

Memory against forgetting: Memoir of a time in South African politics 1938-1964

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In “one of the longest and most testing journeys in history”, Rusty Bernstein’s *Memory Against Forgetting* stands, as testimony to the endurance of the human spirit, when confronted with adversity. More so, when pitted against a ruthless regime, determined in its quest to crush all opposition to it. Rusty Bernstein, his family and comrades did just that, stepping forwards, in defence of their principles. Pitted against the granite face of nationalism, fascism, apartheid; Bernstein’s memory and testimony covers an era in South Africa’s history and that of humanity, one which should never be forgotten.

Effortlessly weaving his narrative through key milestones of the historical milieu, a political consciousness emerges in the 1930s. These early years being shaped by the clouds of an international cataclysm. Serving in North Africa and Italy during the Second World War, Bernstein returned to a divided society, one to be further polarised and subjected to a new fascism – apartheid.

The Freedom Charter was a future vision for a society liberated from a direction in which it was being propelled. Bernstein articulated the submissions shaping this positional statement and, articulated many other keys positions, during his life in the liberation struggle. Always modest of his role in seismic events, he relates the Treason Trial with a sardonic, yet humorous narrative; the birth of his son, being arrested on a charge of Treason and jailed in the Johannesburg Fort, through to standing trial. A moment in the absurdity of it was that the evidence production line could lead to the gallows, yet the warning couldn’t be taken seriously. The accused were all bored to death and longing for a break for tea. Needless to say the state’s case collapsed.

A key point in *Memory Against Forgetting* is Bernstein's narrative in the build up towards, and that, of the Rivonia era. The 1961 Sharpeville Massacre, the banning of political movements, and the suppression of peaceful protests, often through methods of increasing state brutality. The days of petitions, strike action and boycotts were ending. New forms and methods of struggle were vital to enable the continuance of resistance to apartheid. Bernstein played a key role in establishing these new forms of struggle which started centring on underground activity. An organised armed struggle emerged in 1961, which by 1963 linked itself to places and spaces, including Liliesleaf.

The significance of Liliesleaf is that this is a tangible place where the transition into a new form of struggle, namely armed struggle occurred, making Liliesleaf an icon of that struggle for freedom. Liliesleaf represents a seminal shift in South Africa's liberation struggle. Numerous layers of significance exist. Today Liliesleaf is branded A Place of Liberation. Yet Liberation, indeed freedom, came at a cost.

Arrested at Liliesleaf, along with key leaders of the liberation movements, Rusty Bernstein stood trial in the Rivonia Trial, together with his comrades. Bernstein experienced the solitary silence of the cell; the stresses and horrors of detention and interrogation. The uncertainty of life and a future. Yet his family stood strong, as did his comrades. Despite all.

Bernstein's narrative of the trial itself, is that of a relentless yet ethically bankrupt prosecution, which sought to destroy and discredit individuals, along with the causes they represented. Facing the reality of the death sentence or life imprisonment for sabotage, Rusty defended himself with dignity, alongside Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki, Raymond Mhlaba, and other leaders of the African National Congress, Umkhonto we Sizwe and the South African Communist Party.

Bernstein's eyewitness account together with his unique insights into his comrades and their cause is invaluable to understanding the intricacies of the trial and the Rivonia era. A remarkable narrative of that social and political era, spanning almost four decades, told with a frankness and humility, which is rare. Once acquitted, he and his family faced ongoing persecution. The road into exile presented the only option, literally over and out, the title of his final chapter, immediately after the Rivonia Trial.

Yet no dream was ever abandoned. Two decades passed in giving support from exile to sustain and develop the liberation struggle. Thirty years later in May 1994, standing on the terrace of the Union Buildings, Pretoria this was a moment of vindication. Although the end of a single journey, it represented the beginning of another, opening stage of history. Yet not the end of a journey, merely the beginning of another for the faith and dedication for those who sacrificed.

In recording our history and preserving our heritage the lessons of the past and the voice of history can help us to understand that past accurately and honestly. For over the passage of time, it happens that memory changes, diminishes, or is forgotten. Bernstein's account enables both the recovery and preservation of memory and stands as a testament to the importance of memory, in recognising the lessons of the past.

A turbulent South Africa: Post-apartheid social protest

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As I write this, South Africa is in the midst of a series of protests in the run-up to the country's elections on 8 May. In what has been described as the most contested elections of the country's 25-year-old democracy with 48 parties appearing on the ballot paper, protests have been a regular feature of the news cycle as residents attempt to grab the attention of politicians frantically campaigning for votes. By May, 140 service delivery protests had taken place nationwide, according to Municipal IQ, a data service monitoring municipalities.¹

Jérôme Tournadre, explores such protests in *A turbulent South Africa: Post-apartheid social protest*. As he correctly points out in his introduction, there

¹ N Gous, "Service delivery protests on the rise, with petrol bombs being used and journalists targeted", *Sowetanlive*, 11 June 2019 (available at <https://www.sowetanlive.co.za/news/south-africa/2019-06-11-service-delivery-protests-are-on-the-rise-this-year-warn-experts2/>, as accessed on 12 June 2019).