

The future beyond the darkness

WHEN Ruth First was blown to pieces on August 17, 1982, I was a conscript in the South African Defence Force. When the bomb exploded in her office at the Centre for African Studies at the Eduardo Mondlane University in Maputo, I was somewhere in Pretoria or Namibia writing propaganda for the SADF's official magazine.

I have no recollection of her death. I cannot remember reading or discussing the event. Anyway, at the time, she would have been nothing more to me than just another radical terrorist failing in her efforts to achieve a communist takeover of my fatherland.

It was only two years later, one evening in a Pretoria bar, that a former South African Security Branch policeman told me: "We also killed Ruth First."

The policeman's name was Captain Dirk Coetzee, former commander of a police death squad. That evening, which was a turning point in my life, this man, who had killed seven people and committed another 22 crimes as a policeman, told me that the SAP was waging a secret war against anti-apartheid activists.

My conservative upbringing in a traditional Afrikaans home in Pretoria had taught me that the SAP was the protector and guardian of democracy and Christianity. And now I was told that they were also killers! It was a rude awakening to South African reality.

Coetzee mentioned three names of activists murdered by death squads: Griffiths Mxenge, Sphiwe Mtimkulu and Ruth First. At first, these names meant nothing to me: I didn't know who they were or what they had done.

I was then a reporter at *Rapport*, and I remember going to the newspaper's library the next morning to look for the three names. I discovered to my shock and horror that they were assassinated in exactly the way Coetzee had described the killings to me.

Human rights lawyer Mxenge brutally stabbed to death in November 1981 while returning home from work; student leader Mtimkulu disappeared mysteriously in April 1982 shortly after having instituted a civil claim against the Minister of Police for being poisoned in detention; and academic Ruth First, blown up in her office in Maputo as she opened the parcel.

Coetzee told me he and his Askaris of the Section C1 counter insurgency force based at Vlakplaas had assassinated Mxenge and participated in the disappearance of Mtimkulu, but that First was killed by his colleagues of Section A (the foreign section) of the security police. Section A was at the time commanded by Brigadier Piet Goosen, the notorious policeman in charge of the interrogation of activist Steve Biko.

Section A was based on its own farm next to Vlakplaas. It was on this farm, 10 years ago, that Goosen and his colleagues manufactured the bomb posted to Ruth First. Shortly after the

killing, superspy Craig Williamson, a member of Section A, told his friend Dirk Coetzee: "We got First."

Successive National Party governments tried their utmost to silence her. They banned her, charged her with treason, detained and interrogated her for 117 days. When nothing helped, they used apartheid's ultimate weapon.

If there is one aspect surrounding the death of Ruth First that stands out, it was the reaction of the media. Her death led to the most horrendous journalism ever practised in South Africa.

Two years after her death, *The Star*, mouthpiece of English liberalism at the time, wrote that Slovo engineered the death of his own wife.

The Western diplomatic source they anonymously quoted, I discovered later, was none other than Craig Williamson. Joe Slovo sued for defamation in the United Kingdom, and the English judge who presided over the case called it the worst libel he had ever experienced in his entire career and awarded 25 000 British pounds to Slovo. *The Star* refused to adhere to the jurisdiction of an English court.

BUT the worst was still to come. On April 8, 1988, days after Albie Sachs' arm was blown off by a CCB operative in Maputo, the political commentator of *Die Volksblad*, mouthpiece of the National Party in the Free State, wrote in a column that "the death of Ruth First was Colonel Slovo's KGB method of getting rid of an unhappy marriage".

As a journalist, I can only hang my head in shame for the media's contribution in creating the culture in which these atrocities could happen.

The political philosopher Victor Hugo once said: "If a man sinned because of darkness, the guilty one is not he that sinned, but he who created the darkness."

The media in South Africa, especially the mainstream newspapers, are responsible for helping to create this darkness in which people like Coetzee could freely operate. We must never allow this to happen again.

Ruth First did not deserve to die. Neither did many, many other people. Good people, just people, honest people.

The South African security forces have in many ways become havens for criminals where some policemen and soldiers could for years act safely and with absolute impunity above the law.

That is why the book on the death of Ruth First can never be closed and stacked away in apartheid's dirty cupboard. We are commemorating her death tonight not only to remember her, but to never forget why and how she was killed.

This is an edited version of Jacques Pauw's keynote address at the Ruth First Journalism Award ceremony. Mr Pauw is the author of "In the Heart of the Whore: The story of apartheid's death squads". He is based at The Star.

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