-racial Federation of South African Women in 1954 - she drafted the "Women's Charter". With her husband she was also deeply involved in the organisation of the Congress of the People in 1955 - Rusty was the main draftsman of the Freedom Charter.

She had been charged in connection with the black mineworkers' strike in 1946 and was banned from trade union work in 1953. She was also detained during the state of emergency in 1960. She described her husband's, and her own, experience of the Rivonia trial, and their dramatic flight into exile through Bechuanaland and Northern Rhodesia, where they were declared prohibited immigrants by the outgoing British colonial government, in *The World That Was Ours* (1967).

Her sensitivity to the issues surrounding political exile, separation and loss, were shown in her two most original books, *A Life of One's Own* (2002) in which she examined the lives of her father and of an elder sister who had travelled to the Soviet Union and was compelled to remain there through the privations of the Second World War, and *The Rift: the exile experience of South Africans* (1994).

The latter was an anthology based on more than 300 interviews with exiled South Africans which she began to conduct in 1989 at a time when the return from exile did not appear imminent. The majority of the interviews were with members of the African National Congress and its affiliates, but it is not a partisan work and draws on the experience of exiles of widely differing political persuasions, including the hit-squad commander Dirk Coetzee and the politically unaligned actor Anthony Sher. It remains her most substantial publication and the only serious treatment of an important, but neglected, subject.



She was equally alive to the problems of exile, which she saw as "a desertion", and to the problems of return to South Africa by people who had been compelled to become "citizens of the world". She returned to South Africa with her husband for the installation of President Nelson Mandela in 1994, but she did not return to live in the country until after Rusty's death in 2002.

They had not enjoyed exile in a country that Hilda always found cold - both climatically and emotionally - but they had enjoyed a model political marriage and had brought up children who, unlike the children of many activists, had little cause to resent their parents' political activities.

Hilda Bernstein's other publications included *For Their Triumphs and For Their Tears* (1975), a study of women under apartheid, and *Death is Part of the Process* (1983), a prize-winning novel based on the early days of the ANC's armed struggle which became a two-part BBC television film (1986).

She began work as an artist in 1972 and her etchings, drawings and paintings were exhibited at the Royal Academy and featured in many one-man and group exhibitions in the United Kingdom and South Africa.

Hugh Macmillan

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## Obituary: Hilda Bernstein

**The veteran anti-apartheid campaigner, Hilda Bernstein, who has died of heart failure in Cape Town, aged 91, devoted most of her life to the cause of true democracy in South Africa.**

She was the wife of the late Rusty Bernstein who was tried for treason along with Nelson Mandela at the Rivonia trial in 1964. Together, the couple campaigned for the end to white racist rule.

She was a founding member of the Federation of South African Women, the first non-racial women's organisation in South Africa.

She was born Hilda Schwarz in London in 1915, the youngest of three sisters. Her father was a Bolshevik who left the family for good when Hilda was 10, to return to the Soviet Union to try to build a utopian socialist society there.

While trying to get a posting back to London to be reunited with his family, he died.

When she was 18, Hilda emigrated to South Africa where she lived a comfortable middle-class life. But as she became increasingly aware of the oppressive and divisive nature of the apartheid system, she joined the Communist Party, the only organisation with no racial segregation.

It was here that she met Lionel (Rusty) Bernstein and the couple married in 1941.

### Banned

With a reputation as a fiery orator, Hilda Bernstein served as a City Councillor in Johannesburg from 1943-46, the only Communist to be elected to public office on a "whites only" vote.

Both she and her husband were active in the early days of the South African Communist Party and the African National Congress.

They suffered banning and detention by the South African state, not to mention being humiliated by the authorities who regarded them as white traitors.

By 1953, she was banned from 26 organisations and from attending any meetings. Later, her banning orders were extended to include writing and publishing.

At the Rivonia trial, which saw Nelson Mandela and other anti-apartheid activists sentenced to life imprisonment, Rusty Bernstein was the only one found not guilty.

But police harassment made his life unbearable and the couple were forced into exile, having to leave their children behind.

They crossed on foot to Botswana, and ultimately reached London. Later, Hilda Bernstein told the story of their arrests, trial and escape, in her book *The World That was Ours*.

In exile, Bernstein was an active member of the External Mission of the ANC, and a regular speaker on behalf of ANC and Anti-Apartheid Movement, both in Britain and abroad.



She toured extensively in many countries of Europe, Canada and since 1994, South Africa, on behalf of the ANC and the Women's League.

Eventually, she and her husband settled in England, near Oxford, where Rusty Bernstein worked as an architect, and Hilda continued to write. She also became an artist, exhibiting her work in London, France and various countries in Africa.

After Rusty Bernstein died in Oxford in 2002, Hilda moved back to South Africa. She leaves four children, seven grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.

A statement by the ruling African National Congress, the organisation she spent years championing, said "The liberation movement mourns a tireless political activist whose lifelong commitment to the cause of the South African people will continue as an inspiration for generations to come."

Story from BBC NEWS:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/world/africa/5339696.stm>

Published: 2006/09/12 16:48:09 GMT

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**Political activist, Hilda Bernstein dies at 91**

September 09, 2006, 19:30

Hilda Bernstein, the veteran political activist, author and artist, has died at the age of 91. She died in Cape Town after suffering an aneurysm. President Thabo Mbeki honoured Bernstein with the National Order of Luthuli two years ago for her role in the liberation struggle. A close friend, Beata Lipman, says Bernstein was a "bright and sparkling woman."

Lipman said: "She was the only communist member of the all-white Johannesburg City Council. She took part in all our women's activities - the march 50 years ago, all those sorts of things. She wrote magnificently and did some beautiful work in the art field. She was much loved and a wonderful person."

Born in London in 1915, she was educated at State schools and had no higher education. She relocated to South Africa in 1932 where she worked in advertising agencies, later publishing and journalism. In South Africa she became active in organisations associated with the struggle for national liberation. She was a member of the South African Labour Party League of Youth until 1940. After her stint in the Labour Party, she became a member of the South African Communist Party.

**Bernstein banned by ministerial decree**

Bernstein was a founding member of the Federation of South African Women - the first non-racial women's organisation in South Africa and a founder of the South African Peace Council and its national secretary until the organisation's banning. In 1946 Hilda was charged with sedition arising out of a mineworkers' strike. In 1953 she was banned by ministerial decree from 26 organisations and all meetings, including bans on writing and being published.

In 1960, Hilda was detained under State of Emergency without charge following the Sharpeville shootings. In 1964 after the Rivonia trial, she escaped from home as police came to make an arrest and managed to cross the frontier on foot to Botswana. While in exile, she was a member of the External Mission, and of the Women's section of the ANC. She was also an active member and regular speaker on behalf of ANC and Anti-Apartheid Movement in Britain.

Bernstein's late husband, Rusty, was the only Rivonia Trialist to be acquitted of sabotage in 1964. She is survived by four children and seven grandchildren.

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## Veteran anti-apartheid activist dies at 91

The Associated Press

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 11, 2006

JOHANNESBURG, South Africa Veteran anti-apartheid activist and author Hilda Bernstein has died, her family said Monday. She was 91.

Bernstein died of heart failure at her home in Cape Town on Friday night, her son Keith said.

She was the wife of the late Rusty Bernstein, an anti-apartheid activist who was tried for treason alongside Nelson Mandela in the famous Rivonia Trial in 1964. Both she and her husband fought tirelessly in South Africa and abroad for the end of white racist rule.

"The liberation movement mourns a tireless political activist whose lifelong commitment to the cause of the South African people will continue as an inspiration for generations to come," the ruling African National Congress said in a statement.

"Bernstein will be remembered among other things for her work in chronicling the lives and struggles of the South African people, and in particular in documenting the struggle of South Africa's women," the ANC said.

Bernstein was a founding member of the Federation of South African Women, the first nonracial women's organization in South Africa.

Bernstein was born in London in 1915, the youngest of three sisters. She emigrated to South Africa in 1932 and worked in advertising, later publishing and journalism.

Known as a fiery orator, Bernstein served as a City Councilor in Johannesburg from 1943 to 1946 - the only communist to be elected to public office on a 'whites only' vote.

Both she and her husband were active in the early days of the South African Communist Party and the African National Congress. They suffered banning and detention by the apartheid state.

At the Rivonia trial, which sentenced Mandela and other anti-apartheid leaders to life imprisonment, Rusty was the only one found not guilty and was discharged. But police harassment made life afterward so untenable that the couple were forced into exile, leaving their children behind.

They crossed the border to Botswana on foot - a journey described in Bernstein's book "The World That Was Ours." The couple eventually made their way into Zambia but

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were declared prohibited immigrants by the British authorities and forced to travel overland to Tanzania.

In exile, Bernstein was an active member of the External Mission of the ANC, and a regular speaker on behalf of ANC and Anti-Apartheid Movement, both in Britain and abroad. She toured extensively in many countries of Europe, Canada and since 1994, South Africa, on behalf of the ANC and the Women's League.

Eventually they settled in England where Rusty Bernstein worked as an architect. They returned to South Africa after the 1994 democratic elections.

She also was a writer and artist who exhibited in London, France and various countries of Africa. Her work has been used as book jackets, book illustrations, as posters and as cards for the Anti-Apartheid Movement.

Bernstein's publications include "The World That Was Ours", "The Terrorism of Torture" and "For Their Triumphs and For Their Tears."

Rusty Bernstein died in Oxford in 2002 and later that year his widow returned to South Africa.

She is survived by 4 children, 7 grandchildren and 4 great-grandchildren. There was no immediate word on funeral arrangements. The funeral will be held Saturday.

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## SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER

[http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/national/1105AP\\_Obit\\_Bernstein.html](http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/national/1105AP_Obit_Bernstein.html)

Monday, September 11, 2006 · Last updated 4:59 p.m. PT

### Anti-apartheid activist dies at 91

By CELEAN JACOBSON  
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

JOHANNESBURG, South Africa -- Hilda Bernstein, an anti-apartheid activist and author whose husband was tried for treason alongside Nelson Mandela, has died. She was 91.

Bernstein died of heart failure at her home in Cape Town on Friday night, her son Keith said.

"The liberation movement mourns a tireless political activist whose lifelong commitment to the cause of the South African people will continue as an inspiration for generations to come," the ruling African National Congress said in a statement.

Bernstein's husband, Rusty, and Mandela were tried along with other anti-apartheid activists in the infamous Rivonia Trial in 1964. Mandela received a sentence of life imprisonment, while Rusty Bernstein was the only defendant acquitted and freed.

But police harassment made life afterward so difficult for the Bernsteins that the couple was forced into exile, leaving their children behind. They crossed the border to Botswana on foot - a journey described in Hilda Bernstein's book "The World That Was Ours."

In exile, Hilda Bernstein was an active member of the ANC and a regular speaker for the Anti-Apartheid Movement group in Britain and abroad.

The couple eventually settled in Britain but returned to South Africa after the 1994 democratic elections that made Mandela the country's president.

Hilda Bernstein was a founding member of the Federation of South African Women, the first nonracial women's organization in South Africa. She also was a writer and artist whose work has been used as book jackets and illustrations, posters and cards for the AAM.

Bernstein was born in London in 1915 and emigrated to South Africa in 1932, working in advertising, publishing and journalism.

A fiery orator, she served as a city councilor in Johannesburg from 1943 to 1946 as the only communist elected to public office in a "whites only" vote.

She and her husband were active in the early days of the South African Communist Party and the ANC. They both suffered banning and detention by the apartheid state.



Rusty Bernstein died in 2002.



September 13, 2006

## Hilda Bernstein, 91, Author and Anti-Apartheid Activist, Dies

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

JOHANNESBURG, Sept. 12 (AP) — Hilda Bernstein, an anti-apartheid activist and author whose husband was tried for treason in South Africa alongside Nelson Mandela, died Friday at her home in Cape Town. She was 91.

The cause was heart failure, her son Keith said.

Ms. Bernstein's husband, Rusty, and Mr. Mandela were tried along with other anti-apartheid activists in the Rivonia Trial in 1964. Mr. Mandela received a life sentence, while Mr. Bernstein was the only defendant acquitted and freed.

But police harassment made life so difficult for the Bernsteins, a white couple, that they were forced into exile, leaving their children behind. They crossed the border into Botswana on foot — a journey described in Hilda Bernstein's book "The World That Was Ours."

In exile, Ms. Bernstein was an active member of the African National Congress and a regular speaker for the Anti-Apartheid Movement organization in Britain and abroad.

The couple eventually settled in Britain, but returned to South Africa after the 1994 democratic elections, which made Mr. Mandela president.

Ms. Bernstein was a founding member of the Federation of South African Women, the first multiracial women's organization in South Africa. She was also an artist, and her work has been used as book jackets and illustrations, posters and cards for the Anti-Apartheid Movement.

Ms. Bernstein was born in London in 1915 and emigrated to South Africa in 1932, working in advertising, publishing and journalism.



A fiery orator, she served as a city councilor in Johannesburg from 1943 to 1946 as the only Communist elected to public office in a "whites only" vote.

She and her husband were active in the early days of the South African Communist Party and the African National Congress. Rusty Bernstein died in 2002.

She is survived by four children, seven grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.

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Sep 11, 7:59 PM EDT

**Anti-Apartheid Activist Dies at 91**

By CELEAN JACOBSON  
Associated Press Writer

JOHANNESBURG, South Africa (AP) — Hilda Bernstein, an anti-apartheid activist and author whose husband was tried for treason alongside Nelson Mandela, has died. She was 91.

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Rusty Bernstein died in 2002.

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