

# Farm that changed history

A nondescript plot in Rivonia that once housed the secret headquarters of Umkhonto weSizwe has been turned into a museum and learning centre, writes **KHUTHALA NANDIPHA**

**O**N A winter's afternoon in 1963, a dry cleaning and flower van approached Liliesleaf Farm in Rivonia. Armed policemen stormed the farm looking for Walter Sisulu, but got more than they bargained for.

Twelve leaders of the African National Congress (ANC) were surrounded and arrested for plotting to overthrow the apartheid government.

"People were flying through windows and doors in all directions. I ran around like a headless chicken trying to get to the toilet to flush my notebook," recalls Dennis Goldberg (74), a member of the South African Communist Party (SACP) and then technical officer for Umkhonto we Sizwe.

Goldberg had been working with senior members of the banned ANC and SACP on political and military policies and strategies.

The members included Sisulu, Nelson Mandela, Govan Mbeki, Bram Fischer, Joe Slovo, Raymond Mhlaba and Harold Wolpe.

"I had been investigating arms production because I was a civil en-

gineer. I lent my technical skills to the movement," Goldberg says.

He adds that for those few minutes, the farm was in chaos.

"We were unarmed and unprepared."

Ironically, the day of the raid was meant to be the group's last day at the farm. The leadership had been worried that Liliesleaf could be exposed, and they had planned to move to another farm.

The two organisations had acquired Liliesleaf through Navian (Pty) Ltd, which was effectively a front for the communist party.

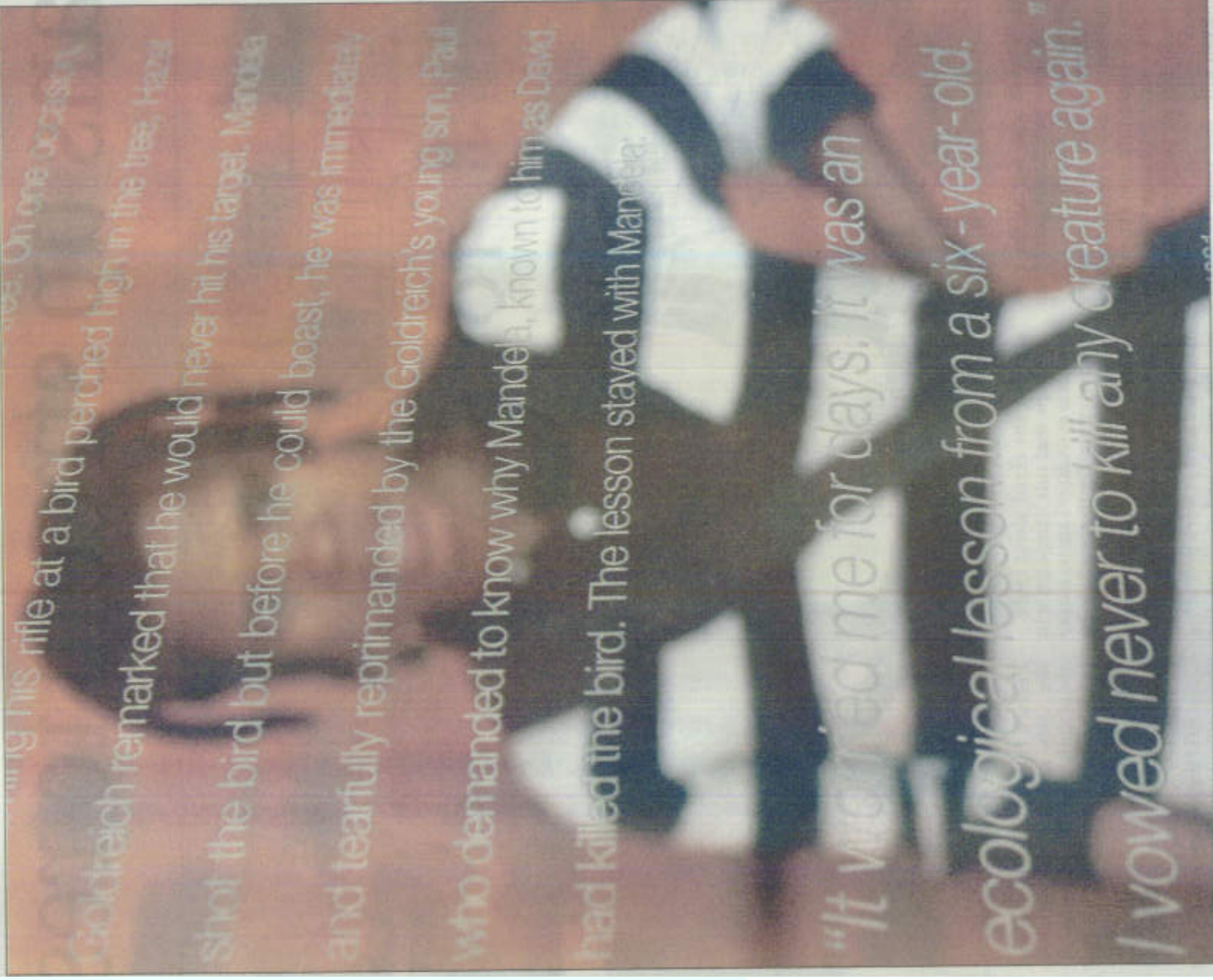
"We disguised it as Arthur Goldreich's home and it continued to operate as a farm," explains Goldberg.

The funds to purchase the 28-acre farm came from the former Soviet Union via Zurich.

In 1964 Goldberg was sentenced in the famous Rivonia Trial to four terms of life imprisonment. He spent 22 years in prison.

"When we took on the government we knew we were playing with fire, but it had to be done," he says.

"Whatever mistakes we made



**WRITING'S ON THE WALL** . . . Visitors to Liliesleaf are treated to fascinating stories from struggle veterans. It was at this farm that Nelson Mandela hid, pretending to be a labourer  
**Pictures: Khaya Ngwenya**

with Liliesleaf, it was for a good cause. In the end we won."

Goldberg and the other leaders still do not know how their cover was blown.

However, there is heavy speculation that British and American intelligence blew their cover.

Nicholas Wolpe, son of Harold Wolpe, one of the leaders who were

arrested but escaped, has set up the Liliesleaf Trust with the objective of preserving the heritage and legacy of the farm by turning it into a museum and learning centre.



**HIDEOUT** . . . Liliesleaf farm was the secret headquarters of Umkhonto we Sizwe. It is behind these walls that struggle leaders strategised a plan that was to change South African history

He shares the same sentiments that an external agency blew the activists' cover.

"One of our audiovisual guys used to camp near here with his family in the '60s. He recalls seeing people climbing up a telephone line near the farm every day and fiddling with the boxes. It had to have been an external intelligence agency because a home-based one would have tapped (the line) at the exchange," he says.

Wolpe is investigating this intensely because he is determined to tell as much of Liliesleaf's history as possible.

"Primarily we focus on South Africa's liberation struggle, most of which took place here," says Wolpe.

Although the farm has become a residential area, there are five acres left, and about 60% of the buildings and structures are still standing.

Most of the buildings have been restored using original materials.

At the manor house, visitors can observe historical items such as a safe in one of the rooms where the leaders hid their documents.

Outside is a water tank where Mandela preferred to stash his papers. A truck that was used to transport weapons into the country is still parked outside with an "Africa Lin-

terland Camping Safari" logo. "It was used as a disguise while crossing the border into the country," explains Wolpe.

The plan is to turn the site into

an interactive audiovisual museum, resource centre and liberation centre. About 500 hours of footage has been collected for viewing at the resource centre.

A creche, coffee shop and 66-seat-er auditorium will also be added.

Bookings to tour the site will open in October but the official opening is scheduled for June 2008.



**HEROES** . . . Photos of the senior leaders of the ANC and SACP, who used to meet at Liliesleaf Farm, line the walls of the learning centre

