

[Eidelberg on Frankel, 'Rivonia's Children: Three Families and the Cost of Conscience in White South Africa'](#)

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Glenn Frankel. *Rivonia's Children: Three Families and the Cost of Conscience in White South Africa.* New York: Continuum, 2001. 381 pp. \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8264-1331-4.

Reviewed by Phil Eidelberg (History Department, University of South Africa) **Published on** H-SAfrica (May, 2002)

Once again, we have an account of the great Rivonia trial of 1964, which effectively destroyed the ANC and its communist allies, at least in so far as their activities in South Africa were concerned. It would take some twenty years for the ANC to begin to reconstitute itself within South Africa, via the UDF. And by then both it and its apartheid adversaries would have been significantly transformed. Appropriately enough, Glenn Frankel refers to his heroes as Rivonia's Children because Rivonia is the place where their dream of revolution was forever shattered (p.6).

The book is not a particularly original work, nor is it intended to be. Its strength is rather in its good writing style and it is intended in particular for the broad reading public. The author is, after all, not a historian. His aim is rather to retell the tale and to tell it well. The work's main distinction is that it provides a full, one-volume account written by someone, for once, with no personal connection, directly or indirectly, to the events described. It has also been written recently and thus provides a very comprehensive bibliography of the subject.

On the other hand, Frankel perhaps goes too far when he takes it upon himself to try to rescue from obscurity a group of people (presumably the three families under discussion) who deserve our critical attention, admiration and respect (p.9). This comment is peculiar since the literature on the topic, especially primary but even secondary accounts, is extensive, making such a rescue unnecessary .[1] As if to underline this point, and almost simultaneously with Frankel's publication, one of his main protagonists, Rusty Bernstein, published his own personal account of the Rivonia saga.[2]

Indeed the Rivonia trial has become a sort of South African Passion Play--a first-century Life of Christ set in modern dress. We have Jesus-and-his-disciples now represented by prominent members of the ANC and especially the South African Communist Party; the anti-Christian Roman Empire reincarnated in the South African Apartheid State; Pontius Pilate as Judge Quartus de Wet This is probably in fact just why the story never seems to lose its appeal and sense of immediacy, becoming in fact the greatest [twentieth-century South African] story ever told.

One of the obvious questions raised by such a book (p.7) is why a select group of whites, racially privileged by South African apartheid, chose to commit themselves to the communist party and the African National Congress. This was, after all, during the 1950s and early 1960s, a period when political resistance was becoming increasingly difficult and dangerous, if not hopeless. Yet although Glenn Frankel does address himself to this issue, he does not really try to analyse it in any great detail. To the degree that he touches upon it at all, he focuses more on the moral imperative these

people had to oppose evil, which he sees as a traditional Jewish response to tyranny (pp.9, 190-191). He also, and with some justification, briefly refers to the pragmatic argument that, in the long run, Jewish interests would best be served by siding with the oppressed majority that would inevitably come to power someday (p.191). As he perceptively points out, they believed that state repression was gaining in strength, but so was the liberation movement (p.61). Only the arrests and trial at Rivonia would shatter these illusions (p.41).

Other than the fact that the three families discussed (the Slovos, Bernsteins and Wolpes) were all Jews, the reader never quite understands, at least not from this book, what was so specifically Jewish about their resistance. The Afrikaner and non-Jew, Bram Fischer, for example, seems to have undergone the same moral choice and, if anything, as Frankel himself reminds us (Chapter 9), paid a far higher price.

Ironically, Frankel's protagonists do not appear to have thought of themselves as Jews at all, at least not by the time they had committed themselves to the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the ANC. Rusty Bernstein significantly does not ever mention his Jewishness in his lengthy 345-page memoirs.[3] Although Frankel is aware of this lack of a meaningful sense of Jewish commitment among these people, he only discusses this once (p.54), almost incidentally, and does not sufficiently integrate this phenomenon into the rest of his monograph.

The point which bears emphasising is not simply that the SACP included a disproportionate number of Jews (pp.53, 55-57). It is rather that those Jews who did join the Party did so precisely in order to assimilate into a broader, non-Jewish context, a form of secularised Christianity.[4] Their newly adopted faith would now be expressed in a commitment to care for the poor--the African majority.

The same phenomenon, incidentally, was not unique to South Africa but existed in Eastern Europe as well, where Jews would join leftist parties for similar reasons. In Eastern Europe converting to socialism meant escaping cultural parochialism (the ghetto and the shtetl) in exchange for a broader church--the secular religion of the vast, non-Jewish majority. In South Africa, parallel drives must have motivated Jews (and white Afrikaners such as Bram Fischer, Beyers Naude and Carl Niehaus) to escape their own respective ghettos. The fact that South African Jews, such as Joe Slovo, were usually originally from Eastern Europe made their proclivity to join the left all the more natural.

It might, therefore, be argued that the appeal of the South African left lay not simply in its alleged ethical message--compassion for the poor, but rather that this same compassion was seen to Jews and non-Jews alike, as proof of conversion to what was still one of the great hegemonic value systems of the West, even as late as the mid-twentieth century. In South Africa, socialism was just as much a white ideology as apartheid but it had the advantage of having, in contrast to apartheid, a wide overseas audience, culturally if not always politically. Even within non-socialist circles in Europe and America, lip service was always paid to a social commitment to helping the poor. In the Soviet Union this support was explicitly political as well. Conversely, it was (and still is) considered most politically incorrect to deny compassion for the poor, let alone speak ill of them, at least in public. Officially, it was maintained as axiomatic that individuals, no matter how poor and how unskilled, had certain inalienable rights simply because they were human.

Likewise, from a historical point of view, this decision to join the left was not necessarily always an

ethical or pragmatic decision. It was more fundamentally an instinctive groping for a cultural identity whose roots were in fact an archaic legacy of Medieval Christian Europe--the Catholic West as well as the Orthodox East. It was the strong appeal of this form of cultural identity politics which must have played such a compelling role in motivating white members of the SACP and ANC, Jews and non-Jews alike, to challenge the apartheid state. Almost as a reflex action, they were willing to take enormous personal risks and at a time when apartheid appeared to be growing from strength to strength during the 1950s and 1960s.

To Slovo, writing in 1982-1983, there were two categories of people who can always be counted on to make whatever sacrifices are demanded by a worthwhile social cause a good communist and a good Christian.[5] His preoccupation with the convergence between Christianity and socialism was ultimately the theme of a talk he delivered at the University of Cape Town in January, 1994, where he quoted the anti-apartheid Anglican cleric, Bishop Trevor Huddleston, on this same issue.[6] To Slovo it was apartheid and capitalism which were anti-Christian.[7] As he himself emphasised, quoting the biblical scholar, Jose Porfirio Miranda, the origin of the Communist idea in the history of the West is the New Testament.[8] In particular, Slovo repeatedly referred to the wretched of the earth,[9] which he considered the natural constituency of both the New Testament and socialism.[10]

Frankel concludes his book by referring to the fact that his heroes had lost their battle but won the war, and that they had contributed to a movement which had turned the tide of history (p.338). This is only a half truth. It is true in the sense that the African National Congress eventually came to power. But its coming to power would be achieved within a very different historical context and within a very different value system from the ones that had existed in 1964 at the time of the Rivonia Trial. It would be a victory that would entail the total marginalisation of any socialist ideal which people such as the Bernsteins, the Slovos and the Wolpes had fought for. Their religious conversion had perhaps been in vain after all. To the degree that they had survived apartheid, they had in fact lived long enough to become tragic anachronisms in their own time.

Notes

[1]. On this point, see also the review by V. Shubin in *Politikon* 28 (1), May 2001, 107.

[2]. Rusty Bernstein, *Memory Against Forgetting: Memoirs from a Life in South African Politics, 1938-1964* (Johannesburg, 1999).

[3]. Bernstein, *Memory Against Forgetting*.

[4]. Appropriately, Karl Marx himself came from a Jewish family recently converted to Christianity.

[5]. H. Dolny, ed., *Slovo: The Unfinished Autobiography* (Randburg, 1995), 126.

[6]. J. Slovo, "Shared Values: Socialism and Religion," *African Communist*, 136 (First Quarter, 1994), 45.

[7]. Slovo, "Shared Values," 46, 50.

[8]. Slovo, "Shared Values," 48.

[9]. J. Slovo, "Political Report: Report to the 8th Party Congress," *African Communist*, 128 (First Quarter, 1992), 22; Slovo, *Shared Values*, 45.

[10]. Slovo, "Shared Values," 45-46.

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