

HB: I would agree with that. I'll tell you something, I personally felt myself to be very much a feminist and very advanced. And when I look at the kind of literature that we produced from that period, from the Federation, we were always appealing as mothers, as daughters, as sisters. It was the kind of language and attitudes of that time.

TB: Why was that?

HB: I'll tell you why it was. First because there wasn't a feeling of feminism among women per se as such. And the culture of women generally, the difference that black women felt towards men and we were only after all a few white women who were organising this thing. The second reason which I really feel that this is the main thing is that we always had to keep the question of national liberation to the fore. The women's question to everybody else in the ANC and so on was a sideline. There is literature about the women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in America who were fighting against slavery and I've got a book where there is a letter to one of these women saying,

"Dear sister we know that women's rights are important in the South but now our main interest is to end slavery, please put aside the things that you want."

And although we felt very keenly about the need for women to liberate themselves in so many peels and so many ways, at the same time we couldn't go further than the ANC, the attitude of

the ANC generally towards the question of women's rights. I think that Julie's criticisms are quite a fair one. I might not agree with everything she says.

TB: So if the nationalist cause hadn't been put to the fore all the time, would women have done things differently?

HB: Up to a point. I think that generally the sort of understanding of what women need and what they want and what they are fighting for wasn't greatly developed. All we wanted was equal rights for women and to see women getting equal jobs and all those things. It wasn't the kind of militant feminism that grew up in America and Britain, I think, in the 1960s. The general objectives, I suppose, were the same but all the kinds of things, for instance, use of languages, things like that. There is a very good book by Jackie Kok called "Maids and Madams" - I don't know if you read it - and some of the women interviewed there, an African women said - I remember one particularly said, "I am stronger than he is but I don't let him know it because I don't want to spoil his pride or something like that." So there was that difference. And the ANC and these were black men and a lot of them were misogynists just like everybody else. The one person in the ANC who was sympathetic to women and the women's organisation was Walter Sisulu. He had a better sympathy and understanding of what it was all about. I think the others thought just like these people during the 19<sup>th</sup> century in America that this is a sideline



and for Christ sake leave it alone, we'll deal with it later. Anyway.

TB: o you think the appeal to women as mothers, was that a - I mean, maybe it is just something that academics seize or much later feminism. I think also Julie criticises the Federation for this emphasis on what she calls the "motherism" not really women as people in their own right but in the sense of as mothers, as people who are going to bear and look after children. That it is in that capacity that they deserve equal rights and so forth. Do you think that is like an academic argument or is it something people were debating at the time?

HB: No they weren't debating at the time. I think it was a reflection of the general attitude of that time. That's what I think it was. And I don't think - I think my own sort of feminism only came to realise what it really meant after I went to England and began to read all the stuff that was coming out of America and Britain. No I think it was a fair reflection of our general attitude. It was not an academic question at all.

TB: When did you both leave? No, there is a long story about the arrests and all of that. I don't want to skip all over that because it's so but I think you might have written about it in other places so maybe - you know, you gave me your overall impressions of the 1950s, let me ask you about the time of Sharpeville, there's the banning of the organisation, there's the formation of MK - those years. You'd come out of what you

would call now the high of the 1950s and now things are gradually being shut down around you. What did that particular time feel like - the early sixties?

RB: I think the sixties was the time we were conscious that the state was clamping down on us and in fact we were retreating. We were no longer in the sort of position of advancing. We were beginning to retreat. And they started with the State of Emergency when thousands of people were locked up and practically all the activists in the whole Movement were in prison. We realised then this was something new, we had never been in this position where they could just whip you all off for no reason. I mean, they didn't need to catch you committing an offence, they just arrested you. Then there was the realisation that things were changing and I think that was the period when people began to talk about having to find new ways of dealing with the Government's threat. And this was when the talk of armed resistance and Umkhonto and so on began to develop. But I think it was at all times the sort of feeling that we are not any longer in command of the situation - they are and we are now responding to their attack rather than the other way around. And, of course, it got worse as time went on because after the Emergency was over, they started banning people more, the bans became more and more onerous and widespread and people, all sorts of people were house-arrested 24 hours a day. Sisula, Mbeki, Kotane, everybody was given 24 hours a



day house arrest which virtually made them useless. They were unable to operate in the Movement and so on so that was another plan which seemed to close them down. And then they introduced this 90-day Detention Law and they started torturing people and that was another thing. So I think we had throughout the 1960s the feeling that the tide had turned against us and - [interruption]

HB: Feeling in danger the whole time. Particularly I think the 1960 Emergency because we were both detained.

You see by that time I had four children and when I was arrested my youngest child was only three. So that was a very painful time and people were leaving and so on. In a way, I think, I felt I would like to leave the country and take the children to safety but Rusty was adamant that he was not going to be driven out of this country and so on. So we didn't actually think seriously about leaving until after the Rivonia Trials. After the Rivonia Trial they came to arrest me and I went into hiding and by that time we both felt that not only was our situation impossible but we were actually a danger to other people. Anybody who came to our house or came near us was a marked person. It wasn't like it had been when you were able to go to secret meetings, trying to make sure you weren't followed or meet in places that you felt safe and that sort of thing. It was deep underground work and we were a danger.

When they came for my book, *The World that was Ours* -  
[inaudible].

RB: But you see apart from the way individuals might have felt, what was happening was that because of these increased restrictions, the use of 24 hours a day house arrest and things like that, people were leaving the country with a reason. You take a chap like Kotane. He's got a house in Alexandra. You can't really go out there. Who knows who his neighbours are keeping an eye on him. He daresn't move out of the house and nobody dare go into the house to talk to him because he was prohibited from talking to people so he is totally useless. He is a prisoner virtually of the state in his own home. So there is no point in him staying. And people said, "go and do something useful in Dar es Salaam." So this was happening. And at the same time there was this sort of increased pressure on us, the organised structures of the Movement were beginning to dissolve because people were either being held in prison for 90 days, tortured and maybe held another 90 days or they were leaving the country. So the organisational structures were beginning to dissolve at the same time which also added to the feeling that we were in dire straits, you know, or we were approaching dire straits. And I think everybody must have felt this at that time even with the forming of Umkhonto which looked like a forward defiant gesture. But in fact it was a gesture taken in a time when we realised your back was against



the wall and if you didn't fight back now you were finished. So it wasn't taken from a position of strength, but from a position of weakness.

TB: Can you tell me about the decision to actually leave? How did you go about it?

HB: While Rusty was in jail, I'd been involved with a couple of people one of whom was Yusuf Cachalia who is now dead in getting people over the border. We were arranging for people to go over.

TB: To Botswana?

HB: Yes, mostly to Botswana, yes. And when they came to arrest me, I escaped from the house and went into hiding - you'll probably find it in the book. And then we communicated with each other through various people. My daughter, Toni, was undergoing nursery school training and a teacher there would give her a note that someone had passed on from me or from Rusty and she would take the note. It was through a chain of people that we arranged these things and we just felt that we now had no future and not only no future, but we had no way of doing anything. And, of course, the responsibility of the children as well.

TB: So it wasn't good enough to just live, you had to be doing something?

RB: Well, we couldn't you see. Apart from the fact that the police had come to the house looking for Hilda so we knew if she

came back and tried to start living, they'd come back again. And if she didn't come back to the house, I was already house-arrested and out on bail on a charge under the Suppression of Communism Act. If she didn't come back to the house, the chances were 50/50 that they'd arrest me and hold me under 90-day detention to find out where she was. So, I mean, we were finished. There was just no future for us really. We would either have both finished up in jail or we had to leave. There was no option of leading an ordinary life thereafter.

TG: This is the second tape, first side.

The Bernsteins have gotten to 1963.

HB: 1964 actually. Rusty is out of jail.

TB: And you've decided this is an untenable situation. You can't live in your house, you can't move out of your house. I'm sure your children must have found this an incredibly difficult period with their mother just disappearing into thin air. I can't remember from the book if you had to jump the garden fence or what you had to do but it must have been terrible for them.

RB: I think by that time they had had so many of these sort of traumatic experiences of police raiding and of my being arrested and so on that in one way or another they were, sort of, hardened to it.

HB: Not hardened, Rusty. It had a terrible effect on them.



RB: I mean, it didn't come to them out of the blue. They'd already had so many of these experiences that this was just - [interruption].

HB: No but still people like Keith couldn't understand why and what was going on.

RB: No. He couldn't understand but I mean it wasn't the first time it had happened - policemen coming in the house and taking our books out and so on.

TB: Can I ask you. I've always wondered what as you have a sense that things are getting worse, what do you say to young children to help them understand that things are going to happen that you as their parents can't control.

RB: I don't know if we have an answer to that one.

HB: I don't know if we have an answer. I do remember I was going out one night and I said good night to my daughter Francis who was about seven, something like that. And she said, "where are you going?" And I said, "I'm going to see a man about a dog." Which was the way I explained to her when I didn't want her to know, because if she was asked by people it might be dangerous. And she looked at me and said, "don't give me that answer." And then she said, "do you want me to do the same things that you do when I grow up?" And at that moment my heart sank to the bottom of my shoes. And I said, "well, I don't know, we'll see." And I said "maybe." And she said, "then how can I know what to do if you don't tell me

where you are going and what you're doing?" But it was a dilemma because children unwittingly can say, "oh, my daddy is not home" when he's supposed to be home or something like that if someone phones or something. I don't think we handled it very well, to tell you the truth.

TB: I am certainly not asking this in the critical sense but, I mean, if you look back in history, there seems to have been this special time when people like yourselves were so involved in political work. You had a family life that I'm sure you lavished as much attention as you could on, and keeping all of this going at the same time. Then the national political story begins to come into those things every minute and I'm a mother and have two children and I think a lot about how do you manage those very, very - how does one manage those very, very - [interruption]

HB: I don't think we managed it very well. I think that all the children of the political activists had a hard time. And when I was doing the "The Rift" there were a number of children I interviewed who didn't in the end get into the book, but they all expressed the same feelings towards their parents. They expressed resentment and the lack of understanding as to why their parents put their cause before their family, and at the same time love and admiration for their parents.

So it was a dichotomy for them too. A divisive thing. Andrew Kasril said, "I knew my dad was on the right side but I didn't



know why he put his cause before his family." And Gloria [name-unclear] daughter of a trade unionist expressed the same thing. "I thought my dad didn't love me. I thought he loved his cause more than he loved his family." They all resented playing second place. I suppose, I mean they all had traumas and things but if you think about the way people live and people who are not politically involved and what their children go through and everything, I don't know. I don't know. Anyway they're great children, they're beautiful, good, loving, supportive children, and we are very proud of them.

TB: I'm sure you are. You had the benefit of difficulties but that's not a bad thing. What were the darkest days of the struggle for you, the darkest days?

RB: I suppose for me, immediately after the Rivonia arrests because then I knew that, although I had the feeling that the Movement was being driven backwards and was on the defensive and was fighting for its life, I think after the Rivonia arrests this was really the finish of it. At least that phase of history where our Movement and organisation was finished. It was smashed. I think that was probably the darkest days for me. I can't think of a period that was quite as without hope or - well, yes hope I suppose, quite as bleak as that period.

HB: Well, that's the same for me, it was the Rivonia arrest. I got sort of periods in my life which

I think were most traumatic, and that was the Rivonia arrests, and realising what was going to happen. The lawyers said, "look they're going to ask for the death sentence for these men." And handling that, still being involved politically, having the children, going up when the trial started backwards and forwards from Pretoria, from the court, it was really a pretty tough time.

And it was all these people - Nelson and Walter and Govan and the whole crowd of them, Kathy and everybody, knowing them. What we thought afterwards they'll probably ask for the death sentence for some of the leading people like Nelson, Walter and Govan, and the others will get life imprisonment. There didn't seem to be any hope for us in the least. We just pressed the lucky button somehow.

TB: Sorry, I don't understand you - pressed the lucky button?

HB: Well, I don't know. Rusty was found not guilty at the end of the trial. Why just him? There was no evidence, just a little evidence against Kathrada and against Andrew Mlangeni.

RB: No, Raymond Mhlaba.

HB: Raymond Mhlaba. So why, you know, people say, "why were you found not guilty?" I don't know.

TB: You've no idea.

RB: It's like drawing a ticket in the sweepstake. The judge could have flipped a coin and said, you know, "comes down heads you're guilty. If it comes down tails you're not guilty."





HB: They adjourned the court to find a member of the Special Branch and there was a big rugby match on.

RB: That's right. Transvaal was playing Western Province.

HB: And all the Special Branch were there. So anyway we were out on bail and when they came to arrest me that was the time, you know, we decided that we had to prepare to leave.

RB: There was no point in staying.

HB: Yes, there was no point in staying.

RB: But it was really a lucky chance that I got bail.

HB: Sure. A lucky a chance you were found not guilty and a lucky chance that you got bail. So interesting and lucky life.

TB: This is 1964. You've skipped bail and you settled in England. I think you've described that period- [interruption]

HB: Rusty described it in his book. I didn't write about that, I only wrote to the time we left.

TB: Maybe you can then just tell me about coming back to South Africa. Now you are on a visit but after 1990/1991 when did you first come back?

HB: In 1992 we got amnesty to return because otherwise we couldn't return without being arrested for leaving the country illegally, etc. And we came back in 1992 for the first time really like tourists, didn't we?

RB: Yes.

HB: We hired a car and went - [interruption]

TB: After almost 30 years?



HB: Yes and we travelled around the country.

RB: Had a look at the country again.

HB: We had just forgotten how beautiful it was. We were transfixed by it. And then we came in 1994 for the elections. Rusty worked for the ANC before the elections and I supposed we've been back every couple of years, more or less.

RB: More or less, yes.

HB: My eldest daughter is here in the Cape at the present time. She makes documentary films and she is making a film for BBC World about the organisation in South Africa. And she comes back the most frequently. The others - two of them came during the elections but they're all married and have children and all the rest of it.

TB: And the family now really has its roots firmly in Britain.

RB: Well, all of their roots are in Britain.

HB: Except Toni. My oldest daughter was asked not long ago, "do you feel yourself to be British or South African?" And she said, "when I'm in England I feel South African and when I'm in South Africa I feel I'm British." But she was 21 when we left and she was married to her present husband.

RB: The others were much younger and if they remember anything about South Africa, they don't really feel attached to the country in any way. They don't think of themselves as South Africans.

HB: Well, Keith my youngest son who remembers least, he's a photographer and he came back in '94 for the elections to go around with Mandela, following and taking pictures. And at the end of that time he said, "I'm glad I spent a couple of months in South Africa because now I know I don't want to live in this country."

TB: If you could rewrite South Africa's history, what would you include?

HB: I don't think I would dare to do such a thing.

TB: Sure you would.

RB: When you say to rewrite South Africa's history, you mean to refashion history or just to write it differently from the way it's been written.

TB: To refashion it. That's a better word to use in such a question.

HB: Yes, I'd go right back to colonial times and take the British out and their exploitation of the mines and the people here and so. I don't know, how can you do that?

TB: No, I didn't mean to change events. I meant the perspective on historical writing. If you were going to rewrite it. I'm sorry I misunderstood you. What perspective would you use?

HB: The woman's perspective.

TB: And you?

RB: I would use the perspective of - from the pre- South African history from the point of view of mass mobilisation of people as being the way in which transformation might have happened



or could have happened or should have happened. Because all the successes of our political movement, in my view, including the new Constitution and the introduction of a non-apartheid government and so on, all of this in the long run comes down to the fact that the whole Movement was concentrated for many years on the mobilising of people en masse to make their influence felt. Not on getting people into office to administer a new society but to create a new society from the bottom. I would like to rewrite South Africa's history I'd like to rewrite what would have happened in the new regime between 1990 and 2001 if that perspective had been maintained. If there hadn't been an attention to produce a new society by administrative means -[unclear]. If the whole movement had stuck to its original viewpoint which was that change comes through mass mobilisation. I believe [inaudible] South Africa for the good.

HB: I just think women have been written out of history generally. So that's what I would do. Write it from the woman's perspective.

TB: Seeing it through those eyes.

HB: Yes. And the part that they played that people don't know about.

TB: I did an interview with Mr Wilton Mkwayi and at the end of his interview he made a point similar to the one you are making but from a slightly different angle. He said in his

experience - I'm paraphrasing - it was so important for a leader to be with people. That you live with them, you talk with them, you interact with them on a daily basis and very constantly and, if I'm remembering correctly, he was implying that was something that the Movement had lost. He was remembering his days in New Brighton where you went to talk to people, you heard what they were saying, you know. There was a very kind of personal, kind of, daily interaction there. And that just reminded me when you were speaking of mass mobilisation.

RB: Yes, I've heard him say that sort of thing too. I think he's got that sort of view but things somewhere along the line began to change. This attitude towards mass [unclear] amongst the people down on the grassroots has changed, has got away from them. That's one of the reasons why he's not playing the sort of role that he really is quite capable of playing judging by his past [inaudible].

HB: But he's getting old like us.

RB: But so are a lot of other people getting old but since he came out of Robben Island has really not played the role that he has the ability to play. Pity.

TB: A sort of a philosophical difference.

RB: I think so. I think it's a shift. I think what happened there was a shift of emphasis in the Movement from looking at the mass mobilisation of people was a way to change South Africa into



an idea that you can change society from the top if you get into positions of power and the new administration. And I think it was a philosophical shift, if you like or difference. I don't know. I think its unfortunate but there it is. I mean, that's why I asked you, you can't remake history, you can re-imagine how it might have been but you can't remake it. You can't go back and recapture it.

TB: My last question would be is there anything that you feel I should have asked you that maybe I skipped over or didn't ask? Something that came to mind while we were talking about something else.

RB: Nothing I can think of myself. I don't know. You seem to have covered - I mean between what you have asked and what we have written ourselves in our various books, you've got practically all our history and experiences and views about everything.

HB: Now you must go and speak to the children of all the political activists and hear what they have to say.

TB: That's another project. But it would be a very fascinating one.

HB: Yes, it would. From a different angle.

TB: I haven't read all of "The Rift." I've read parts. You read this person and then that person and skip around. I like it for that reason. But that's one of the most interesting angles because families are often forgotten when people start speaking about

struggle and political and mobilisation. Those are very difficult choices and their results are often - [interruption]

RB: And the history tends to focus on important people, you know. People in high positions and there are a stack of people who participated and took part whose stories just got lost.

HB: That's one of the reasons I wanted to write "The Rift" and when South Africans who were in the Movement start reading they look up the names they know, but it's the names they don't know who have the interesting stories.

TB: Well, thank you very much. I think we'll end there.

**END OF INTERVIEW**



**Collection Number: A3299**

**Collection Name: Hilda and Rusty BERNSTEIN Papers, 1931-2006**

***PUBLISHER:***

*Publisher:* **Historical Papers Research Archive**

*Collection Funder:* **Bernstein family**

*Location:* **Johannesburg**

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