

**A thought-provoking tale of the “cost of conscience”**

**G. Frankel, *Rivonia’s Children: Three Families and the Cost of Conscience in White South Africa***

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In the “new” South Africa, it is easy to forget the draconian character of the old order when apartheid laws controlled all dimensions of public and private life. For its primary victims, “separate development” was merely a redefinition of oppression: it was, moreover, a cynical means to divide and rule. For the system’s beneficiaries, it was a means of addressing the so-called colour question while maintaining cheap labour and political power. When necessary, this meant brutal repression, as in the Sharpeville massacre of 1960 where at least 69 innocent black people were killed.

Some liberally inclined whites saw this outrage and the subsequent state of emergency, including the outlawing of the ANC and SACP, as a reason to emigrate; others turned to armed struggle. Among the latter were a group of selfless and brave individuals engaged in varying brands of activist fervour, Marxist and non-Marxist.

It is their story that is reconstructed in this new edition with masterly precision by Pulitzer prize-winner and *Washington Post* staff writer, Glenn Frankel.<sup>16</sup> Of particular concern to the *Post’s* onetime southern African correspondent (now head of the School of Journalism at the University of Texas, Austin) are the lives of Rusty and Hilda Bernstein, Joe Slovo and Ruth First, and Harold and AnnMarie Wolpe. More importantly, his focus is on the “cost of conscience”, the subtitle of the book.

The *dramatis personae* include a veritable who’s who of South African activists. Using memoirs, contemporary accounts, newspaper clippings, trial records, documents and extensive oral testimony, Frankel has woven a remarkable story, full of pathos but ultimately edifying and inspiring.

In 1961, Lilliesleaf farm in Rivonia, on the outskirts of Johannesburg, was purchased “as an incubator for a revolution” (p 71). It was, explains Frankel, set up as the secret headquarters for the underground Communist Party and as a safe house for political fugitives. One July afternoon in 1963, the special branch carried out a successful raid. In the aftermath of this swoop, nine comrades and Nelson Mandela (who was not among those surprised at Lilliesleaf, but was arrested shortly afterwards), were charged with sabotage.

Following a trial which ran from October 1963 to June 1964, life sentences were imposed on eight of the accused. The trial itself must surely rank as one of the great show trials of South African legal history; political theatre at its most profound. On the one side were heroes of the struggle; on the other side, representatives of a malevolent and illegitimate state, bent on destroying popular opposition.

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16. *Rivonia’s Children* was first published by Jonathan Ball in 1999. This new edition has a brief revised introduction and some minor factual changes.

It was during the trial that blacks saw in stark form the presence of at least some whites in the fight for liberation and that Mandela delivered his now-famous “it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die” speech (p 236) from the dock.

Frankel has dramatically captured a heroic and uplifting drama; the trauma of families split apart by a vicious security system; the dramatic escape of Harold Wolpe and Arthur Goldreich, aided by the indomitable AnnMarie Wolpe; the unwavering principles of Bram Fischer; and the talents and warmth of Hilda Bernstein.

We are introduced to the flamboyant James Kantor, brother-in-law of Harold Wolpe, to Ruth First, the Rosa Luxemburg of the resistance movement, and many others, including shadowy special branch figures. We also see in operation the arrogant prosecutorial skills of the ambitious state prosecutor, Percy Yutar. Essentially, however, the story revolves around the Bernstein, Wolpe and First/Slovo families where the “cost of conscience” was indeed massive.

One of the many issues judiciously considered by Frankel is the disproportionate number of Jews in the liberation struggle and the extent to which “Jewishness” was a factor in their political activism. On the surface it was of no consequence. Many Jewish activists were “openly hostile to Judaism and Jewish causes” and “Jewishness quickly ceased to be part of their self-identity” (p 44). But, adds Frankel, many of these radicals came from a left-wing Lithuanian-Jewish tradition: “... even as rejectionists they were firmly within the larger family of their contentious and self-contradictory faith” (p 45).

That sort of assertion is difficult to prove. A final answer explaining the disproportionate involvement of Jews (however defined) in the struggle may never be possible. Certainly an interesting literature has developed around this phenomenon, both in South Africa and beyond: the ethics of Judaism, social marginality, self-hate and the desire to escape Jewishness, the loneliness of migration and other factors have been suggested.<sup>17</sup>

Frankel reminds us too that very often the Jewish establishment was embarrassed by its radical co-religionists. Neither can we ignore the fact that the state prosecutor was Jewish. These issues continue to engage Jews and Jewish historians. Certainly the high visibility of Jews within the radical left was not lost on the state and the National Party press. “Where does the Jew stand in the white struggle for survival?”, asked Dirk Richard, editor of *Dagbreek*.<sup>18</sup>

*Rivonia's Children* is a magisterial tale, inspiring and thought-provoking. Frankel is a consummate writer, concerned with motives and perhaps more importantly, with implications. Quite clearly those whites who challenged the apartheid order contributed to the notable degree of racial reconciliation in the new South Africa. As Frankel explains:

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17. For thought-provoking accounts on the Jewish left and its motivations in South Africa, see James Campbell, “Beyond the Pale: Immigration and the South African Left”, in Milton Shain and Richard Mendelsohn (eds), *Memories, Realities and Dreams: Aspects of the South African Jewish Experience* (Jonathan Ball, Cape Town, 2002), pp 96-162 and Gideon Shimoni, *Community and Conscience: The Jews in Apartheid South Africa* (University Press of New England for Brandeis University Press and David Philip, Hanover, New Hampshire and Cape Town, 2003).

18. Cited in R. Mendelsohn and M. Shain, *The Jews in South Africa: An Illustrated History* (Jonathan Ball, Cape Town, 2008), p 148.

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The fact that even a small group of whites was willing to put aside their privileged status and fight alongside blacks for racial justice meant to Mandela that people could not be judged solely by their skin colour; all whites should be given the chance to participate in the new society (p xviii).

For that alone, the Rivonia trialists and their families deserve the recognition and appreciation of white South Africans. Of course, ultimately, all South Africans benefit from racial reconciliation.

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