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# MARRIED TO THE STRUGGLE

HILDA AND RUSTY  
BERNSTEIN RECENTLY  
VISITED SOUTH AFRICA  
FOR THE FIRST TIME  
AFTER BEING IN EXILE  
FOR NEARLY 30 YEARS...

By SAUL MOLOBI

**L**ISTENING to Hilda and Rusty Bernstein telling their life story is like being taken on a history tour of the struggle for democracy in South Africa.

The former exiles have been devoted to each other almost as long as they have been involved in the struggle. They met in 1937 when both were members of the South African Labour Party (SALP).

"Our political involvement did not create problems for our marriage because we met through politics," Rusty (72) smiles.

In 1939 Hilda became a full-time organiser for the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA). Rusty joined two years later as an organiser too.

"The CPSA developed non-racialism in South Africa. It was the only organisation that served as a bridge for people from different racial groups," Hilda (76) says.

Rusty agrees but adds: "We should be careful not to see this as a one-way flow of ideas from the CPSA into the African National Congress (ANC). The latter also taught the CPSA the importance of nationalism in our liberation politics."

## World war II

**A**s they worked together in the CPSA, so the couple's relationship flourished and they got married in 1941.

pic: Saul Molobi/Learn & Teach



LIVING HISTORY: Rusty and Hilda Bernstein

It was World War II at the time and the following year Rusty joined the army. He was stationed in Italy until 1946.

Back home, Hilda was elected to the Johannesburg City Council. "The CPSA advised me to stand for the elections," she says. "Because I was a good public speaker, I won. I represented the Hillbrow constituency. I was young, and the only woman on the council.

"I found it difficult to work in the council. Many members were conservative. They wanted to get rid of me. In 1946, they put some conservative parts of Parktown under my constituency. They knew that most of the residents there wouldn't vote for me. So when elections were held, I lost my seat."

It was a memorable year for other reasons too, Hilda recalls. "Rusty was back ... We were working together for the CPSA ... There was the African mineworkers' strike ...

"Communists worked hard to ensure that the strike succeeded. According to the law, the strike was illegal. But we defied this

law. We printed leaflets and pamphlets popularising the strike."

The Bernsteins were arrested at the end of the strike with other CPSA members, and charged with \*sedition. They were given suspended sentences.

In 1948, two years after the strike, the National Party came to power. The level of repression increased and in 1950 the CPSA \*dissolved itself, because it expected to be banned.

The Bernsteins were harassed. "This forced us to lead a divided life. We never told each other what meetings we were attending. It was part of our discipline," Rusty remembers.

## The party underground

**R**usty helped build underground units of the CPSA. "We secretly relaunched in 1953. We changed the name to the South African Communist Party (SACP). Only highly disciplined activists were recruited into its ranks."

Throughout the fifties, Rusty and Hilda were very involved in opposing apartheid. In 1956 they helped to organise the Congress of the People at which the Freedom Charter was adopted.

They were later arrested together with 154 other political leaders, including Nelson Mandela, and charged with "high treason". Their trial was one of the longest in the history of South Africa — beginning in 1956 and ending in 1960.

The imprisonment of the leaders was a blessing in disguise, according to Rusty, because "it brought together leaders of the Congress movement from all the provinces of the country in one prison. Some of us had never met before, but now we had a chance to make strategies which we were to apply nationally."

When the leaders were released, they embarked on some of the campaigns they agreed upon in detention. The government responded by declaring the State of Emergency in 1960 and banning the ANC. Both Hilda and Rusty were detained for three and four months \*respectively.

*' Listening to Hilda and Rusty Bernstein telling their life story is like being taken on a history tour of the struggle for democracy in South Africa '*

pic: ANC/DIP



**TREASON TRIAL:** Nelson Mandela (second from right) and other political leaders arriving for the treason trial in Johannesburg in 1956. Rusty and Hilda Bernstein were among the accused.

After that, Rusty went underground. He was eventually arrested, along with other leaders, at Rivonia outside Johannesburg. He was the only Rivonia trialist to be acquitted of high treason at the famous trial which followed.

The judge said the state had "failed to prove beyond reasonable doubt" that Rusty was a member of Umkhonto we Sizwe's High Command.

But the state was determined to catch Rusty — he was arrested again before leaving the courtroom. He was charged under the Suppression of Communism Act and released on bail. At that time, Hilda was on the run from the police.

Hilda remembers: "We were terribly frustrated. We didn't want to leave the country. But things were too tough for us. Although we were prepared to be imprisoned, we had to think about the future of our children."

The couple decided to go into exile.

**Life in exile**

**W**ith the help of Thomas Nkobi, now the ANC's treasurer-general, they made their way to Tanzania, via Botswana and Zambia.

The couple eventually settled in London, where their four children joined them. It was a difficult time for the family, according to Rusty, because they had to start afresh with "no money, no furniture and no close friends".

The ANC community in London soon grew rapidly, however, and "within a few months, one felt at home," Hilda says.

"We didn't feel the worst pangs of exile. Rusty worked full-time for the ANC and the SACP — building their units and writing political papers."

Hilda was a member of the ANC's Women's Section, where she worked on the journal *Women's Voice*. She was also involved in the British Anti-Apartheid Movement and the World Peace Council.

She didn't work full-time for the ANC, however. She was a journalist and wrote a novel, *Death is part of the process*.

The couple are unsure if they will return to South Africa permanently. They foresee problems. "If we come back," Hilda explains, "we'll be coming to do nothing. We are too old to find new jobs. We can't afford to live far away from our children, who won't be coming back."

Although they cannot see a better tomorrow for themselves in South Africa, Hilda and Rusty Bernstein are pleased with the present political changes. "The fruits of our long, bitter struggle can now become a reality," Hilda believes. ♦

**DICTIONARY**

**sedition** — speech or actions which undermine the authority of the state  
**dissolved** — to dissolve an organisation means to officially end it  
**respectively** — Hilda and Rusty were detained for three and four months respectively means Hilda was detained for three months and Rusty for four  
**acquitted** — if someone is acquitted of a crime in a court of law, it is formally declared that they did not commit the crime

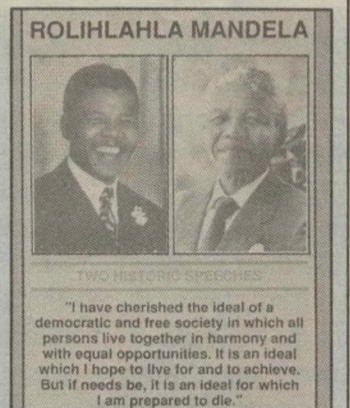
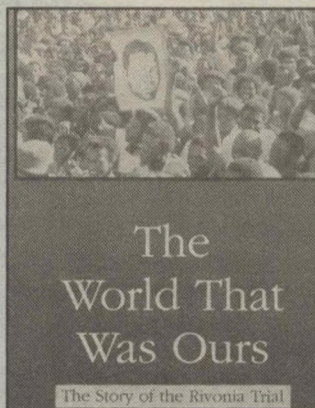
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This month LEARN & TEACH is giving away two publications — Hilda Bernstein's book, *The World that was Ours*, and *Two Historic Speeches* of Nelson Mandela.

Five readers can win a copy of Bernstein's book, and another 50 readers can win a copy of Mandela's speeches.

All you have to do to win one of these publications is answer the questions below. Then put the answers on a postcard and send it to this address:

**LEARN & TEACH BOOK COMPETITION**  
 PO Box 556  
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3. The decision of the judges is final and no correspondence will be entered into.
4. Prizes will be mailed as soon as possible and cannot be exchanged for cash.
5. The names of the winners will be published in the September issue of Learn & Teach.

1. Who wrote the book *The World that was Ours*?
2. Name one person who was charged during the Treason trial
3. Who is Nelson Mandela?

NAME: .....

ADDRESS: .....

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