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MK Special Operations Unit Project

Interviews

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Aurora, West Coast of Western Cape

A bit about your personal details first. How did you become socially and politically aware? Did your parents or other family members influence you in this regard?

I was born in Cape Town in 1951 and grew up in Mossel Bay on the Cape South Coast, where my Greek parents had a café, where we all worked. My parents were not progressive, they were very standard conservative immigrants.

But, my mother had been in Greece during the Nazi occupation of 1941 to 1945, and on the island where she lived, Lesbos, there was a great deal of resistance, of guerrilla activities, against the Nazis. This, along with stories of the domination and resistance to the Ottomans – Lesbos was liberated only after 1918 – are the stories that I grew up with. I came to feel that resisting bad things was what one should do. Her stories made me conscious of oppression, fascism, empire, and of the need for action.

When I went to UCT (University of Cape Town), I tried unsuccessfully to join NUSAS (National Union of South African Students), I really couldn't fit in there. Perhaps it was a class issue?

After university, I travelled, hitchhiked, to Eastern Europe and I found it really interesting. On return, I taught at a Coloured school in 1977, Windemere Senior Secondary in Kensington in Cape Town. I learnt a phenomenal amount from these kids - textures of black life, if you like, which I wasn't aware or conscious of. I re-met some of the then Standard 7's much later in the UDF (United Democratic Front) organisations!

I went to Lesotho, and I met the ANC-structures there. I taught at Thabeng High School in Morija. From 1976 onwards, there were a lot of South African exiles, youngsters, the '76 generation, as they became known, who came to

the school. The UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees) had built an additional boys hostel and another for girls at the school to accommodate the influx. I was the first White South African teacher at the school, and these politicised youngsters put me through my paces! Well, we South Africans were drawn to each other, and again their experiences had an enormous impact on me.

The facilities at our school were very modest, and at one stage, the South Africans staged a protest, and through this, if I recall correctly, I met Phyllis Naidoo who was in exile in Lesotho at the time, and through her, Chris Hani, who was the ANC representative. This is how I was recruited into the liberation movement.

Comrade Chris organised my training, contributed to my political development, and critically, my survival in the underground.

Were you recruited into the ANC or into MK specifically?

Comrade Chris recruited me into the Party (the SACP). At the time, two MK comrades, comrades Solly and Mathabatha – which were probably their MK names – were also trying to recruit me into MK directly, but comrade Chris stopped that. He said that we're going to do it in a more integrated way. I later went for more training in Moscow, in MCW (military combat work).

Anyway, I left Lesotho at the beginning of 1981, and went to newly independent Zimbabwe where I lived for six months before returning to Cape Town. I met Rodney (Wilkinson) and Heather (Gray) in Zimbabwe during this period.

They came to stay at the house of a Zimbabwean, Jackie Cahi, where I was staying. Rodney comes along and tells me that he's got the building plans for Koeberg, the nuclear power utility, and wants to get them to the ANC. I was in contact with (veteran trade unionist, SACP and ANC leader) Ray Alexander - who I had met in Lesotho – and she, together with Mac Maharaj (veteran ANC SACP and MK leader) and devised a plan: to get the plans but not to compromise my situation. This was not long after Renfrew Christie had been arrested for working with the ANC on nuclear issues, and the ANC comrades were very nervous, especially as Rodney and Heather were friends-of-friends, so my ability to vouch for them was limited.

The plan to get the Koeberg design plans to the ANC played out through Jeremy (a Zimbabwe African Peoples' Union leader) and Joan Brickhill (an ANC activist): Rodney would give the plans to them, and they would pass the plans on to the ANC. I was to take Rodney plus plans to their home, on a particular

Sunday afternoon. Part of the plan was that the Brickhills would not be home but they would leave a window open so that we could toss the plans into the house. Rodney did not know about this last bit, that they would not be there, so when we got there and they were not at home, Rodney got cold feet – he did not want to toss the plans into the house, he wanted to put the plans in their hands. Of course, he finally threw the plans through the window, after quite a bit of teasing and talking.

I left Harare soon after for Cape Town and lost track of developments, other than through the social friendship networks.

When did you go back to Cape Town from Harare?

In mid-year 1981 after six months in Zimbabwe. I initially got a teaching job on the Cape Flats, and after about three and a half years, went to work at the UCT Education Faculty and became involved in teacher research and development.

In Lesotho you connected with comrades Phyllis and Chris and interacted with the 1976 student exiles, in Harare you met up with comrades Mac and Ray, weren't you vulnerable to being picked up by the security police here?

During my Lesotho years I had a lot of problems at the border on the South African side – I was often strip-searched, and once I was taken to the Ladybrand police station where they partly stripped the car as well. They put a mark in my passport which seemed to trigger these searches. I never had these problems crossing from Zimbabwe. Whilst I lived in Lesotho and even in Zimbabwe, I didn't socialise or be seen with these leadership comrades, nor did I hang around ANC social circles.

Similarly, when I was back in Cape Town, I didn't socialise with the White left. I was an ordinary member of UWO (United Women's Organisation) and other UDF organisations. I went to the township daily to teach, and I lived a life way under the radar so that my profile did not draw attention. With my training, I was able to build a profile of a free spirit, hitchhiking hippie, if you like. This changed after 1987, and until 1990, I more or less lived in hiding. I was working at UCT at the time and I kept safe by house sitting for academics when they went on sabbatical. So, every few months I moved home. This whole period was awful – there were a number of big arrests and trials, which had an enormously negative impact on our work.

You know, one of the things that struck me after 1990 – and when we started talking about our involvement – is that nobody ever said that they were scared!

My healthy fear is what I think kept me active and sane. Comrade Ray had coached me to be conscious of fear and how to manage it.

Were you given any specific tasks by the ANC to carry out when you came back to Cape Town, and if so, what?

Well, initially a huge chunk of my time was about establishing some sort of communication; the ANC was re-activating in the Western Cape during this time; it was '81. Another activity was to re-activate comrades and set up underground structures. It was the beginning of the UDF and these structures provided assistance in establishing the UDF. In the later years, most of our activities were focused on carrying out political and military operations. Until 1990, I was on the RMPC (Regional Political Military Committee).

So, who was your Commander?

Until the December '82 raid (South African Defence Force into Lesotho that killed 42 people), I was reporting to Lesotho, to comrades Chris and Gini, who was killed in the December raid. Chris' wife, comrade Limpho, worked at a travel agent on the main road in Maseru. Her desk was at the window where I would present myself, for her to see, which would alert comrade Chris to my arrival. A meeting would then be arranged with him. After the raid, our reporting was directly to Lusaka via comrades in Harare.

Once you're back in the country what contact exactly do you have with Heather and Rodney?

Mostly social. I knew he was working at Koeberg. We never talked about it directly. My contact with Heather was more for personal support as she often expressed her worries and concern for Rodney. Rodney had this softness for drinking and she was worried. Rodney would often bubble over with excitement as his Koeberg operation was developing, but we never talked about it directly or in any significant manner.

When Koeberg occurs, where were you?

I was in Lesotho, having travelled there at the start of the school holidays with a very solid legend. And this was days after the raid. Most school holidays I had been going to Lesotho for ANC work and my lift for this trip was with a couple of mountain hikers: we, I would say, were going mountain climbing. Comrade OR came to Lesotho for the funerals, which I was instructed not to attend. I looked after, as it were, comrades who had been injured in the raid at Phyllis' house. It was very sad.

What was your response to the Koeberg operation being carried out?

I was absolutely joyous! It was a few days after the raid, supposedly as a retaliation, but of course, I knew that was not true at all.

The operation delayed the start-up of the facility for at least a year, and, Rodney had carried out an incredible operation, which brought some well deserved credit to MK.

Did you know that Rodney's and Heather's operation was part of a special MK unit called Special Operations?

I didn't. Mostly I was only concerned about knowledge that assisted my work directly.

Of MK's operations as a whole, which among them stand out for you?

Off the top of my head, I suppose Sasol and Koeberg, and the McBride story was very powerful.

After 1990 what happens to you?

After 1990 I assisted to establish the legal structures, and later worked for the ANC in the province fulltime, up to the first elections. Achieving the first democratic elections in 1994 was my cut-off point: I joined the struggle to solidify my birthright since my parents were foreign. For me votes-for-all was the most important thing.

By 1994, after 17 years of operational activity, I was exhausted, perhaps an emotional wreck. Comrade Chris' murder in 1993 changed the trajectory of my involvement: I met comrade Chris the Thursday before he was murdered and our preliminary discussion was about working in the national office of the SACP. So, that didn't happen, but more critically, the SACP did some harsh things to old members! After our first elections, I continued to attend branch meetings of the ANC, SACP, and so on. Currently I don't even do that.

What do you make of where the ANC and country are now?

When considering where we have come from, of all those generations of colonialism and apartheid, I am very positive about where we are. I don't feel so good about our path to socialism however. It seems that the left has fractured, imploded, and lost touch with the issues confronting ordinary working people. It is critical that all the organisations of the left work together,

and that the youth of these structures should be out doing more and rhetoricalising a great deal less!

If you knew then in the '80s when you took up the struggle and went into the underground what the country would become now, would you still have been prepared to do what you did?

Yes, 100%!

I feel that the struggle humanised me, I am forever grateful for the opportunity I had to serve in it.

I have always felt immensely privileged to have touched history, to have assisted to bring peace to our country, and hopefully with time, prosperity as well.