

# BOOKS

## The World That Was Ours

Hilda Bernstein

*Heinemann*, 246 pp., 42s.

OF THE MANY recent books on the hated apartheid system in South Africa this is easily the most gripping for the ordinary reader. It does not set out to make a deep analysis of the roots of apartheid. Yet, in its vivid portrayal of the personal experiences of the Bernstein family it cannot fail to arouse the anger of any reader.

Hilda (the author) and Lionel Bernstein (popularly known as Rusty for his ginger hair) came to know each other because of their common concern with the fight for racial equality.

They first met as members of the Labour Party League of Youth, but soon broke away because it rejected Africans as equals. Before the world war both joined the Communist Party (then legal) which, in the author's words, was '... the only political party that had no colour-bar, and unified diverse racial and social groups'.

From the outset of their political life they were completely integrated with the African struggle for liberation, and in 1946 both were arrested for assisting the strike of African mine-workers. Towards the end of the war (though the vote was confined to whites) Hilda was elected to the Johannesburg City Council. In this capacity she was able to visit the broken-down African shantytowns and realised even more the need to change these terrible conditions.

Earlier books have portrayed the vile character and consequences of apartheid. What is different in this one is the simple but penetrating narrative of the experiences of one

family, while at the same time entwining this with a political appraisal of the nature of the struggle against it. It frankly describes the uncertainty and torturing fears of the author about the fate of her husband, and the disturbing impact on the two children—the girl Toni and the boy Keith.

Who can review with equanimity the events of the past 20 years since the 1948 'Suppression of Communism Act' in South Africa? It led to Sharpeville in 1960, to the infamous Treason Trial which lasted for four years, and to the Rivonia Trial of 1963 at which Nelson Mandela and other African leaders were given savage sentences.

If these experiences arouse hatred for the apartheid system the courageous struggle against it also creates unbounded pride and respect for those who resisted. The description of the crowd outside the court at the trial of Nelson Mandela (when he was first remanded on bail) is an inspiring expression of the spirit of revolt:

'So we moved, in a unit, a solid mass; we were not separate people but a single living whole... singing contempt of the court, its trappings and flunkeys, singing defiance of the police, their arms and power, singing belief in the future, in freedom, in the possibility of happiness. Each of us felt enlarged and released, as though the sound of the singing alone could liberate us from the sorrows and terrors of our lives and lift us above the possibility of defeat and despair.'

There is no space to describe all the stages of the struggle of the Bernsteins, finally left with no alternative but to launch on a hazardous escape from South Africa. Many other courageous fighters have been forced also to take this course. All of them have played a noble part in the struggle in South Africa, and are still waging the fight from outside. I know of no

other book which has such a high quality of convincing the Labour and progressive movement outside South Africa to redouble their efforts in solidarity action with those still in

South Africa who are waging a brave struggle against a system equally as vile as, and in some respects even worse, than that of Hitler fascism.

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