



“Ruth could have had an easy life as an academic but she followed her conscience and, in doing so, lost her life. That’s what makes her a hero in my eyes”

Ed Miliband chooses
Ruth First

1925-82

Ruth First was a South African anti-apartheid activist and academic. Born in Johannesburg, she met Nelson Mandela as a student, joined the African National Congress (ANC) and (along with Mandela) was among the defendants at the ‘Treason Trial’ of 1956. In 1963, she was jailed following a further government crackdown and held in isolation for over 100 days. The following year she went into exile, working as an academic first in Britain and then in Mozambique, where in 1982 she was killed by a letter bomb. She was married to the anti-apartheid activist Joe Slovo and had three children.

When did you first hear about Ruth First?

I met her when I was 12 years old and she came to dinner at my parents’ house with her husband, Joe Slovo, who I think was the chief of staff of the armed wing of the ANC, and a long-standing friend of my father, Ralph. Ruth was a renowned anti-apartheid ANC activist in her own right, and I remember her being a larger than life, animated, vivacious person.

Then, shortly afterwards, I recall my mum in tears as she told me that Ruth had been killed by a letter bomb sent by the South African secret police. It was a formative experience for me because it showed me the consequences that politics can have – how it can even be a matter of life and death.

What kind of person was she?

Ruth was a very charismatic person but also determined and brave. She had to be to survive in solitary confinement in a South African prison. But despite all the things that were thrown at her, she carried on fighting for what she believed in, right to the end.

What made her a hero?

Above all, her courage and commitment to a just cause. People sometimes ask me what it’s like to have brickbats thrown at me as leader of the opposition – and I think of her. What happens to people in politics here is as nothing compared to what she went through. As my father once said to me, Ruth could have had an easy life as an academic but she followed her conscience and, in doing so, lost her life. That’s what makes her a hero in my eyes.

What was Ruth First’s finest hour?

In a way it came after she died: namely, the liberation of South



Ruth First pictured in 1956. “What happened to her showed me that politics can be a matter of life and death,” says Ed Miliband

Africa. She played an important part in making that happen. My father wrote her obituary and I’ll always remember one passage in which he said: “When South Africa has had its revolution, hers will be one of the names on the roll call of martyrs which new generations will honour...”

The idea that she would become an inspiration would have probably sent her into fits of embarrassed laughter, but as my dad went on to observe: “Her life and her death have made her so.”

Is there anything you don’t particularly admire about her?

Not really. That said, her long struggle against apartheid put a huge strain on her home life. And some might argue – wrongly, in my view – that her commitment to regime change at times resulted in her putting her family second.

Can you see any parallels between her life and your own?

Only in the sense that we were both in politics, and I share her commitment to tackling injustice in my own time, in my own way. But the scale of her political struggle, and the challenges she faced, put mine in perspective.

If you could meet Ruth First, what would you ask her?

I’d ask Ruth how she kept going in the face of such adversity, despite the personal risks involved and the price she paid in terms of family life. **E**

Ed Miliband was talking to York Membery

Ed Miliband was elected a Labour MP in 2005 and served in the cabinet from 2007–10. In 2010 he was elected leader of the Labour party