

NAMING CEREMONY OF JOE SLOVO RESIDENCE
Tuesday, 16 March 2010
Rhodes University

We, Shawn, Gillian, and Robyn, the daughters of Ruth First and Joe Slovo, are especially honoured that there are now two residences at Rhodes named after each of our parents. Our only regret is that we can't be here in person to celebrate this occasion with you.

That Joe would have a university residence named after him is not something that could have been predicted. His background is not academia nor one of privilege – he was born into poverty in the tiny hamlet of Obel in Lithuania, the son of Yiddish speaking parents, isolated from the Lithuanian community by language and anti-Semitism.

His father left Obel when Joe was two years old to try and find a better place in which to raise his family. He went first to Argentina, but unable to find work there, he took the boat to South Africa. A hawker of fruit on the streets of Johannesburg, it took him six years to save enough money to send for his family. In 1936, aged ten years old, head shaven against lice and clutching a paper bag filled with rotting fruit, Joe arrived in South Africa with his mother and older sister.

Joe's family were on the lowest rung of the newly arrived Jewish community, but the colour of their skin opened a world of opportunity denied the majority of the people in South Africa. As he wrote in his autobiography: 'we knew nothing at all about the black ghettos; they seemed to be in another world whose function was to belch servants.'

Their lives started to improve when Joe's parents opened a fruit shop on Rocky Street in Yeoville. But two years later, when Joe was twelve, his mother died in childbirth. Without her input, the fruit shop slid into bankruptcy. The new baby was placed in an orphanage, Joe's elder sister went out to work, the family lost their home, and Joe and his father took lodgings in a series of boarding houses. Here, the first seed of political interest were planted in Joe as he listened in on the discussions about socialism and the oppression of the black majority in the country.

His education was patchy and erratic. His last year completed at school was standard 6, and his adult working life began as a full-time despatch clerk at the age of 14. He became involved in the trade union movement, and joined the Communist Party. When Germany invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, Joe lied about his age and joined the army. He fought with the allied forces in Italy, and when he was repatriated in 1946, and despite the fact that he had never matriculated, he was awarded an ex-serviceman's five year scholarship to attend Wits to study law. And so a journey that had begun in a stetl in Lithuania led him into becoming one of the privileged of South Africa, and only because of the colour of his skin.

He excelled in his law studies, winning his year's first prize. Like many of his contemporaries, he could have chosen a life of privilege and high earning. But Joe took a different path. Like Ruth, and a handful of other white South Africans, he

could not close his eyes and ignore the oppression and inequality which was the fate of the majority of his fellow South Africans.

Throughout his life – whether during his participation in the peaceful protests of the Defiance Campaign and the writing of the Freedom Charter (which culminated in both he and Ruth being amongst the accused in the 1960 Treason Trial); his position in exile as Chief of Staff of MK and his chairship of the South African Communist Party; or finally as Nelson Mandela's Housing Minister in the first democratically elected government – Joe's commitment to changing South Africa was unwavering even though he was always fully conscious of the risks involved. Working fulltime for the ANC, he experienced the dark years following the Rivonia Trial when, with the leadership either in prison or exile, the ANC was struggling desperately to keep a foothold in the country. As the military struggle, and his part in it accelerated, he experienced much loss: Ruth's murder in 1982, and also the death of the many young men and women, the soldiers in the field who were fighting with him against the apartheid state. And he was loathed by that state. He was regarded as the worst of traitors, Public Enemy Number one - not only a communist, but white to boot.

But we want to talk here also about Joe the man, renowned for his humour, the archetypal Jewish joke teller who liked nothing better than, in his time off, to strum the guitar & sing, everything from Jewish folk songs through Woodie Guthrie to Jimmy Hendrix. (A favourite of his was 'Hey Joe, where you going with that gun in your hand?') His cherished past-time was to lie on the sofa eating peanuts, drinking whiskey and watching football on TV. He loved to swim, and to walk his neurotic rescue dog Simba.

Joe was a man who loved life, and loved his life. Before his death in 1995, these are his words: 'I know I am dying, but I am the luckiest of men. For how many other people can say that, having spent their whole life fighting for justice, they lived to see that justice achieved?'

Joe had no feelings of regret, or sacrifice, or martyrdom. His was a life lived by the choices he made. He chose to use his training as a lawyer not to cushion his nest, not to partake of the privileged lifestyle of his white contemporaries but to attempt to change the world for the better.

For us, his daughters, that is his legacy. Not everyone can make the same choices, but what better tribute to Joe's memory than if the students at the Joe Slovo Residence can learn that such choices are possible in every person's life.

Gillian Slovo

A transcript of SAFM Nancy Richards interview with Larissa on the Lilian Ngoyi Hall naming ceremony

Interviewer:

Lillian Ngoyi , Victoria Mxenge and Ruth First; all had something in common as you well remember. They were all committed struggle activists and it's their names and their memories that have been chosen to be part of a new naming programme at Rhodes University in Grahamstown as part of Human Rights Week. Well to tell us a little bit more is someone to be reported as somewhat of a female activist herself and also Hall Warden she is Larissa Klazinga.

Interviewer:

Hallo Larissa

Larissa Klazinga:

Hi.

Interviewer:

Nice to have you with us.

Larissa Klazinga:

Thank you for having me.

Interviewer:

Give us a background of this, so Human Rights I think the university have decided to do a few name changes, what's the big picture?

Larissa Klazinga:

Well what we're doing is ...we're generally trying to highlight Human Rights, this is the third year that we've had an annual kind of Human Rights Week and we've decided to as a hall of residence to try and fit in our naming to coincide with Human Rights Week for obvious reasons, because the names that we've chosen and the resonance that those people had with the Human Rights Struggle in South Africa .

Interviewer:

Ok, so this is something that's ..., you know one of those things that has been decided to do. Are there rather lots of name changing all over of is it sort of ...

Larissa Klazinga:

Not really changing names so much as naming new buildings. ... So what the university has decided to do is to try and ensure that all the new names ... of residences and buildings in general on campus... are on ... with the vision and mission statement of the university and we also thought that as a hall it would be important to try and reflect the legacy of struggle heroes ...so that's the reason that we chose these names.

Interviewer:

Ja, ja... I suppose the question on everybody's mind would be, I mean, are they going to change the name of the university?

Larissa Klazinga:

Well that's not really a question I can answer.

Interviewer:

All right...

Larissa Klazinga:

I think there's been a lot of discussion about it and I can safely say that, let me tell you that when I was here in the 1990's there was a lot of discussion about changing the name of the university to Ruth First University, but we've not making much headway. There are a lot of arguments both for and against keeping the name Rhodes ... I think it's an ongoing discussion.

Interviewer:

Yes, ja... no absolutely so it's not going to happen right now. Ehm, tell us, Larissa, tell us about your role.

So you were there in the 1990's you're now Hall Warden. What does being a Hall Warden mean?

Larissa Klazinga:

Well what it means is that I'm now sort of administratively in charge of the hall residences that make up Lillian Ngoyi i Hall. ... I am not the Hall Warden anymore, I was the Hall Warden last year. Currently the warden for Ruth First House, with is the residence,... one of the four residences within the hall, Jeremy Bagster is kind of ... the hall warden.

Interviewer:

Oh ok, ok... Well, what does being a hall warden actually mean?

Larissa Klazinga:

Well what it means is that the wardens of the hall report to the hall warden who deals with hall administration and the, like more serious disciplinary issues within the hall. Wardens are in charge of the particular residences and are loosely charged with the well being of the students both academically, psychologically and socially.

Interviewer:

Ok, let us go back to the name then. You've chosen the names of three women which is a wonderful thing. ...I'm not sure I could put my head on a block about this but there are very few statues of women struggle activists, there's a ...

Larissa Klazinga:

Absolutely

Interviewer:

They're kind of very few, ... I know there's a ... Lillian Ngoyi i has a little tug names after if I'm not mistaken.

Larissa Klazinga:

Sure

Ehm, but, you know, kind of ... is this ...undernamed, underrepresentation.. Is this why they've been chosen?

Larissa Klazinga:

To some extent, but what we also realized was some years back when we had a lot of expansion at Rhodes, we decided that it was important that women's residences be named after women and Rhodes is currently about 63% women in terms of our student intake so more and more of our buildings that are being built are women's residences and in the past those buildings have been named after men, but with the new dispensation that was found to be completely inappropriate

Interviewer:

mmm...

Larissa Klazinga:

so it gives us a fantastic opportunity to honour women and not just women activists, there are discussions around naming buildings after, for example Miriam Makeba apparently so there's a broad scope for us to honour South African women in particular and we've taken up that , that challenge.

Interviewer:

It's an interesting statistic that that 63% of the students are female...

Larissa Klazinga:

Correct.

... I wonder how that would compare to other universities around the country. One wonders if there s any significance in that? Is there a very strong somebody as somebody who's, who's a bit of an activist herself? Is there a very strong sort of women's action, activism at all?

Larissa Klazinga:

Well there is, but that doesn't really relate to the intake, like oddly, I don't know what one reads into this but women seem to just generally do better in their matric results than men do ...

Interviewer:

Yes...

Larissa Klazinga:

And in terms of our intake, we receive more applications women, more women seems to be getting matric exemptions ... consequence. Our intake tends to be more women than men.

Interviewer:

Mmm...

Larissa Klazinga:

And I don't know, but we seem to have the highest ratio of women to men in the country and we also have the highest pass rate. So...

Interviewer:

Ja, interesting...interesting, whatever it all means.

Larissa Klazinga:

Correct.

Interviewer:

Let's take a look at these women, as we both said, they're kind of represented. Lillian Ngoyi i, tell us a little bit about her.

Larissa Klazinga:

Well, she was an amazing woman. She was one of the four organizers of the woman's march on Parliament, she was a ... fantastic public speaker and an indomitable spirit who was really one of the first leaders of the African National Congress Women's League

Interviewer:

Womens ... was that one of the founders?

Larissa Klazinga:

She was one of the founders of the women's league. She was also somebody who didn't let the challenges of life get to her down so she was under a banning order for 18 years, which limped her ability, to work at her ability to kind of be successful as an activist and despite that she maintained hope that the liberation struggle would be a success, which it did.

Interviewer:

Ja and I see that she was only, she became the only women who became elective of the National Elective of the ANC in the early 50's.

Larissa Klazinga:

Correct.

Interviewer:

Which is also quite something, and of course she was there at the march..

Larissa Klazinga:

Correct.

.....(speaking at the same time).....

Larissa Klazinga:

Was a person that supposedly hammered on Strydom's door.....

Interviewer:

mmmm... you know we're going to be hearing, I'm interviewing ... from Professor Fatima Mia, who spent 113 days in prison ...

Larissa Klazinga:

yeah...

Interviewer:

and Lillian was also arrested a number of times...

Larissa Klazinga:

actually, as was Ruth First.

Interviewer:

Yes.

Larissa Klazinga:

And famously wrote about her own experiences. Ehm so look, Fatima Mia were very lucky that she was able to accept and honorary doctorate from Rhodes a number of years back, actually in a speech that she gave when she received her honorary doctorate was one of the most moving and challenging and fantastic pieces of oratory that I think I've ever heard. So certainly she is one of the people we would hope to honour in the near future.

Interviewer:

Yes yes and let's hope that people will recognize that very very soon certainly. She had a lot to say I remember we interviewed her once we were also on this programme talking about young women I think she was something of a women's rights activist as well.

Larissa Klazinga:

From very young...

Interviewer:

Yes...

Larissa Klazinga:

From very young she started getting in activism from I think as early as 12 or 13

Interviewer:

Which is quite something isn't it?

Larissa Klazinga:

As did Ruth First, actually.

Tell us, you've mentioned Ruth First a couple of times, tell us a little bit ...famously, ... married to Joe Slovo.

Larissa Klazinga:

Correct, which is one of the buildings that we're naming today so the buildings in the hall are Joe Slovo residence and ??? residence which was named during the centennial year Victoria Mxenge and Ruth First House and then the hall, which administers those four residences is named Victoria, sorry, was named Lillian Ngoyi i.

Interviewer:

mmm... and tell us about Victoria Mxenge, she's also an anti apartheid activist and I see that something like 10 000 people went to her funeral

Larissa Klazinga:

I this she is somebody who , despite being a brilliant organizer and a human rights ???, somebody who lost their life in the struggle against apartheid and who was assassinated by ???, by the apartheid state and who's murders have never been brought to book. She's someone who, I mean if you do an internet search, you find very few images of her, very from quotes from her . She's somebody who's know,

but not known about, if you know what I mean. So people know the name, but they don't really have an opportunity to engage with her, who she was as a person.

Interviewer:

Yeah, yeah well...

Larissa Klazinga:

And the, on, on her tombstone ..???.. she asked so little and gave so much.

Interviewer:

Wow

Larissa Klazinga:

And I really, I think that's so true of many struggle women, there, there was, if we look generally at the way that people are honoured in South Africa, we hear a great deal about Mandela, we hear a great deal about Oliver Tambo and yet we hear so little about women who were in the country. Women who were on the frontlines, and who, I mean, the women's march on Parliament was the largest march that had ever been organised in the country at that time.

Interviewer:

Yeah...

Larissa Klazinga:

So the women were fantastic organizers...???... but their contributions were often, have often been undervalued or not recorded.

Interviewer:

Yeah, they were just, there will be those who would say that the struggle goes on, the liberation struggle kind of upstages the women's struggle, but it's never too late and I think what's interesting about your 63% women there at Rhodes University is that I wonder how many of them know about these women. Very young women quite possibly don't.

Larissa Klazinga:

Well...

Interviewer:

So this is a good opportunity...mmm...

Larissa Klazinga:

That is why this is so important that what we've found is that particularly for the women at Victoria Mxenge house and Ruth First house, they take that legacy incredibly seriously. We spend time at the beginning of every year, ehm, educating the new intake of women students, about who these women were and what their contribution was and how they owe a debt in a sense. Like ... that old saying, you know, walk in the footsteps of giants, well, the students in these buildings they take cognisance of that, they make a real effort to ensure that the activities in those residence honour the names that they bear.

Interviewer:

Wonderful and as to Human Rights Week, just a last question: Who's going to be cutting the ribbon or whatever the ceremony ...

Larissa Klazinga:

Family members

Interviewer:

Family members, oh

Larissa Klazinga:

We are really lucky to be joined by the families of Victoria Mxenge and Lillian Ngoyi i and they'll be doing the plaque unveiling and the formal naming for us.

Interviewer:

Well... well otherwise we'll be with you in spirit. Have a ...

Larissa Klazinga:

Thank you.

Interviewer:

Fantastic, well done.

Larissa Klazinga:

Thank you very much.

Interviewer:

Thank you very much for joining us, thanks a lot.

Larissa Klazinga:

Thanks a lot for the opportunity.

Interviewer:

Larissa Klazinga, wonderful story there she's former hall warden at Rhodes University talking about their renaming programme and the honouring about struggle women. Wonderful stuff.

You're listening to Otherwise here on SAFM.....