

INTRODUCTION

At 5.30 in the afternoon, on 11 July 1963, a dry cleaner's van drove into the private driveway of Liliesleaf, the home of Arthur and Hazel Goldreich, on the outskirts of Johannesburg. A florist's delivery vehicle followed closely behind the first van. They were not delivering flowers or neatly pressed suits for some family celebration. Near the house both vehicles came to a halt, their back doors opened, and armed policemen with dogs poured out. They fanned out through the house and its outbuildings, and then, supported by reinforcements, searched the surrounding fields.

They soon found what they were looking for. In one of the largest outbuildings twelve men were sitting round a table discussing a document which lay open on the table. The document was Operation Mayibuye, a plan for guerrilla warfare in South Africa, and the twelve men were leaders or members of the ANC and Umkhonto we Sizwe, its armed wing. Amongst them were Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki, Ahmed Kathrada, Andrew Mlangeni, Bob Hepple, Raymond Mhlaba, Elias Motsoaledi, Denis Goldberg and Rusty Bernstein. All in all seventeen people were arrested, and a crippling blow delivered to the nascent liberation movement. Five of the seventeen arrested were whites, and all those whites were Jews.¹

Ever since Jews began arriving in South Africa in significant numbers, they have played their part in her political, social and economic life. The experience of Jews in South Africa has been unique in that South Africa has been one of the few lands where Jews were not the primary objects of oppression and racism, but rather spectators to the systematic oppression of another group.

During apartheid's heyday, when white South Africans enjoyed one of the highest standards of living in the world, and the country's economy boomed, Jewry enjoyed the fruits of an apartheid economy, and on the whole remained cowed and silent regarding the systematic exploitation of the majority of this country's people. There was no sense of collective

1 Arthur Goldreich, Lionel (Rusty) Bernstein, Hilliard Feinstein, Denis Goldberg and Bob Hepple. See Gideon Shimoni in *Jews and Zionism: The South African Experience 1910-1967*, p 231.

Left:

The escape of Arthur Goldreich and Harold Wolpe is reported in the Rand Daily Mail, August 13, 1963

outrage based on their own experience or memories of persecution, and most Jews acted exactly as did most English-speaking South African whites.

But despite the silence of Jewry as a community, a disproportionate number of individual Jews played a part in transforming South Africa into a more just society. There were two streams: those who fought 'within the system' as jurists, members of parliament, via the media, or in civil society, and those who entered 'illegal' organisations which were socialist, communist or mass-based in character. While it is true to say that many of these individuals did what they did not as Jews but as South Africans, communists, trade unionists, internationalists, liberals, or merely as professionals acting in their professional capacity, it is also true that a whole set of atavistic cultural memories shaped and motivated their unique contributions. In many cases, the heritage of Eastern European marginalisation, landlessness and proletarian militancy created an openness to radical positions and a capacity for imaginative empathy with those most directly oppressed.

The primary purpose of this book has been to document the oral testimonies of individual Jews who were active in the left, or in the fight against apartheid's political and cultural hegemony, or in both. The chronological scope is from the 1930s until the present. We interviewed people who had been in exile, jail, or the underground, as well as those who faced strong opposition or even harassment as they fought against a dehumanising ideology from 'within' the system.

There was some urgency to the project, as many of the interviewees were elderly or unwell, and we wanted to record their story in their own words. The interview with advocate Isie Maisels is the last one he gave. So were the ones with Barney Simon of The Market Theatre, with Rowley Arenstein, who served the longest banning order in South Africa, and with Jack Florio. We received the contribution from Joe Slovo's family only after his death.

Putting together the list of names for this book was difficult. In the end, from hundreds of potential candidates, I chose twenty-seven. The drama and compellingness of people's stories on the one hand, and the extent and duration of their involvement on the other, guided my thinking. (It was a lot easier — and safer — to express opposition to apartheid in late 1989 than it was in '59, '69, or '79.) Some people were included because they are famous, and others were included because they are unknown and yet their lives have been rich and fascinating. I eventually arrived at a few names from each generation of activists, knowing that in many ways their stories would be representative of those I could not include.

A reader wanting a mythical objectivity might call these portraits deeply subjective, and indeed they are, and therein lies their value as truthful records. I have continually encouraged the interviewees and the interviewers not to polish and shine and alter whatever emerged on the day the interview took place. Often there can be no better record for posterity

than the statements we most wish to erase from the record; and what we see in the harsh light of self-criticism as ugly, unbalanced, or embarrassing is seen by others as human, endearing, and honest.

When Geoff Sifrin had finished interviewing one of the people in this book, Jack Flior, Geoff turned off the tape, and they sat and drank a schnapps together. Flior told him he had messed up his life, wasted it by being so involved in politics. He had been betrayed, he said, by Stalin and communism, and if he had done it all over again he would have done something better, like become a scientist, and studied mosquitoes and how they affect human beings. But Flior's response is atypical. Almost every one of the interviewees affirm that the choices they made were the correct ones. Even more remarkable, and it comes across very strongly in most of the interviews, is that they feel grateful for the way their lives have unfolded. The lack of bitterness is remarkable, especially for people who 'lost' long periods of their lives to jail, exile, banning or house arrest.

Ultimately I wanted to present the individuals in this book as they are. If heroism, ingenuity, optimism, humour, thoughtfulness and deep conviction are qualities which permeate the lives of the people herein, I hope these qualities are apparent in the interviews. And if narcissism or a certain sanctimoniousness are also occasionally present, I hope these too will be clearly visible in and between the lines of these interviews.

The grouping together of prominent people around the common denominator of their Jewish roots is a statement, an assertion that their Jewishness played a significant role in making them what they are. Because *Cutting Through The Mountain* highlights the Jewishness of people who are not frequently positively identified as Jews, it does two things.

Firstly, it forms a connecting link between them and the unfolding narrative of the Jewish collective. It welcomes them back not only as worthy South Africans, socialists, communists or liberals, but as worthy Jews. It thus 'recanonicalises' people, especially those on the left, who were written out of histories celebrating the achievements of the South African Jewish community.

In South Africa under National Party rule there was only one 'truth', one 'News at Eight', one version of events claiming an impossible authority. Other voices, other consciousnesses were forced underground. This culture of censorship was absorbed into the South African Jewish community. Official histories produced by the representative bodies of this community have recorded events in a one-sided way, suppressing whatever threatened them, and often celebrating economic achievements more than ethical, artistic or religious ones. *Cutting Through The Mountain* will hopefully go some way towards shifting the unidimensional self-concept prevalent in the Jewish community by positing alternative role models of success.

Secondly, *Cutting Through The Mountain* asserts the variety inherent in any and every grouping of people. As such it is a refutation of needless

stereotyping in general, something which has characterised much of South Africa's intergroup relations, and which no one, including Jews, has been immune from. Jews are probably the most frequently stereotyped group in human history, and have of course frequently stereotyped others. The controlling business person, the disloyal citizen . . . these images of the Jew are encoded in popular discourse. The Jew as patriot, fighting democrat, or cultural innovator are images less often acknowledged. Not that there are no philo-Semitic stereotypes in South African culture, perceptions of Jewish people as concerned and caring. But these positive stereotypes can equally be a trap, holding Jews to some imaginary standard which does not allow them to be human and fallible. Because the interviewees express such an enormous range of opinion and belief, I have hopefully avoided reinforcing negative or positive stereotypes of Jews — both of which tend to annihilate the individual.

All times are times of transition, but some times are more visibly so than others. *Cutting Through The Mountain* appears now because an era has visibly ended. The context, the clearly defined Struggle, which made the activism of the people in this book so meaningful has vanished. Whatever racism, injustice, or oppression remain in South Africa are still driven by our fears but no longer appear in the statute books. South Africa has changed irreversibly, and with it the nature of South Africanness, and the position of whites in South Africa. The Jewish community, primarily located in white English South Africanness, has therefore also changed irreversibly. It will likely continue to shrink through emigration, and those Jews who choose to stay in South Africa, and choose to involve themselves fully in South Africa's unfolding story, face a difficult period of redefining their role and finding a niche in which they can believe they are relevant and useful.

Yet there is surely a place for those who wish to contribute, and especially for people of the ilk of those in this book. When a new order emerges after a long period of struggle, there is often a tendency for it rapidly to become the new orthodoxy. People who notice faults and flaws in the new order are silenced with the accusation that they are agents of the old. The iconoclasts in this book refused to keep quiet while they saw injustices around them. There will be no less need for such iconoclasts and boat-rockers in the renewed South Africa.