MK Special Operations Unit Project

Interviews

Hélène Marinis Passtoors

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Pretoria, Johannesburg and telephonically (in Belgium)

Tell us a bit about your family background, and how you became politically aware?

Let me first explain my surnames. Marinis is the name I chose upon divorce in 1979 and by which I was known. Hélène Marinis was the maiden name of my dear grandmother, godmother and namesake, who played a very big role in my upbringing and my becoming an independent woman. An official name change was still pending when I was arrested in Johannesburg in 1985. The apartheid authorities decided, against my will, to use my maiden name, Passtoors, that I hadn't used since my marriage in 1966 and didn't want to take back. Before, I was known as Hélène Van Leynseele - my children and ex-husband's surname. I published under that name and after 1979 under Marinis. Still now in Mozambique and other places, I am known by Marinis. But in South Africa and in all that refers to my past in the struggle, I am known by Passtoors. So now I want to use both names.

I was born close to the border of Belgium and the Netherlands, in a family of Belgian and Dutch ascent. My parents were conservative liberals, but the kind with strong humanistic values. So they were against racism and supported the emancipation of women.

I was born in 1942, the same year, by the way, as Chris Hani, Pallo Jordan, Thabo Mbeki and Jacob Zuma. It was the Chinese 'Year of the Horse'. I think we all got from being born that year a tendency to be impetuous, a bit like horses can be (laughter).

I was born on 9 August, almost like a premonition, as that became Women's Day and is now a holiday in South Africa. Sometimes I think these convergent symbols are a bit too much for comfort.

I was born during World War II, I'm a war child. My whole childhood and youth were very much under the shadow of this war. And the evidence of the camps and the Nazi crimes came out little by little. So even as kids, a bit amazingly, we were quite early on shown documentary films about the Nazis that were pretty awful. Most people became strongly anti-fascist. There were also many stories about resistance fighters who became our big heroes.
And then you become a teenager and you start doubting things, you know. I had a Jesuit education. Jesuits teach to reason very well, to debate.

There was the Suez Crisis and all the news about President Nasser of Egypt. That was 1956, and for us at boarding school this was wonderful – because there was a petrol crisis and restrictions on driving on weekends. This meant a change in the rules – and suddenly the boarding school allowed us to go home more, by train.

This was a great change, so we asked who's this chap, Nasser? We liked him (laughter)? Then we said, what do the British and French have to do with Egypt? What's the big deal about Nasser nationalising the Suez Canal? That's the country of the Egyptians. And so, we became conscious of colonialism. With a few friends, we set up a little secret society which we called the Mau Mau. And we had our slogan "Merdeka", which in Indonesia means freedom and was the big slogan of the freedom struggle from the Dutch colonisers.

You were fourteen years old then?

Fourteen, fifteen. You know, that age as a teenager when you start becoming more aware. We had become very much anti-fascist. And then there was the Cold War. But we didn't really know what to think. My father said he had left the Resistance very early on because there were too many Communists (laughter). So, of course, the critical daughter that I was, I was very much ashamed of him. He was not the Resistance hero I would have liked him to have been.

I told him, wasn't it to beat Hitler? Why should it only be Liberals – Communists were also very much part of the struggle? Of course, my questions angered my dad; it was the beginning of the distance between us. Until his death, politics poisoned our relationship. Generally, I was never very happy with my environment, I always wanted to leave.

You were restless?

Well, when I was about eight years old, I remember that I was walking with my father and he said it looks as if you were supposed to have been born elsewhere! I don't know why he said that, perhaps because I was cold always,

perhaps because I was a dreamer, as he kept saying… So apparently, I've had that restlessness, as you call it, my whole life. After school I wanted to do bio-chemistry. But then my parents were in divorce proceedings and couldn't agree on who would pay for my studies.

So I dropped out and worked at Shell. But it was too dryly scientific while I was also into theatre and music and all that. I left and did a course on publishing and the book trade. And then I managed to get a job in America. I would've left for anywhere. If the Soviet Union or Cuba would've offered me something, I would've gone there. So that was 1963-64.

In Los Angeles, I got a job in a pharmaceutical company as the 'multilingual' social secretary of the Chairman of the Board.

Then I met my husband Pierre, a Belgian. My dad said, 'did you have to go to America to find a Belgian husband' (laughter)?

There were the first big anti-Vietnam demonstrations. We got the first real evidence from Vietnam of what they were doing with napalm. For a long time, Americans just wouldn't believe it, even hard evidence, photographs. That's something I, as a European, found hard to understand, because of the revelations about Nazi Germany after the war and all those many people claiming they 'didn't know'.

At the same time, there was the Civil Rights movement. So, those were the times of Martin Luther King and 'Black power', and then the very big uprising in Watt's Ghetto in Los Angeles. The violence of the police there! In California they were these hefty, bulky chaps, going in the ghetto with guns sticking out of their cars to shoot their fellow citizens! It was something that we, in Europe, had never seen. We never saw armed policemen or soldiers in the streets. And we got very disgusted with the United States, the violence, the lies, the manipulation, the media. And so, we left as soon as my husband, Pierre, could get a job as a researcher and lecturer at the University of Kinshasa.

Which year would that have been, can you remember?

1967. Straight from the heady sixties in the U.S. to the heady hopes of newly independent Africa… The university was called Université de Lovanium. The Belgians hadn't invested in the local population's university education. Lovanium was the first university, founded by the Belgian Catholic University of Louvain in 1954. Unlike in French colonies, the Congolese couldn't get scholarships to study in Belgium either, except some priests. I think there were just about 20 very recently university educated Congolese at the time of independence in 1960. It was just incredible!

So what were you doing there when Pierre was lecturing in anthropology?

First, I was just there as his wife. Our first baby was born in September 1967. I registered for an anthropology degree and then got drawn to African linguistics.

Pierre did research with fishermen-traders on the Congo River basin. And I worked on local language issues. They were a very special, very wonderful people that had hardly been colonised mentally. They'd always had their own business, they were independent. There were not many poor people, and some were richer than us. This made for an experience of, let's say, equality and mutual respect. I really liked that. I'd been afraid to land in a cliché situation of 'poor little Africans in the bush'. It was nothing like the colonial clichés. So I was happy to meet the Water People, as they were called, who saw no reason to look up to us as Whities or educated people.

I never had this experience of wanting to 'do something for those poor people', you know, the do-gooder type of thing. I got to hate those type of people because, generous as they might be, they generally shy away from considering their position in terms of the race, class and power relations. Or else they think they can be exceptions because they want to do good. Those are what one comrade called 'sweet racists'. So I've never been involved with Western development NGOs. I've never liked them because from my early days in the Congo, it was easy to see the inequality, even racism, that is part of their DNA.

When I came to Congo, I felt I just could listen and learn, and I think that was important in my development. It's also why I got interested in linguistics, the different ways of expressing oneself, the beauty and precision of African languages, oral history, and oral literature. It opens up new worlds.

Was Pierre on the Left?

No, but he was an Africanist scholar. He was anti-colonial and he said as an anthropologist he would never do research in South Africa under apartheid. He was an a-political academic. For me, it's in Congo that moral outrage made place for budding political consciousness.

How long were you in the Congo?

From 1967 to 1974. We saw the day-to-day consolidation of Mobutu as a dictator. The campus was the only place of resistance against the Mobutu dictatorship. There were two student uprisings in '69 and '71.

I saw friends being shot. Many were arrested or disappeared. It was terrible! In ’71, Mobutu closed down the university and nationalised it. By ’74, the repression meant the line between just looking on in silence and being accomplices in the dictatorship was being blurred. So, we decided to leave for Belgium.

I got a Master’s Degree at the University of Leiden and became a research assistant. I did research in West Africa on a language called Anyi-Baule in Côte d’Ivoire.

I wanted to go back to Africa. I wasn’t going to stay in Europe. And then Pierre and I broke up, unfortunately. We couldn’t find what we had in Congo, a country where we could both work and live at the same time, not necessarily work together. So actually, we broke up mainly because we couldn’t go back to Africa together. And we didn’t really want to live in Europe. It felt claustrophobic. In Africa, the orientation is towards the outside world but in Europe, it’s all about the little nuclear family with much looser links to the outside world. It made me very restless, I felt trapped. Even now that I live in Belgium mainly to be closer to my family, and it’s pleasant, my identity remains multiple, I’ve integrated the ways and values of several peoples and cultures, with the strongest links to South Africa.

I’m basically an observer, but not in a traveller’s way. ‘I hate travelling and travellers’, as anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss put it so well. In the way of learning, I’m more like a sponge taking time to absorb things. As a journalist, I can’t write about a situation or country I don’t feel. Perhaps that’s my way of life, my personality. A bird nesting where the wind takes it, a cosmopolitan.

Anyway, I couldn’t stand the idea of being an Africanist in the way of a traveling salesman: going to Africa to collect nice research data and then back to Europe to write good articles and make a career. I wanted to live in Africa, get to know the country and people where I work, keep the capacity for amazement, love for the unexpected. Then came an offer from the University Eduardo Mondlane in Mozambique to set up a new linguistics department together with a Polish colleague. And, of course, Mozambique at the time had just become independent…

So when did you go to Mozambique?

We got there in January ’81, on the very day of the funeral of the comrades killed in the Matola raid by the apartheid regime. Among them Obadi, the legendary Commander of Special Ops. The day President Samora Machel defiantly said: ‘Let them come!’ But then they did come, with RENAMO and civil war and ever more destructive economic destabilisation…

You met Klaas de Jonge at Leiden before you came?...

He worked in the same Africa Study Centre as my husband in Leiden, so I knew him and then we had a bit of a relationship. But he wanted to come also to Mozambique and he didn't have a job there. And then the Dutch Ministry kind of pushed us saying, in Mozambique, you know, I'd get a house from the university, but FRELIMO doesn't like couples who are not married, so there might be a problem for a residence permit for Klaas. So we said we get married then. And so we did one day, we didn't even tell the kids or anyone, we told them later. So that was a bit of, I think, a mistake. We didn't know each other well enough.

The university was full of ANC people. There was Ruth First, Albie Sachs, Alpheus Mangezi, Rob Davies, Dan O'Meara and others. Ruth was a kind of a mentor to us in human sciences. And we also got to know her socially along with Joe Slovo, Sue Rabkin, and comrades like Indres Naidoo who had a lot of contact with foreign *cooperantes* (internationalists).

Through the Congo experience, I had evolved pretty much to the Left. But I'd never been in a Communist Party or any other party. I had no political profile in Europe. Klaas had a very long political profile.

You meet Joe Slovo?

At first socially only. Mozambique being a socialist system, we got talking politics.

Did you identify yourself as socialist before you went to Mozambique?

Yes, but without a party affiliation.

Were you drawn to Mozambique because it was socialist?

Among other reasons, but also it was a professional challenge because of the academic work. It was pioneering because very little was known about Mozambican languages. There had been no tradition of researching, teaching or even writing them under Portuguese rule.

How did you get involved with the ANC and why?

We used to meet Slovo and Ruth socially but initially I met Ruth more often at the university. Then in the course of the year, I fell ill and the Mozambican doctors couldn't identify the problem. The Mozambique National Medical Council finally said, 'listen, you have to go abroad for treatment. You have to go to South Africa or back to Belgium.'

Well, I'd never thought in my life that I'd ever go to South Africa under apartheid. That was a big thing. But with four kids, it was not easy to go back to Belgium for an indefinite time, so I went to South Africa. This was in August '81.

That was my first experience of Apartheid, and it was just to me absolutely incredible. Ruth had told me to go to the General Hospital. I went the very first day and when I got there it was all very complicated, although I had all my papers, my medical file and so on. Finally, a young doctor came and said, 'You know, I can't treat you in this hospital'. I said what? Being so new in South Africa, I didn't even realise he was White. If you've lived long enough in Africa, skin colour is generally not the first thing you notice. The doctor took me apart and said 'I can't help you, there's a new hospital for Whites' (laughter), 'it's not here anymore'. The first address I went to in South Africa was a problem because of race (laughter).

So, he said, 'Just wait in the hall and I'll get the girls', as they would refer to African women in those days, 'to get you into a taxi, so you don't get lost again'. He said, 'You must be coming from outside. And then, these women, they're sitting there at the reception desk and making fun. Of course, I didn't understand South African languages. And then they were singing something about taxis. I got irritated. I thought they were making fun of me (laughter). And finally comes this taxi. Roses Taxis took me to the new Johannesburg hospital. And later, listening to the radio, I realised what those nurses were singing - it was the jingle for Roses Taxis (laughter). So then I understood they were trying to find a White taxi and one of them remembered that jingle so that's how they must have found the phone number – Roses Taxis to take a White woman from a Black hospital to a White hospital (laughter). So that was my first day in South Africa!

And it was also when I was in South Africa that the Voortrekkerhoogte attack occurred. Very nice, I read all the papers.

After an operation, I went back to Mozambique. Ruth and Joe asked me about my impressions of South Africa. I said, well, I couldn't go very far, I was more in Hillbrow and those places but still… I found it mind-boggling how Whites were living like goldfish in an aquarium, I remember I had that image, cut off from the rest of the population. It was unreal. But also, what actually impressed me was that, at least in Johannesburg, African people were very proud, they walked tall, whereas in Maputo, people hadn't seemed to realise yet that it was their country, they were a bit cowed still. I said these people in South Africa are not going to let themselves be oppressed for very much longer. That was impressive.

Then one day, suddenly, Joe phones – can I meet you sometime at your house? I knew Joe's and Ruth's names before as communists and Joe as a strategist but I never imagined Joe was in the armed struggle. But he came to recruit me for Special Ops. He explained what the armed struggle is and everything, and about reconnaissance missions in South Africa. Yes, I said I have a multiple entry visa because I went there for medical reasons. I thought – the military? But then I said okay, well, I couldn't say no to Joe, I mean I could only say yes.

Later he asked me 'Why didn't you ask to think it over?' He said 'most people would, and you had four young kids'. I said, Joe, it's very simple - because I realised immediately how could I say no? I mean this thing, I didn't ask for it, you know, but when you come and you put someone in that position – they say in French 'in front of the block' – what else can I do? So I said, Joe, I knew immediately there was no alternative in my mind. What could I have said? I'm an academic, I'm a woman, I'm a foreigner, I'm a mother, I'm White… Sorry, Joe, I'm not made for this?

I heard later that in the ANC they called it 'let others do the dying'. Well, I couldn't do that. I also knew immediately I couldn't say no because of the kids. I mean what about the kids of other people who were in the struggle? If Joe had not come, I probably never would have joined the armed struggle. I've never been good at weapons. I was a good shot, yes, with a pistol, but that was about it.

I did wonder why me? I had strong convictions, but I thought it might be because I didn't have a known leftist profile so no one would suspect me.

Since the student uprisings in Kinshasa, between Pierre and me there was an understanding that if I was drawn into action, he would stay out of anything dangerous, and vice versa for his adventures, so one of us would always be there for the kids. When Joe came, I knew for the children I could always count on Pierre. What really struck me was that it was for the military. That really was not my thing. But then I thought: well, recces (reconnaissance), that's nice. I always liked spy stories…

And just before, Indres Naidoo had recruited Klaas as a courier. That was not for the military. So then apparently afterward there was friction, after I'd agreed, because Joe went to Indres and he said leave those people alone, they're ours. Indres was angry. Joe stole, as it were, Klaas from them, which was not done in the ANC at the time, but he did it. Joe wanted to make a team.

And I'm proud Joe came to recruit me first. I really appreciated that Joe didn't hesitate to choose a woman in her own right. And only then he formed a man-woman team.

I later understood that in the Voortrekkerhoogte attack, my Belgian colleague at the university, Guido Van Hecken, had played a role. At the time, Rashid lived with Guido's family. Guido was even head of my department at the university. There was also the British historian David Hedges. Guido and David were exposed in the South African press as being connected to the Voortrekkerhoogte attack. So later I realised it was also to replace those recce teams that Joe approached us. Apparently, it was urgent to do that. In the beginning, we didn't know Rashid.

Did you know Klaas was working with Indres?

Yes. Perhaps I told Joe that, I don't remember.

So after Slovo approached you, did you tell Klaas that you were asked to join the armed struggle?

No, I don't think so because I knew you weren't supposed to do that. Surely Joe said it was highly secretive work and not to tell anyone. I think Klaas went to Swaziland as a political courier for Indres a few times. I might have gone with him some time but I was not involved in anything.

So Slovo approached Indres and said he needed Klaas?

Yes. Indres was very angry; years later he still mentioned Joe's high-handedness. But when we were going to Swaziland and the Political Department needed help, we often took things for them. The very first time I saw Ebie (Ebrahim Ismail Ebrahim, head of the Swaziland Political-Military Council and former Robben Island prisoner) was when I handed him a parcel from Zuma in Swaziland. So, we did make up for that tension between the Military and Political – but, once, they'd packed the secret compartment in our car so badly with their things (laughter) that we said, no more, this way we can no longer do this work for the Political Section. Or else, they must hand us their stuff and we'll pack it ourselves.

Of course, they didn't want us to know what they were sending. It was all on a 'need to know' basis. But they had no choice if they still wanted us to help them. The Political Section wasn't good at security. The way they packed their weapons for self-defense, any metal detector at the border would've found them. Joe also had said early on that we were to get more intensive training and the rules were very strict. He said this is an army now. And me being very

anti-discipline, I was forced to be disciplined while being in MK for the first time in my life, the only years of my life. It was a matter of life and death all the time.

Guido Van Hecken, Hélène Passtoors and Joe Slovo, Maputo, early 1980s, Supplied

What training were you given?

Joe kind of trained me for our first mission, Christmas 1981. Then he would debrief very extensively and again give the necessary training for the next mission, often with Rashid. When Rashid became Commander, he continued that routine. For each mission we also needed to know the basics about the materiel they intended to use – weapons, explosives, artillery and so on. You had to know, for example, the reach of the artillery in order to choose a good place to fire at the target. Later we got more complete training with Ronnie Kasrils.

What training?

Military combat work, MCW, it's called.

Where?

Partially in Mozambique and then in Swaziland. A private course. Ronnie kept training me whenever we had the opportunity, even when Klaas and I were no longer working together. And once, Ronnie took me to the cinema in Zimbabwe to see one of the John Le Carré films, *The Little Drummer Girl*. I never forget it. He analysed all the positions in that film with me. Of course, John Le Carré was a master spy himself, so all his books and films are technically perfect. Ronnie also made us read many books, not only of Le Carré but also of German Resistance in the Second World War, technical stuff in bad Soviet translated English, and so on. Ronnie – always the teacher! So MCW was a general course while Joe and Rashid prepared more training for specific missions.

About your first recon (reconnaissance) in South Africa in December '81?

That first time the two of us went into South Africa only for a recce (reconnaissance), so without any weapons. There were two good targets chosen by Slovo – the export of coal and the import of crude oil, which were both embargoed by the UN. He wanted to blow up the Umfolozi Bridge of the rail line for coal exports. The bridge was over the Umfolozi River in KwaZulu, and the railway line was going to the coal export terminal, Richard's Bay, I think. And the other target was the oil pipeline to the industrial area in Joburg. We reconnoitered about four or five pumping stations along the major oil pipeline through which imported crude oil was pumped from the Natal coast to the Johannesburg area, the industrial hub.

And you went along right through to Joburg?

Yes, we followed the pipeline to Joburg. The pumping stations, the idea was that they would explode at the same time. It would be a coordinated attack. So it was quite some task for beginners like us, but exciting. So we learned also to be very quick at inventing legends, as we call it, to use if we were stopped by police or met other people in the bush or on country roads where tourists were unusual. We went back several times to Umfolozi. It is a very high bridge at the back entrance of the game park. It wasn't easy. All Joe had shown us was a beautiful colour photograph of that bridge he'd found in some publication. And to get to the Umfolozi Bridge itself we were entering what was a military area. Very forbidden to go there and it was very hilly, mountainous country with sharp bends in the road, so you couldn't see what was coming.

Anyway, that first trip, we checked in at the only hotel around and also put a little tent at the Umfolozi River almost under the bridge as if picnicking. We took pictures from different angles and measured and sketched the points and angles as precisely as possible on a map. It was difficult precision work, necessary for military engineers to get all the data needed to blow it up. But being no engineers, we had to improvise and imagine what would be needed. We found Klaas was good at photography and to find suitable places and I think I was better at sketches and maps, as well as writing reports.

Then we did all the pumping stations which was a bit easier in the sense that we just went up to the fence at night and looked at how it worked, movement of people, guards and so on. Then we took pictures. Joe had explained what the pump stations look like. At the pumping stations there were guards and so it wasn't easy to approach.

And camping nearby was often not easy. But technically it wasn't as difficult as the bridge. Another difficulty was how to get some sleep on a recce mission.

Sometimes we just checked into a hotel to sleep during the day, get a good meal and were off again.

The photos and information on the Umfolozi Bridge, Joe sent to engineers to calculate what to do. After a while this comes back from them because we had taken pictures at certain angles thinking that, with the map and measurements of angles, they can adjust what they need for their calculations for the operation, basically to decide at which places to put how much explosives for maximum impact of the explosion.

I made the sketches. But they needed pictures head-on at ninety degrees otherwise they couldn't calculate. So, we had to go back and we took pictures from the middle of the river. The second time we went to Umfolozi, we had the whole thing figured out.

After that, we went again once or twice into the country with the weapons for that operation. We dug the DLBs (Dead Letter Boxes), the caches for that. We were almost caught there. We did a big DLB for all the weapons and explosives a bit further in the bush and then a smaller one right at the bridge for self-defense for the comrades.

And it's very important to also plan and have sketches of how the operatives can get away after the operation.

We went that time with a bakkie, which the ANC got for us. And for the last DLB for self-defense close to the bridge, we had taken the stuff out of the secret compartment to work quickly. We put it in a metal trunk in which we had camping gear. So, we got the camping gear out and put all these AK 47s, and whatever else was there, into the trunk that was in the back of the bakkie. And the camping gear was lying loose, rather messy. And we drive in the forbidden hilly area towards the bridge and suddenly, puff, the army comes! Did Klaas tell you?

And the Black guys there jumped onto the bakkie and wanted to start searching but the White guy who talked to us at the window was hesitating and started talking through a two-way radio. At that point I realised I was a bit good at observing people and being able to tell a bit what they're feeling. The White guy obviously had doubts about searching us and I decided to play on that. I never knew I could do that. So when it came to it, he was afraid to make a mistake with what he saw as tourists, and they let us go. I couldn't believe it, but it happened, and they didn't search us. Later on we went back there and finished the job, but then we didn't unpack before having readied the DLB.

You must understand: opening the car's secret compartment, taking the stuff out and closing it again invisibly takes time. So, doing it before would speed up establishing a DLB, which is the trickiest part with the digging, packing and then camouflaging it. Especially as this time we had decided to do it so close to the target for the cadres' safety. But we underestimated the risk of still having a pretty uncertain, winding stretch of road to go by car.

Alternatively, one can dig the DLB, go back to get the stuff out of the car and carry it on our backs through the bush where one can hide if necessary. We often did that later. Well, it depends on the terrain and each time it was different.

I'm not certain how we turned around that suspicious officer. I remember we got him to look with us at our road map. This little road through the veld looked nice, we showed him, and it's going all the way to the coast where we want to go, we said, after our lovely camping, no, we hadn't understood it was forbidden, we're sorry, and so on. Polite overseas tourists of the kind who like back roads and the veld and wild camping – we spun out the story, the legend.

I don't know how that inconspicuous probing of others' moods and intentions works, it is instinctive, but it always worked. It's bluffing of course, but without any nervousness or fear at that moment. And that's what police and soldiers are trained to look for – signs of nervousness. I guess it's like how card players or gamblers or also casino croupiers inconspicuously observe others around the table and adapt their game. I guess I have a gambler's streak.

A similar close call happened to me once in Swaziland, in 1983 or '84. I was alone then and carrying a load of weapons. Handing over weapons always had to happen very fast. Also, the comrades were not supposed to see where the secret compartment in the car was. So, a bit before the meeting point, I had left the main road, somewhere before Manzini coming from the Mozambique border, and in a bushy place on a little dirt road I'd taken the weapons out and put them in the boot. This was not the bakkie, but a Peugeot 504.

Back on the Manzini road, suddenly there was a police roadblock where there never was one. A policeman asked for my papers and my gun. I laughed that I was a Belgian, not a South African – who Swazis knew to often illegally carry guns – and Belgian women don't like guns, why would I carry a gun, in Mozambique guns are also illegal, and so on. Then he put on a threatening face and said, 'I'm going to open your boot, lady'. Of course, I laughed, go ahead, open my boot, it's not locked. He took a few steps to the back of the car while looking at me and saying again 'I'm going to open your boot!' Of course, sir, go ahead, I smiled. Then he turned around and said, 'Okay, drive

on'. His face suddenly looked bored, perhaps he was just lazy. But, oof, that was a real close call!

Wasn't it that while the police were talking with you in Umfolozi, a car with Black people came by and the police got distracted and started searching their car, while it's your car that had explosives?

No, I don't remember another car. I remember seeing that White chap hesitating, thinking these stupid tourists or something, and in the rear view mirror the faces of the Black chaps in the back impatient for the order to search us.

Klaas recalls being amused that they were harassing those innocent Black people yet it was you two who had the weapons in your car. He said they searched them instead of you and then they said to you, 'Come, let's show you the right way to go'.

Yes, maybe that was also that time…it's possible. The officer made us turn around.

And also, another time, we put up a tent near the rear entrance of the game park with the idea that we would come across as tourists who arrived too late when that entrance was already closed and who didn't know there was another entrance – in fact the main gate is on the other side – and so we just put up our tent there. That was going to be our legend, a bit shaky, but still. We had brought in a big load of explosives for the bridge. And in the morning, we hadn't finished yet with the DLB with still lots of stuff in the tent and we saw these helicopters coming.

They must have seen us, and so we just stayed put and waited and waited. And finally, they seemed to have gone and we went to one of those general stores and we heard it was a minister from the Apartheid government who'd come to see Buthelezi or the King (laughter). But we really thought they came for us (laughter) because that's the kind of thing they would do, they would send a whole army to arrest you.

Were you anxious or not?

No, not anxious, but, I mean, we had to finish the job. Actually those first times when we came back, Joe debriefed us also about the psychological aspects. Joe thought that I wasn't scared enough. I felt no fear at such tense moments. And he said that's not good because then you're not fast enough. He tried to teach me the reflex to shoot first, don't hesitate or they'll shoot. You have to think of yourself in these situations. These people will kill you. It's a

reflex soldiers must acquire. It means maintaining a state of maximum alertness, ready for instant action, no hesitation. Then I saw Joe had been an officer in the Second World War, he knew how to drill soldiers like for this shoot first thing.

So how many days did you spend doing the Umfolozi reconnaissance?

Twice we went. The first time I think was two or three days. We came again – I think it was one day to do the pictures from the angle the Soviet engineers wanted.

And for the weapons, how many times did you come in?

Also twice, I think.

So what happens? Why doesn't the operation take place? You did all the groundwork…

I think the operatives got arrested before they could do it. Rashid must know that.

They actually went in and I think they were arrested on the way from Lesotho. With the oil pumping stations, I think, only two went off. There were also problems with the teams that went there.

Do you know what?

No, I don't know for sure. I think in at least one case, the comrades saw people they suspected were the enemy and decided not to go ahead. That happened quite often, also in our work, and one can't know if it's not just a passer-by. At our last DLB in 1985, for example, we decided it must be a passer-by and finished the job quickly. It was a cop passing by who got suspicious and found the DLB. That's how we were caught.

Were any of the comrades who were to carry out the operation arrested?

No. If they were arrested, the police would've found the sketches of the target and caches and then probably the caches themselves. But the SB (Security Branch), the interrogators, didn't have any of those sketches and instructions. That was one of the best reconnaissance we ever did and the DLBs were also good. It's a pity the operation didn't take place.

For the oil pipeline recon, did you go in twice as well?

I'm not sure. We could have gone in twice, once for the reconnaissance and when the command had decided on the operation, once for the DLBs. Perhaps we needed to go in twice further for the weapons because there were four stations.

First we had a Toyota Hi-ace, a nine-place minibus. We bought it because of the five children, my four and Klaas' oldest son. But besides hiding things like packets of cash for underground units in the doors, it was not a car for a secret compartment, a DLB. So I remember first we went in with Guido's Renault 4, it had a DLB but it was a small car. So, to have as big a compartment as possible, Guido had sawed through the cross bar of the Renault, and the DLB was in the middle over almost the full width of the car – we had to take seats out to access it. It's only when Guido handed us the car that he told us, giggling – be careful on bumpy tracks, the bottom might just break into two! Can you imagine how crazy we were? And explosives are bloody heavy. Well, the old Renault 4 made it, but soon we got a better car for the purpose.

And what happened about the oil pipeline operation?

I think it was only two that went off. But at the time, the regime managed to keep it pretty well out of the big media. There was something in the local media. This was an increasing problem. Those operations were supposed to be armed propaganda. If hardly anyone heard about them, they didn't serve their strategic purpose. So, we had to do spectacular attacks that couldn't be hidden from the media and the public or attack urban areas.

Do you know why it was only partially done?

No, you'll need to ask Rashid… As I said, if I remember well, at least one team had some dubious encounter and went back. I think there was some frustration among the Special Ops leadership about what went wrong…

There was something also in the Durban papers, I think, or something about the attempt on Umfolozi, I remember that, because I started doing for Special Ops analyses of newspapers and magazines like Paratus (the official magazine of the South African Defence Force) more for military but also for political purposes.

Did both you and Klaas do that sort of analysis?

I think it was mostly me. I had a young Mozambican who did the actual clipping and filing of articles or pics I had marked.

Was this work done for Special Ops only or MK generally?

It was for MK, but also for general information. We even got, like, pictures of generals at funerals that the censors had overlooked.

You passed all that information on to JS and Rashid?

Yes, of course. Unless another comrade did those things in Maputo and I handed the clippings to him, I'm not sure now. I continued doing it in Swazi and Joburg. I still have files of clippings that came with stuff I'd stored in Swaziland. When I was arrested, the police found quite a few clippings in my house in Joburg and interrogated me about them. So, they got excited about a few pics of generals or dignitaries of the regime that they suspected might be potential targets for assassination, although that wasn't ANC policy.

I also had a photograph of Craig Williamson - I tried to get an idea which places he might frequent and wanted to be able to recognise him. I remember interrogators taunting me about his sterling work and asking if I wanted to meet their hero. It sounded as if he actually was working at SB (Security Branch) headquarters then. But more interestingly, they seemed not to trust him altogether, they tried to find out if I somehow had been in contact with him. That is, if he was perhaps still a double agent. I don't know if they weren't just putting it on to see my reaction. But they did mock him and I really hoped they gave him a bad time.

So what do you do next?

I think armed forces targets, in particular army camps. We first went through the Kruger National Park. In the north, they had a military area and had it closed off. MK didn't know what facilities they had there. And so we looked at that, but there wasn't much to see. And then we went to Phalaborwa to do something for Mozambique, a project of Joe's, to help our friends of FRELIMO he said. They thought that the main training base for RENAMO was there, so we found out where it was, and we recced that as much as possible. I think it was the main RENAMO base, it was very well covered. Camouflaged I should say, it was not visible from any public road and the road leading to the entrance was winding and in a wooded area. So suddenly you found yourself in front of the gate and had to turn back quickly. We went on foot in the veld on the side to observe the camp. It was huge with trucks driving in and out.

Then we reconnoitred the Potch army camps. It was an amazing thing. The military installations are located along both sides of a long road. There are different camps, for miles, the army was everywhere. I think even some air force people were there and ground forces. Then also different officers'

messes. It was very impressive. And we chose a camp a bit at the end with bush around it, and we watched that camp. Now Klaas was better at that because he'd been in the army. I had not much idea of the purpose of the buildings, movements of soldiers and other things we saw in army camps.

And later, when in detention, they took me to Potch and said they didn't understand how we could just drive through because there were all these military guards checking cars. They were very angry. They said you look so innocent, how could you do all this? They were frustrated because even as the security police they were stopped all the time there by the military guards. They shouted at them – when the ANC came here, you didn't stop them! The security police liked to boast about how important they were. They were stopped at the gates of the camps and other facilities while we weren't.

They even almost got shot by a Black guard at of one of those pumping stations! When I went there with the security police, this Black guard raised his gun towards us and I was in the back of the car and ducked thinking he might shoot, imagine, when I'm there with the police (laughter)! It was the first and only time in my life that I went down to avoid to be shot at (laughter)… They said, 'aha, now you are scared'! I said I'm not going to get killed because you are such idiots…

You used the word 'idiots,' did you?

Yes, that was at one of the pumping stations.

What did they say, didn't they get angry?

They couldn't afford to be. On such trips they needed at least a semblance of cooperation and they knew I'd clam up if they became aggressive. It's the kind of thing they tried out from the beginning, your reaction to their behaviour, their tactics. They hate you, you hate them, they are dangerous, but often it would look as if you had a halfway decent conversation. Now and again intermixed with barely veiled threats. That's how they generally played it with me, after having tried out a more violent approach the first day and warned 'when we're through with you, you won't be a woman anymore.' That starting shot was enough to never forget how deadly a game it was.

No, they weren't angry, they said, 'but how did you always pass here without problems?' I said I don't know, but I don't behave like you, like idiots. So, I told them. I mean they were so arrogant, so boisterous, like one imagines Mafia bosses behaving. So of course, this Black chap pointed his weapon at them. He was doing his job. The same happened at Potch. There were also many White chaps guarding there, and the SB were stopped all the time.

And you were not stopped when you went in with Klaas previously?

We'd never been stopped, we went back and forth there (laughter)…

After these recons, were there operations carried out by Special Ops or most of them were not followed up?

Most not, but some yes. I think Joe once said it's about one out of ten projects or something that come to fruition. It needs tremendous planning and logistics, as well as tactical considerations. And then the risks for the operatives. In some cases, it ended in a shoot-out. There was the Durban Wentworth refinery attack in 1984 that we hadn't recced but brought weaponry in for. We established that DLB on a nearby beach which was a mistake. Apparently shifting sands under the surface moved the contents and the comrades couldn't find it.

There was a major attack that ended in a shoot-out. The SB showed me horrible photographs of our slain comrades.

Barney was also killed in a shoot-out, but that was after our arrest. I think they also showed me those photographs, but after those horrible Wentworth ones I refused to look at those things they show to get you off balance. I just looked away.

As a rule, we were not told which projects were followed up or not, nor why and how they failed. In the underground, one doesn't want to know what one doesn't need to know - it's dangerous. As it was, in detention I realised I knew already far too much and was happy I didn't know more.

The one I missed, and I was really sad about it, was the Koeberg operation. I liked that one very much. For me it was about the best one. We managed to do an inside job. But I asked Rashid at some point why wasn't I asked to help with that, and he said that I was on another project at the time.

What was your role in the Church Street Air Force bombing?

After the first recces of Umfolozi and the oil pipeline, we were usually given only general indications of the kind of targets Special Ops was looking for, and the kind of weapons to be used and so on. Joe used to say, 'you'll find something'. But that wasn't so easy.

At some point, Rashid said that we had now the technology for a car bomb and we are going to use it. Then we were sent out to Pretoria to find targets. Rashid suggested three or four because we didn't really know where strategic

targets were located. One was the police museum in Pretoria, I think it was part of the Compol building. I hung around quite a while there on the ground floor one morning. Anyway, civilians came there, so that was out.

They were supposed to be strategic targets like buildings which housed headquarters of relevant institutions, such as the military or police. Another suggested target was on the third or fourth floor of a flat or office building, but again there were civilians there too. And then there was the Air Force HQ which looked like a good target but along a big, quite busy road lined with several high buildings. When we looked at that target, we saw hardly any military but quite a few civilians around.

Pretoria seemed full of those secret, highly strategic places. But they were all hiding in the midst of civilians, as behind a human shield. Then there was also Voortrekkerhoogte outside Pretoria…

Were you still together with Klaas then?

Yes. Joe kind of forced us to stay together, at least for MK's sake. He said, 'You are adults, can't you just stay in separate bedrooms, you are such a good team?'

So, you did what he asked? For the struggle?

Well, yes (laughter). Not only working as a team, but also giving the impression of being a married couple, it was a better cover for our work. In hindsight I think we would have continued working together better if we had quietly separated at that stage.

So, when we saw the Air Force headquarters, we thought it would be difficult for a car bombing. We didn't know much about car bombs. MK didn't have experience with them.

Then we concentrated on Voortrekkerhoogte. We went there several days to look at where a car bomb could work. Apart from all the buildings and residences there was an area with shops and things, like in a small town. We hung around there buying newspapers, military journals and groceries. We also looked at the exercise routine on the training grounds to try and find possible targets. But it was amazing – Voortrekkerhoogte was this big army camp, it had been attacked before and yet we just drove in and out (laughter)…

Really (laughter)…

They stopped us at the gate as usual, but they'd just let us go through when we said we're going to visit someone. I think we mentioned some Afrikaner name. I've never understood that. Never. So, we proposed two possibilities for Voortrekkerhoogte. The problem was it would probably have to be White operatives who would have to do it.

We also visited the Voortrekker Museum. I was speechless. In my eyes, it was pure fascism; the architecture and also inside. I said to Joe we must attack that. He said can you imagine the quantity of TNT we'd need for that? I said true, those walls are massive.

He said no, the ANC doesn't attack cultural symbols. But I thought even a small blast would be a good psychological blow to their supremacist mindset. But the ANC didn't think so because it would be attacking Afrikaner culture and history. So that's how I learnt also more about the ANC. Like on several other issues it made me think and conclude the ANC was right.

Then we went once for a target for a heat-seeking missile which we got from the Soviets. And so, we went to look at Waterkloof Airbase and found it was possible to rent a house around there which would be good for the operation. But we messed up a crucial bit – we hadn't understood very well how these heat-seeking missiles work. I thought it went after the airplane, but it doesn't, you had to be in a straight line to the exhaust to hit the plane. Also, logistics were very difficult. If they wanted to do it, the house for renting would have to be taken by White comrades. So, they never did that either.

But I actually did go back quickly to check how it could be done in a straight line at the end of a runway. Mind you, Klaas didn't know much better although he'd been in the Dutch air force during the compulsory military service that he hated. He said he now regretted he had never paid much attention in the courses!

And then we did a series of weapons transports. We were told about where to establish the DLB, but not what it was for. Perhaps for units based inside the country and doing their own recces. I didn't visit them again. But Klaas must have checked on them later or else have heard from Rashid that they were empty. Because those were among the empty DLBs the police led me to. I only vaguely remembered those places. Gun running, as they call it, and DLBs was more Klaas's thing.

Klaas and I had a different understanding on a number of things. In practice, we did the same things, but we had a different understanding of how we should relate to MK and also on some aspects of ANC strategy and tactics. About a year into our involvement in MK, I realised that we were doing all

these military tasks but each time the Special Ops leaders would ask 'would you like to do this mission?' And I said, listen, I don't want that question. I'm not the one who takes the strategic decisions and I'm very happy I don't have to do that. So, I said if you ask each time whether I want to do a particular type of thing, then you kind of give me a choice of whatever I personally may like or dislike. I don't want that. I'd rather be under the discipline of MK and do what I'm asked. I don't want the responsibility, it's yours, the leadership's.

But Klaas always thought he was free to say yes or no when he wants, he wanted that freedom. In practice he never said no, but for him it was important to always have some freedom from the movement. I think he is a libertarian who wants at all times self-ownership, the full right of the use of their person. He might not use the term, but he applied it not only to MK but in other aspects of his life as well.

To me, it was important not to have the responsibility. I remember when Rashid came to tell me the leadership had approved my request. He teased me and said, 'so from now on you're a soldier'. Meaning no questions, no objections. And, of course, he the Commander. I said, well, that has to be then because I don't want that responsibility. And so, later when the car bomb came up, first the recce and then the one that I drove into South Africa, would I have said no because it's a car bomb? It was too late, I was already under the discipline of MK. I joined the ANC as a whole if you like; I was no longer a volunteer, an auxiliary.

Let me try to make this clear because it's important, I've been criticised for this, mainly outside South Africa. Let's say they say to you, do you want to drive this car and you know very well there's a car bomb in it. You agree. So, of course, then you're not just following orders but you act as a partner implicitly agreeing with that particular attack. That is, you choose to partake in the responsibility which really is the Commander's, who have the power and competence to decide. So, should I have said no, I don't want this job because I don't like car bombs, perhaps there will be civilians killed, I don't want that, look for someone else? But I didn't want the choice, you see. So, I preferred being a soldier with my own responsibility at my level. A soldier only refuses in very exceptional circumstances of a clash with his or her conscience. I didn't want special treatment either. I was a soldier like all other MK comrades.

Now that was different from Klaas's approach. And I was even amazed myself because my being a soldier was the last thing I would ever have been interested in, but then there's the cause. We all did it for the cause, and the ANC decided our deployment, what tasks we did.

But there's another aspect to this issue. Being under the discipline of MK means you must obey, but it also gives you democratic rights in the ANC like any member. I also wanted those rights to debate, discuss, express doubts, criticise, and even hoped to be at some point perhaps involved in policy discussions. Like I was later involved in the commission for the language policy. I loved the workshops, the debate, discussion papers and so on, to contribute in a field that was mine as a linguist.

Now some like to think that retrospectively criticising decisions of your MK Commanders is being disloyal. I don't think so. You obey the orders but that doesn't mean that you can't analyse and perhaps disagree. Now during the struggle, this could only be internal as it could be detrimental to the movement and the struggle. But once it's all history – victorious history at that – I see no problem to make some of the discussions and opinions public.

It's true some people do it to harm the movement and its memory, out of anti-communism or some grudge or other. Or to get at individual comrades. But it's not breaking ranks if one shows the ANC in exile was no dictatorship, to point to its impressive dynamism and diversity, also of opinion, to what unity in action really meant. Only a great movement could achieve this.

So to my mind, by giving up my volunteer status, my ethical concerns were resolved in relation to MK's military nature. I am not a joiner, never have been – probably as a result of years of forced joining in boarding school. I am a migrant, a cosmopolitan, and the ANC, the liberation struggle, came not just as a movement or a family. It came with a country, a new people to get to know and learn to integrate with. You know, it was the same feeling as when I settle in a new country – I never know for how long or perhaps forever – and start learning how to shed the outsider clothes. A migrant doesn't feel like an internationalist or an ex-patriate. Klaas did, but I never did. We can talk about that later.

About my role in the Pretoria bombing, it was actually very simple. Rashid told me that I had to drive a car into South Africa on a Thursday. So I had to get off from work. I met Rashid in Swaziland. He gave me the car. I understood it was a car bomb. I didn't know which target they had chosen, nor whether it was planned to go off at a specific time or day. You don't need to know. But he sent me to Pretoria where all our reconnaissance for a car bomb had been, so I thought that perhaps it was one of the targets we had reconnoitred.

All the papers were perfectly done. Guido took care of that. The car had Belgian licence plates – actually the kind for a car bought tax free outside Europe – with the corresponding documents. Then I also had a set of Swazi plates with, again, the papers perfectly done. All in my name. Rashid gave the

instructions and I repeated them as was the usual routine to make sure you got it right.

He asked, 'do you have any questions?' I said no. He said, 'But you can ask questions'. I said no, I understood what I need to understand. I didn't ask where the bloody stuff was because I knew very well where. We had spent a lot of time on secret compartments in different cars. And we focused on cars where we could make bigger hidden compartments. Guido did a lot of this work as well as forging documents. He was a master at both. There was a bit of a thick antenna on the car this time. Rashid said make sure you put the radio on at the border and at roadblocks because otherwise they might pick up something is unusual. That antenna obviously had to do with something technical for a remote detonation.

As instructed, I changed the plates on a rural path along a stream when in South Africa, and it was a bit difficult to get rid of the Belgian plates actually. I finally buried them under a layer of sand in the stream bed where they'd hopefully rust very fast. The documents, I tore in very small pieces and scattered in the water. And then I drove to the place where I had to deliver the bloody thing… It was a very beautiful car and I had said this to Rashid. He said, 'that's for your security'. I thought it was a waste, man, to blow up such a nice car.

What car was it?

I can't remember, but it was a Japanese car.

A relatively new car?

Almost. A very recent car.

Was the car stolen?

I think so.

Did you play a role in that?

No. There was a huge racket of stolen cars from South Africa into Swaziland. I understand the ANC often bought those although, of course, not for use at recces or other missions inside the country. For that we would have legal cars. This was exceptional.

But I think there was some claim that you stole the car or you bought the car in South Africa and took it out to be used to carry the bomb.

No, I had nothing to do with that. Others did that. This was an exceptional case because the car itself was the weapon. Now imagine this car blows up and they find it is bought and registered in my name!

Joe loved nice cars. So, one day he got this fancy, brand new car that was stolen in South Africa. I think it was a super BMW but I'm bad at car brands. But some spare was missing so he asked me to get it in Swaziland. The official dealer was astonished, he asked where is this car, we haven't gotten this latest model yet! I didn't know how fast to get out of that place. That's precisely the kind of thing that may give you away. So, for us to go and steal cars in South Africa would be very stupid. Moreover, bringing them into Swaziland, how? It needed organised professionals. So whoever claimed that, didn't apply his or her mind.

So you bring the car in – and then?

I drove to Pretoria and was very careful not to be stopped or flashed for speeding. I knew the road very well, there would usually be one or two roadblocks but there were none this time. So, I had to deliver the car at Mamelodi train station at, I think, five or six in the afternoon.

I get there and I see all these crowds, and I think that's bad. With all those Black people, not one Whitey, I stand out like a sore thumb and someone might later remember. I have to get away as unseen as possible, but how? And later Rashid told me he had talked to the comrades over the phone to set up the place and arrangements for leaving the car and he had asked, 'Can anyone come there?' And they said yes. He asked, 'Absolutely anyone'? Yes. They had obviously never imagined that it would be a White comrade, even less a White woman. I had to park the car in front of the railway station in Mamelodi.

So, you went into the township? Not parked the car in Pretoria outside the station where people took the train to Mamelodi?

Yes, into the township. The agreed place was not in Pretoria, but the station in Mamelodi where people take the train to Pretoria or arrive back from town. I then saw that it's going to be tricky to get away. The comrades and I were not supposed to meet or even see each other. So, I was going to get out on my own and the chaps had the other key of the car and would take it. I cleaned up as we should and then put my key under the mat as instructed, slammed the door locked by holding the handle and that was it. I couldn't even go back into the car.

How did you get back to Pretoria?

(Laughter) This is a funny story. First, I look around and see there's a train to Pretoria leaving quite soon. So, I join the crowd of people walking up the stairs leading to the platform. They looked all tired after work and couldn't care less about me. It was winter, so I wore a big parka jacket. I knew that my salient features by which I would be easily recognised were my long red hair and my low voice. So, I didn't say anything and I covered my hair with the hood. If necessary, I would change my voice.

A conductor comes down the stairs against the flow of people. He stops in front of me and says, 'Lady, where do you think you're going?' And I feel the people just pushing around me like I'm a pebble in a river. So far, we were all going upstairs in the same direction, so they didn't see my face. Except for the conductor who came down. And so, I said I need to go on the train to Pretoria. He said, 'This train is not for you, it can't take you'. I tried to tell him, listen, I really have to get on that train, I don't care, but he kind of pushed me, so I had to turn around and go down the stairs, this time facing the crowd, and then I realised that people were too tired actually to even notice me now.

But still, I mean someone could have remembered later that there was this Whitey. So, that was the first very bad thing. Then I saw one of those taxi buses in front of the station was about to leave for Pretoria. But this driver said, 'No, it's full, you have to go with the next one.' So then I have to sit and wait till it fills up. People who come in say hello. Of course, they see my face, but just sit down. It finally fills up and we go.

So you couldn't take the train because it was for Africans only?

Yes.

Now when you leave a car for a car bomb operation, shouldn't there be another car nearby that you have the key for that you use to leave with?

That wasn't the plan.

Yes, but why? What was Rashid's expectation? That you would use public transport to get back to Pretoria?

Yes. I guess he didn't realise what it was like at the station in Mamelodi.

Of course, there would have been challenges and there were limited resources, but was it really not possible for Special Ops to have arranged for another car to be there for you to use? Or for you to

leave the car bomb in central Pretoria, maybe outside the station for trains to Mamelodi, for it to be picked up by the operatives from there?

The main thing is that it was not the first time I had to get away from somewhere, so he knew I could do that. When one does a target reconnaissance, one looks at the best way to get away for the team of operatives, one makes sketches and everything. In this case, no one did that. It wasn't an operation, an armed attack, it was just handing over a car. I had to get away myself.

There would be Whites in the townships, maybe social workers and other civil servants or municipal staff and maybe activists, but not many, not using public transport. And with you being on such a major operation, weren't these arrangements a security risk?

Listen, I have never asked myself that question. You're the first to ask it. You must remember we got used to risks. In Swaziland also it was very tricky, with the Swazi security working hand in hand with the South Africans. So, even there, I was in tricky situations where unexpected things happened and I had to get away by myself. So, I didn't think the Mamelodi arrangements were that abnormal.

Of course, there would be the unexpected, the unforeseen. But this was a planned operation – shouldn't Special Ops leaders have foreseen the problems in this case?

I've never asked myself that. You're making me think about it...The choice of place could have been better. But there's another thing that perhaps you don't realise. That was '83 when Special Ops had no permanent units inside the country. Rashid had a unit trained especially for this car bomb. They did as he planned. We knew that later because it was not my business to know before. So, there was not necessarily a strong infrastructure to do these kinds of things. What you're talking about is a support unit who take you out of the country. So, it's an underground structure you're talking about. But we didn't have that at the time. Later on, perhaps, but then – no. Rashid would have had to send other people in to get me out after I left that car, which was ridiculous. We didn't have so many people.

The comrades involved in the operation were also on an underground mission. Even if they were based there, that didn't lessen the risks for them. And none of them was to know who delivered it. And what kind of car could they have left for me? With what documents? Remember all the trouble Rashid went through for me to drive that packed car as safely as possible. The kind of

getaway you suggest would be another major operation – and what for? They did the main job, not me. Yet Rashid and Guido went through a lot of trouble for me. Moreover, coming back at the border with a different car might also have raised eyebrows – especially as the blast went off the next day, when I was still in South Africa.

It's not clear to me why it wasn't possible for you to leave the car near the city centre somewhere where the comrades from Mamelodi could pick it up? Why send you into the township? Yet Rashid is known for his detailed planning and being meticulous.

Yes, he might have double checked although you might not realise how difficult communications were. But, look, I made it, and, well, it's quite a nice story to tell.

But you could easily not have made it?

I could easily not have made it so many times… This was risky but not what might be said to be a close call. You might say that the place to leave the car was a mistake, and of course that's not the fault of the chaps who did the operation. The two of them were very brave and sadly died in the operation. The other comrade involved besides Rashid, Victor Molefe (Johannes Mnisi), was a senior comrade who knew me. He might not have known that I'd brought in the car. I didn't know who had the contacts in Mamelodi, where they apparently were, but later heard it was Victor. I guess they weren't in a very safe place either, or else they might not have decided to do the attack the very next day, they might have taken their time.

When I was waiting in that taxi mini-bus, I worried that the car was still standing there although I'd left it at the planned time. It's only from Victor's amnesty hearing at the TRC that I learned they fetched the car only the next morning which I think was really too risky. But it's another indication that those comrades operated under very difficult conditions, probably much more than I.

By then, we'd been operating almost every week for two years. I mean we weren't novices, nice foreign couriers. I was trained and experienced, a soldier like the others, not a VIP. I never blamed Rashid for the Mamelodi drop off. Actually, we had a good laugh when I told Rashid the story. This was 1983. The heavy roadblocks and controls in the townships came later. And no one stopped me. No one asked me why was I was going into a township whereas two years later, I would have been stopped and searched.

I also don't want to blame Rashid for that because the comrades who did the operation were taking the greatest risks. As the person taking the car in, I was

taking my own risks. Ebie said to me later 'what if the bomb went off while you were driving the car?' Yeah, I said, I only thought of that later. Could it have gone off when I drove it as it did the next day, by an external device or whatever did it? I said in fact I don't know, I never asked Rashid. I just took it that the bomb could only go off if somebody activated the detonator. But I was aware I should be especially careful not to get into a collision or so.

So you get to Pretoria. Then?

So in Pretoria I step out of this taxi in front of the main station, and there are two young White policemen standing there and I think now I'm fucked (laughter). This Whitey coming out of a Mamelodi taxi… But these chaps – it was the end of the day, perhaps they were also tired – they were kind of staring ahead and they looked right through me (laughter). I walk past – and nothing.

Did you converse with the people in the taxi?

No, they just said hello, but then nothing. I asked the ladies sitting next to me to tell me when to get off to take a train from Pretoria Central Station.

And they didn't think it strange there's a White woman in the taxi?

No. Or else they didn't show it.

And the driver didn't ask you any questions either?

No (laughter). Do you really think in those days such people would ask Whiteys questions? And even so, I would have said I'm a tourist who got a bit lost and we'd all have laughed. The risk is people remember you later, when there is a police investigation and lots of noise in the media. But no one did, or else they thankfully didn't tell. Two years later, the SB went full out to get any shred of evidence of my involvement, but they found nothing.

Anyway, I get a ticket at the station. I remember that I should look for a posh carriage. I was alone and I settle in this nice seat, thinking I've made it. Another conductor comes now and he says, 'Lady, this carriage is not for you, it's for Indians' (laughter). At that point I cursed bloody apartheid. So now, I had to change to the White coach. So, perhaps someone should've explained to me how trains worked under apartheid. That Rashid might have explained to me, but nobody thought of that.

In Joburg, I checked into a little hotel under a false name. I don't think I slept, I was waiting for the famous knock on the door because anything could've happened to give me away, you know. And then the next day, I did some

shopping in Hillbrow which was partly for legend in case someone would ask what I was in South Africa for. Then I flew back to Swaziland.

Rashid fetched me at the airport. I went with him to a safe house. And then comes the nice point for both of us at the end of a mission where he was very nervous and I had my adrenaline levels way up. So, he debriefed and we chatted and we had a good laugh about my adventures in apartheid land.

And it's in the car the next day with Klaas who came with the kids for the weekend, that I heard that the thing had gone off. In fact, it had gone off when I was still at the airport in Joburg. Rashid later told me that the comrades were supposed to decide when it was good for them to carry out the operation. They had to file off the engine numbers of the car and attend to other things first. And so, neither he nor I thought that they would do it the next day.

I sat all weekend watching SABC coverage of the Church Street bombing. Part of the car had landed on top of big buildings. It was tremendous. I hadn't talked to Rashid or anyone else yet, so I didn't know yet that it had gone off – detonated – too early. I didn't know what the other reconnaissance had provided because there had been another one after ours. It turned out that those comrades had observed the scene in the afternoon at the hour when buses lined up in front of the building for the Air Force personnel. On the spot there was, at that hour, a big concentration of military in blue Air Force uniforms. Of course, as well as civilian personnel but whoever worked for the enemy forces also belonged to a military target.

So, it was decided to attack at that hour in the afternoon. However, the bomb went off a bit too early, when the comrades who should have activated the detonator from a distance, were still in or next to the car and were blown up as well. We don't know what triggered the bomb, some radio device, perhaps an ambulance, a police car or whatever might have passed by.

And so when it went off, it was just as the first Air Force people coming out of the building. These people actually came out a bit before the time they were supposed to leave their workplace. Later, I read in documents on a website of SADF veterans that the Air Force managers initially refused to pay the usual allowances or compensation for personnel. If they got hit, they argued, it was because they were on the street when they still should have been at work. Can you imagine, that's how bad those people were even to their own people! They refused to give them compensation because technically they were AWOL because they had left their work five or ten minutes early. Quite amazing. They eventually won their case but even so.

The car bomb was so powerful, but most of all, such an indiscriminate weapon. I understood the target was the Air Force HQ because I knew it. But I wondered how many people would realise that from those negative images. There were obviously many civilian victims, even though the SABC coverage was surely biased and surely civilian army personnel would be counted as simple passers-by – but even so.

Klaas took the kids out as I watched the non-stop TV coverage. Brigitte, my sweet daughter, hugged me and said, 'Come with us Mama, this is not good for you'. She was 15 and she knew I was in MK although not what work I did. That shows you how protective she and other struggle children were of their parents. They worried for us, not for themselves. And as they felt powerless, they ultimately suffered more than we did.

But then on Monday morning, the South African Air Force attacked a jam factory and a crèche - innocent people - on the outskirts of Maputo! Hell, couldn't they have even done decent recces of their targets? I mean that really upset me! There was no reason, even if we, for once, had made a mistake, for the regime to do this. Attacking from the air: civilians, little children, in another country. They killed one ANC comrade, who was our storekeeper. I actually went to that funeral as a journalist. Kind of hiding my emotions behind my camera. All the victims' coffins were lined up at the gate of the central cemetery of Maputo. My mood turned, I got so angry. I was upset but at the same time it confirmed my determination to go on fighting. Might be that we should've done this or that better with the Church Street operation. But these apartheid chaps, these criminals, we had to stop them.

Mind you, of course we also scrutinised the reactions in the South African townships to the Pretoria bombing. Black people and kids were killed by security forces there all the time. So, many refused to be particularly moved by White deaths. Many rejoiced openly that MK, 'our boys', finally attacked in White areas. People used to be proud of MK operations. That was the purpose of armed propaganda. I think the Pretoria bombing, despite its problems that many of us thought at the time might be counterproductive, had the desired long-term effect that many Whites suddenly began to realise what could be coming if there was no change. Remember, it was also only a few months before the formation of the United Democratic Front. The internal struggle was attaining new heights.

And I think that was the main reason why we began to talk – I think Joe first, or perhaps Rashid – about the idea of infiltrating me into South Africa as soon as my contract with the university was finished in Mozambique. I felt these are no longer times to do things part-time. I must do this full-time. I think lots of us had that feeling at the time: we've got to stop these people!

Anyway, a month or two after the Pretoria attack, Joe fetches me, he says 'put on something decent', meaning no jeans, the Chief wants to see you. The Chief was OR. He was in Mozambique. And he wanted to see Klaas and me. He knew I'd been upset about the Pretoria bombing.

Tambo said, you know, these things are sometimes necessary, and so we had a talk about it. And then he talks about other things and also asks about the family, the university and so on. Then at the end, he tells us that he'd been in Mozambique for maybe a week, he said I've always been like a brother to Samora Machel and walked in and out of his office but now I suddenly can't. I'm told to make appointments and I'm made to wait. Do you know what's wrong?

He asked you?

Yes, if we had heard any rumours. We hadn't but there were clearly tensions then.

What did Tambo say about your concerns about the civilian deaths in the Pretoria bombing?

He said it was awful, but sometimes these things are necessary. And, of course, I knew the ANC in all official communications, as well as to MK and to us for recces, had always insisted we take extreme care to avoid civilians being killed or injured. But the ANC also had stressed that the apartheid regime should stop having its military buildings in civilian areas. Except for Voortrekkerhoogte, all these targets we had looked at in Pretoria were really hidden amongst civilians. And they were all highly strategic, such as various military or police headquarters. The ANC had said publicly to the apartheid government you need to move these military outfits out of civilian areas and not hide among civilians, because these are prime targets we will attack. That's how I understood OR saying this was sometimes necessary. And as I said, in the long term he was right, it did have the foreseen effect.

But even so, the idea was that we avoid as much as possible civilian casualties. The bomb in Pretoria led to the death and injury of some of the Air Force's administrative personnel, but for their own obvious reasons, the apartheid government never accepted that they were military personnel. The ANC correctly saw them as such. Anyway, how could you avoid them if you attack a military target? But because the bomb accidentally went off early, and more real civilians were affected than would have been the case if it had gone off at the planned time, it looked as if we had targeted them. But two of our own operatives were also killed because the bomb went off too early.

The first thing Tambo said, when we started talking, was that he read all our reports and looked at all the sketches. I was quite impressed that he actually read all that. I didn't know because I dealt with Rashid and Joe. But Tambo was the overall Commander of Special Ops, and he obviously took this role very seriously.

Did Rashid engage with you about the consequences of the Church Street bombing?

I think he was rather on the defensive. So we talked with Joe and OR, but I don't remember discussing it in that sense with Rashid. Until 20 years later, in 2003, he raised with me that he was upset because I'd expressed my doubts in the Afrikaner press in an interview and a subsequent written exchange with Afrikaans journalist André Pretorius, a very nice younger person. I think both André and I were a bit too eager to reach out to an Afrikaans audience in a spirit of reconciliation. I admit what I wrote was overall too emotional and I went too far about Church Street, that I very well knew not only to have been MK's biggest attack, but perceived by the enemy as a stab deep into Afrikaner hearts. How sensitive Church Street was for them I had learned in detention and prison. As for André, he addressed those emotions in his way in his article and subsequent exchange. But even if we bent over backwards, we didn't succeed. With one exception, readers' reactions were negative, even hateful. This was in 2000/2001 in *Beeld*, before I received the TRC decision to grant me – as well as Rashid and Victor – amnesty for the Church Street attack on the South African Air Force HQ.

So, Rashid felt I'd let him and Special Ops down. I hadn't seen Rashid since 1990 in Lusaka and 2003 was my first time back in South Africa since my release from prison in 1989. We hadn't had direct contact about the amnesty applications for this bombing to the TRC either, that was all done via ANC lawyers- with Guido as my contact person, because I then lived in Chile and rarely came in Belgium. And I hadn't been able to attend the TRC hearing. I had read what Rashid told the TRC – and Victor (Johannes Mnisi) who told the details of my involvement – but we hadn't talked any more.

If I'd been able to be there for the TRC hearing, together with Victor, the other comrade to apply for amnesty for Church Street – we were three – guess we would have prepared and gone through the hearing together in the close comradeship we always had during the struggle. That's what I'd been looking forward to. But it couldn't be, I received the convocation by the TRC too late.

My personal take of that blast remained hesitant though. I don't know how much explosives and especially shrapnel were put in, but the blast and damage

were huge. Perhaps we should have chosen a different target, even if it would have been more difficult. The ANC said we'll take the struggle to the White areas. That was necessary, but attacks with that kind of impact made it easy for the enemy to say we targeted civilians.

It seems that Klaas has a somewhat similar view as you on the Church Street bombing?

Yes, I think Klaas also had his doubts already early on. Klaas and I had done a first recce with the instruction to find a strategic military or police target in Pretoria to attack with a car bomb, a new weapon for us. We judged there were too many civilians around, shops and offices. We didn't see it at a time when there was a concentration of air force personnel boarding buses,, we only looked at the general environment during the day. Mind you, I think basically Klaas's doubts are, like mine, not so much operational as political. I agree that militarily it was okay in terms of urban guerrilla tactics, as well as both legitimate and proportionate according to international rules on asymmetric warfare. The Amnesty Commission of the TRC confirmed that.

For me, it was the first time I was directly involved in such a big attack, albeit in a secondary role. But as I said, it didn't change in any way my determination to fight on; on the contrary… Also, you have a feeling of now I'm in it till my neck, if they catch me, I'll hang. And anyway, if they know I was involved, they might kill me anywhere in the world. So, you're into it 200%. It was part of the commitment.

There were other car bombs used by Special Ops units. There were the cases of the Magoo's operation by the Robert McBride-Gordon Webster Unit, Krugersdorp Magistrates' Court by the Dolphin Unit, Wits Command by Hein Grosskopf, Ellis Park by Lester Dumakude's unit and the Witbank security police offices by Xolile Sam's unit, apart from those used by some other MK structures

You know, it's a too indiscriminate weapon. It causes confusion on who we are targeting. I thought we had better use artillery, although it's more difficult. Artillery was used in the attack on Voortrekkerhoogte in 1981. Barney was planning to use it again but then sadly he and two others was killed. There were also other techniques to avoid civilian victims. For instance, when MK attacked a courthouse, they might put a small limpet bomb to go off first, and when everyone was evacuated and there were only police or army, the big bomb would go off. That way civilian casualties can be kept to a minimum. Remember also, that at the time car bombs were not so common, not like now.

Of course, the loss of life in the Church Street operation is regrettable and your existential issues about your role in it are understandable, but surely the operation is understandable? It was the first car bomb operation in South Africa and it was very unfortunate that the bomb was detonated prematurely through some unanticipated signal interference. And as regrettable as the civilian deaths are, given what the Apartheid security forces were doing in the country and across the borders and the number of people they killed and maimed, and how few were the deaths caused by MK and the movement as whole, do you not think that, on balance, you are judging the Church Street operation too harshly. And wasn't the operation supported by many in the movement and the country, especially African people?

You're right. I was in an emotional state writing from Chile in reply to André Pretorius' interview of mine in *Beeld.* I had no feedback on what happened at the TRC hearing on the Church Street bombing and was nervously waiting whether amnesty would be granted or not. I knew the victims could – and would – object. Of course, I referred to the dreadful scene which should have been most of all military victims, blue Air Force uniforms. Not a majority of civilians. That would have been different. But I shouldn't have written at all at that stage, I didn't even know the mood in the country.

As for the impact inside South Africa, you are absolutely right. How could I not share the thrill of this very strong message to the Whites that we were serious and of the kind of war at home they should expect if their government continued its total war, as they called it, on the people, the carnage and suffering they inflicted daily with impunity both at home and in the region?

Church Street was also labelled by the ANC as a retaliation for specific murders. As I told you, I was in Maseru in 1982 shortly after the night-time slaughter by the SADF of ANC families and Lesotho civilians, who were neighbours of these families, killing 42 in their sleep in their flats, including women and children. I spoke with an eyewitness who was still in shock about the plain horror he witnessed, way beyond legitimate warfare. The Church Street bomb was also in retaliation for the assassinations of Ruth First in Maputo, Joe Gqabi in Harare and Petrus Nzima and his wife in Swaziland. The SAAF was targeted because of its role in these and other attacks in the frontline states.

Thus, we were all well aware that the Church Street bombing paled in the light of the increasing horror the enemy wrought inside and beyond South Africa's borders, the daily wanton killings, disappearances, torture, the extreme cruelty of punishment of any resistance by detention without trial of countless people including children and parents taken as hostage. There was the terror of

nightly police raids in the homes that children grew up with from early childhood. The bannings. It just didn't stop, and there was always more cruelty, more callousness, more bloodshed. You are absolutely right. So, of course in that sense, Africans and probably all in the ANC, including myself, welcomed the attack. It was arguably our best piece of armed propaganda.

I hoped at least some Whites would finally come to their senses. In my understanding, that was the main goal of that bombing. Afrikaner journalist Deon Lamprecht wrote in 2003, in *Beeld*, about the reactions to Church Street among soldiers at the border and the new fears of Whites he noticed all over the country, saying: "*Die Afrikaner-mite van onoorwinlikheid, getroetel deur dekades van nasionalistiese propaganda, het aan skerwe gelê.*" (The Afrikaner myth of invincibility, upheld by decades of nationalist propaganda, was shattered.) This was a big step forward. In that sense, the bombing was also hugely successful.

At the Kabwe conference, new rules of engagement were decided on. Subsequently, those were wrongly interpretated by some of the military units inside the country and were then set straight by the leadership.

I have always been in two minds about that bombing. Joe Slovo understood that, and mentioned it to OR. I deeply appreciate that OR then asked to see me to talk about it.

At the time you were doing your Special Ops work part-time. How were you able to get away from work so often?...

It became a bit difficult. Well, I also did research outside Maputo sometimes and Guido was my head of department so he covered for me. But not always, because sometimes, especially on the Swaziland work in tense periods I could not get back to work on time. It happened quite often then, you go to Swaziland and because communications were more and more difficult, comrades had to leave their accommodation and so sometimes you couldn't find them. Or they were arrested, or killed.

So sometimes one had to contact a comrade without previous arrangements, which was difficult because they were suspicious of everything and everyone. And those that I knew well such as T-man were always very deep underground, Rashid wouldn't even know where. So then, I had to contact a comrade who was easier to find, but might not know me. So, at times I couldn't make it to the border before it closed on Sunday and I'd be late for work on Monday.

I remember once I came back on a Monday morning. And Rashid is upset because I come in late and he says Guido can't cover for you all the time. So, I tell him if you want me to come back on time, how do you expect me to complete all the tasks you give me when you know how difficult it is to find comrades in Swaziland these days? And he was very upset. I said don't blame me. Yes, I know why there are all these problems, but then look for someone else, or don't blame me. I tell him would you want me to come back without doing what you asked? Then what? And then I left. I said I don't feel like arguing, I'm tired. I'm going to work, and I'll see you afterwards.

I came back after work and he'd calmed down. And then he realised of course it's true because if I'd come back without the job done, he would've been even more angry. There was no way I could ring him from Swaziland to ask for new instructions, I just had to manage. But it became even more tricky when there was the Nkomati Accord.

After the Pretoria bombing, I couldn't go inside the country for a year because the Special Ops leaders thought I would be somewhere on a suspects list. If only because the day before the blast I drove the same type car inside the country from Swaziland – in the media, they immediately said the bomb must have come via Swaziland – and didn't drive it out again. So thereafter I only worked on Swaziland with Rashid.

A year later, in 1984, first Klaas was sent into the country on a blank run and then I. Nothing happened. And it's really amazing because when I was later arrested, I still thought that I was on a suspect list – but those people, they'd got all that forensic capacity, but it never occurred to them to check the border data for clues and suspects. Who had come into the country with a car and gone out the next day in a different car, or by air. So, there was something wrong with them. I was sure I was on some kind of list, that they would know me, have that kind of crucial evidence, but they didn't. They could never prove anything.

At some point, I think I was just about the only one who did the communications work with Rashid – and it was very difficult then. Often it was just oral communication and orders, because it was too dangerous to carry written stuff. That was when my job at the university began to suffer, and then there were also tensions in Mozambique, and then came Nkomati and it became far worse.
At the time, with Swaziland increasingly becoming a very dangerous place for us, I felt it was not only the lines of communication that were a huge problem, but also the commanders not going into the country. From what I know, the one who went back all the time inside was Chris Hani – from Lesotho. This

while the struggle inside went from strength to strength. The UDF was launched exactly three months after the Church Street bombing.

Joe wanted to come inside. In jest, he once said he would stay with me in Joburg and I would then have to cook him once a week lamb chops and once leg of lamb. He was dreaming, of course. There was no way we had the infrastructure then to have someone like Joe stay, or even briefly visit inside. His face was even shown on national TV as enemy number one. So, they were all dreaming about going inside. But almost no one did. On the political side, I think it wasn't much better. Ebie said it wasn't enough to work from the frontline, he needed to go in himself for a sufficient time to work with the underground at home.

But as far as I know, at the time of my arrest Ebie was the only ANC leader of that level to be inside the country for any length of time – remember he'd been inside for six months by then. Certainly, the Boers thought so. Because during my detention, once they had identified him, they kept interrogating me about which other Commanders or leadership were inside. At some point they repeated: give us one more Commander who is inside and we'll let you go! I told them there were many inside and all others were preparing to settle inside. But, of course, that wasn't true. The conditions weren't there and MK didn't want to lose senior leadership, they were too precious.

Well, Mac Maharaj and Siphiwe Nyanda went in too…

Yes, but I understood Gebuza and others only went in for shorter missions. I know that Rashid moved along the frontline, because once he called me urgently to Lesotho to bring him the sketches for an operation right after we had finished bringing the weapons in. This was very soon after the Maseru massacre of December 1982. I waited two days or so for Rashid, as per his instructions, in a shabby little hotel used by diamond smugglers at the edge of Maseru.

But there was a need for senior Commanders to infiltrate and head the underground structures inside. That took shape in *Operation Vula*, but I was already in prison then. Earlier on, those released from the (Robben) Island tried to stay at home and build the underground. But almost always, the ANC had to call them to come out for their security. They didn't want to lose those precious Island graduates. Mac was inside again for *Vula* later. But I think he also was never happy to work from outside, he seemed on the move all the time.

Joe always had big plans and he loved Joburg. We had to bring him pictures of the Joburg skyline after every mission. Plus spare parts for his cars… and other

shopping. But obviously Joe already realised the absence of Commanders inside was becoming a real problem.

So after the Church Street operation, you stay away from South Africa for a year, then comes the Nkomati Accord, then you go back into South Africa? That would be 1985?

Yes, my first blank trial run into South Africa was in 1984, a year after the Church Street operation. Then I moved to Swaziland, went several times back and forth to prepare my infiltration, and in January 1985, I settled in Johannesburg and started at Wits.

As for Klaas, when he came to Johannesburg in 1985, first once early May, then the fatal time in June, we hadn't worked together for over two years, the last time was before the Church Street bombing in May 1983. Already before that, we were not a couple anymore, but, as I said, at Joe's request we had continued to work together in Special Ops for a while under the cover of a married couple. Klaas moved out of my house in late 1982 or 1983. That relieved the stress at home a bit. I had told Joe and Rashid already that it had become dangerous for us to work together because we always got into arguments. Then you're not alert enough.

Also, a little after Church Street, I had Ebie's place to go to in Mbabane. Ebie was based in Swaziland and provided a home for my eldest children who were schooling there. That made my work between Maputo and Swaziland much easier. So Klaas and I had separate tasks. I don't know what he did and he didn't know about me. In 1984, he did a clean run to Johannesburg to check security and nothing happened. We were not officially divorced yet, so if they looked for me, they might have gone for him. Then I went in on a clean run myself – I think I went by air, not road – and again nothing happened. We then started preparing for me to infiltrate into South Africa on a full-time basis.

Before that, there had been Nkomati and I had to go lie low for about a week in Ebie's place. This was March 1984 and Ebie and I were a couple then already since mid-1983. Before Nkomati, many sympathetic foreigners had been asked by the ANC to keep stuff for the movement in their houses. Weapons were officially forbidden in Maputo. FRELIMO closed their eyes but we had to play the game. So our houses should be clean. We each had a pistol but that was it. And at one point I got a Luger from 1942. It was a big thing for everyone to have, a Luger of your year of birth, so Rashid got one for me. But when I went into South Africa, I couldn't take it. I bought a pistol in Johannesburg, a Walther PPK, the little 'spy pistol', and got a fire arm licence.

Anyway, when in Maputo in early 1984, the terms of the Nkomati Accord became known, suddenly all these foreigners who didn't risk a bloody thing got nervous and they gave everything back to the ANC. So now our flats and houses were full with weapons and ANC stuff. All those development workers, often they were ANC couriers and so on, those Whiteys, they got nervous for themselves.

I had a university house with lots of room. It used to be clean. So then I suddenly had to store boxes of MK stuff. Plus an enormous piece of artillery, the Soviets only gave MK two of those, I was told, they were said to still be secret weapons not known to the West, the other one was in our camps in Angola. It was brought in pieces to my house. It needed sophisticated calculations with complex tables.

I mean, I already had nothing to do with do-gooders. They thought the ANC was cool, MK was cool and they all liked to be seen as couriers of the ANC. But now that MK was going to be disarmed and thrown out of Mozambique on the orders of the Boers and because Mozambique was vulnerable and signed the Nkomati peace accord, they suddenly were afraid and wanted their houses clean of any ANC things! True, many did do helpful work and were appreciated. And many were nice, committed people who continued to be supporters of the struggle. But right then, their attitude was hard to accept…

The children knew they couldn't say a thing. They were very good all along, even the youngest ones whose friends were all ANC kids. So they also learned from their ANC friends and families where secrecy and struggle stories were a way of life.

Then Joe comes rushing into my house on a Friday afternoon and says you've got to leave immediately. FRELIMO is sending the army to disarm us. He said you're on the list, not your name but your address. So out! It was a terrible moment. These were our friends, Joe said, and suddenly his tears flowed. I was all shaken, the great, wonderful Joe Slovo wept because he felt betrayed by our FRELIMO friends… Those were deeply emotional hours.

So now, the house is full with these weapons and I am in hiding with friends in Maputo with the youngest kids. And an hour later, the Mozambican army came to search the house – but I got saved by a neighbour. The soldiers hesitated at the door because it said it was a university house. So the neighbours said, no, there's no ANC here. A Belgian lady lives here, she must have gone to Swaziland to see her kids at school, she goes every weekend. They didn't know about our involvement in MK, so they innocently helped me out.

When it was dark and the soldiers had finally left, we got out what we could stack in my car. The next day I went off with my kids to Swaziland with whatever weapons I could take.

Of course, I was not in the habit of taking kids along when I was loaded.

On missions to South Africa, we never took kids of course, loaded or not. We only took them once on holidays to the Kruger National Park.

Did you go back to Maputo?

Yes. And then I compressed my teaching courses so that I could finish the contract as soon as possible. And I sent my youngest kids, Fabrice and Yves, to their father who still worked in the Netherlands. Letting my kids go and breaking up my family was the hardest thing I ever experienced. But their security was at stake, even in Mozambique.

And then I went to live with Ebie in Swaziland, where my daughter and oldest son already lived. Ebie had taken on a father's role, they got along very well. And they were disciplined, they learned what living in an underground house meant. They could never take friends home and not let themselves be dropped off there either. No one should know where they lived. And they understood and always complied. They had lots of friends but would see them in Mbabane or at friends' homes.

So how long are you in Swaziland before you move into South Africa to settle in the underground?

I got Swazi permanent residence for me and my family and was fulltime with Ebie for several months before he went into South Africa at the end of 1984. Then my oldest son, Philippe, chose to also join his father and brothers. My daughter, Brigitte, finished her O-levels and lived with me waiting to go to London in September to study for her A-levels. But Brigitte fell pregnant, and then I was arrested.

I obtained PhD candidate status at Wits, as well as offers for lecturing at Wits, UCT and Windhoek – South African universities lacked African linguists as opposed to specialists of African languages.

Only recently when I saw part of my security file, I found proof that the NIS (National Intelligence Service) had initially advised against my being granted a visa. That was because, unknown to us, in 1984 Klaas had somehow come on their radar in Maputo for doing anti-apartheid radio work. NIS also found Klaas had been active in anti-apartheid in the Netherlands.

But they had nothing on me.

Klaas' last South Africa visit in June 1985 was for an appointment at the University of Bophuthatswana.

However, the NIS didn't leave me off the hook. They put me on a reservation list and the Post Office was ordered to intercept my phone calls. This was effective from mid- March. As I suspected, because around that time I got a visit in my flat in Yeoville of a so-called phone technician who did something to my phone and engaged in friendly talk. Upon my move to a house in Bellevue, my phone broke down, I went to the post office saying I was expecting a very important call from overseas. The chap looked strangely at me and the phone was connected again. I also picked up low level surveillance those first months, so that surely was the NIS.

On 12 June 1985, the SB also applied to the post office to tap my phone. That is around the time that the SB took over from the NIS apparently as a result of my contacts with Ebie in Durban. So, the Durban underground cell must have been under surveillance of the SB.

That is where the lines crossed, as it were, unfortunately. All this is confirmed by documents in my trial records archived at the South African History Archive at Wits Library.

By the end of 1984, I had received my visa for South Africa and Ebie was about to go on a month's long mission inside the country. The children were on school holidays. Ebie and I planned to have a home together in Swaziland again after his return from South Africa, and I would go back and forth. But then Ebie's attempts to cross the border (from South Africa into Swaziland in 1985) failed and I got arrested, as well as his comrades Moe and Yunis Shaik and Shirish Soni in Durban, who I had never met.

Ebie and my relationship had started soon after the Church Street bombing. We ran into each other and fell in love during one of his trips to Maputo from Swaziland. Within days, we were each informed of the supposed incompatibility of our respective positions in the struggle. I didn't know what to think of the movement again interfering in my personal life – first Joe kept Klaas and me together and now I was told who not to have a relationship with a comrade! I thought such interference was common only in cases where there were reasons to fear attempts at infiltration by the enemy. But Ebie just shrugged – he proposed to ignore them.

Later, Ebie applied for permission to Lusaka – the required procedure for vetting and approving relationships in the ANC in exile – and it was approved.

At the time, Ebie headed the Political committee in Swaziland and thought much more resources should go to political work inside the country. The military's task was to support the political struggle and should always be relevant to the mass struggle, he taught me. I think Ebie would have liked me to get out of the military, but then he also always said I couldn't work fully in the political department because I didn't know the country well and had no networks. He didn't seem very happy on my settling inside the country on my own.

Rashid said our relationship was irresponsible because of potential security problems by crossing lines between different lines of command, Ebie's political and mine of Special Ops. That is what finally happened but there was an emergency. It was not our plan.

Rashid forgets how handy the link with Ebie was for my work, especially in the tense times around Nkomati. I had a home in Swaziland, didn't have to go to hotels or so where the Boers were certainly surveilling. I don't know how else I could have done all that liaison work from Maputo in those hectic times. And Ebie also gave us a lot of information, for instance about Swazi police raids and the presence of South African security forces. And about our comrades arrested in Swaziland. But then Special Ops moved out of Swaziland to Botswana.

I settled in South Africa after New Year 1985. At Wits, the linguistics department gave me a small office and a part-time teaching job.

How long were you in the country before you got arrested?

Six months only.

What were you doing apart from studying? What was your role?

I had to make sure I was clean. I only participated a bit in student politics on campus keeping a very low profile.

So you were lying low? Like a sleeper?

Right. Meanwhile, I was supposed to prepare liaison, things like places for blind meetings, for mail, and on my own initiative I also did some recces for smaller targets. I liked recces and you're constantly looking out for good targets, it had become a second nature. The liaison work was to improve and shorten the long communication lines, our biggest problem.

I had a project for Joe, it was to find a chap called José Da Costa, one of the highest Mozambique intelligence people who went over to South Africa in 1982. And among other things, he went with all the files of couriers who'd asked for exit visas via the ANC to avoid the cumbersome red tape. Luckily, Special Ops did not operate in that way, Joe insisted we get our own exit visas from the FRELIMO administration. For security, Joe said, we in Special Ops didn't use the ANC services for that. Costa had done a lot of damage to FRELIMO, to the ANC also. So Joe wanted to find the chap.

I tried to trace him, but soon afterwards I was arrested. And later when I came out of prison, I heard Da Costa had been killed in Malawi…

The SB never knew that I saw Ebie twice in Joburg for personal reasons, before he needed assistance and we met in Durban. Ebie phoned me at my department at Wits, not at home, but rarely.

So how did you get caught?

I think my surveillance by the NIS had been light and haphazard until things started to go wrong, when the enemy got pieces of the puzzle. The earliest photographs the SB had of Ebie and me were from Durban. They were from sometime in May when I once made a detour via Durban on my way to Swazi and we quickly linked up on an isolated beach at the Snake Park where he handed me mail to give to Nkosazana (Dlamini Zuma) in Mbabane. She was a friend, and Brigitte was a frequent visitor in her home in Mbabane. She kept an eye on her when I was not around. With Nkosazana – who we called Joan – we used my landline in Joburg sometimes, but she was a genius in coding in the shape of innocuous women's talk and for the rest it was genuine family talk.

When I lived in a flat in Yeoville, I picked up that there was a flat across the street where some chaps moved in, in a funny, unusual way. Like they put furniture and curtains in a way that you normally don't move into a house. And men only. So I moved house. I got a little house in Bellevue with a closed garage so I could every day thoroughly check my car for bombs or other devices. Often, I even left a hair stuck on the door so that I'd immediately see if someone had entered.

How do you think they traced you?

It was Klaas who came onto the NIS' radar in Maputo, as I told you, and he had been my husband. But at an early stage in Joburg, I already had some suspicions that my phone was tapped.

Why did you think that?

Twice my phone broke down inexplicably, once in the beginning and once after I'd moved. As I told you, during the first few weeks in Yeoville, a man saying he was a phone technician came to my flat, fiddled at the phone and started a chat. The second time, the line was properly transferred to the house in Bellevue but it went dead the next day. I went to the phone people at the post office to complain and it was connected again. Both times I suspected it was for bugging purposes.

At the time, public phones in Joburg were bugged as well. So if absolutely necessary we used the home phone but spoke in code.

To bug all the phones in Joburg would have been a gigantic, hugely expensive task. How do you know they were all bugged?

Well, a lot of them were, according to MK. Certainly in places like Yeoville and Hillbrow. So, we used the phone as little as possible for ANC purposes and relied on coding, in a way that made it sound like a normal conversation when we were communicating messages.

Do you know how the police got on to you?

There was a marked difference between the relatively light surveillance by the NIS or MI (Military Intelligence) that I had suspected and thought I'd get rid of in time, and when the SB took over in June. We know the date from my trial. The first time we picked up definite surveillance was when we tried to get Ebie to cross over back to Swaziland. At his first attempt he hadn't been able to cross, I think his guide hadn't pitched up. He used to work with a guide to take him over the border.

So, he asked me if I could help check security for his second try while he would come with his comrades from Durban. At each checking run for Ebie, I caught suspicious issues. At the third try, after dark, we ran into a roadblock that wasn't there when I checked the route earlier. I think the Durban political underground was under SB surveillance which then somehow crossed with mine by the NIS. At my trial, the NIS chap said it seemed to them that I was into something of a 'more criminal nature' and therefore they had to give my case over to the SB. That seems to have been just after Ebie's failed crossing attempt of 5 June. The document of the post office says the SB applied for phone interception on 12 June 1985 and adds that apparently the police took over a case against me by the NIS for whom they had tapped my phone since 18 March.

When Klaas came on 2 May and I assisted him with DLBs established at Muldersdrift, he briefly came to my flat…

I did a bit of security for Ebie when necessary. Simple things like checking the roads he would take or letting me follow him to his meetings or as his driver drops him off and later fetch him. He often met in hotels with comrades who came from South Africa to see him, which was of course always tricky. The hotels were full of agents and they might have been followed.

Ebie and I had gotten used to the constraints imposed by the struggle. Apart from him at times sharing security warnings with us, and those casual security tasks for him in the period that I was inactive in Swaziland, we kept our work carefully separate and didn't talk about it. At home he had his office, a no-go area, and I had my desk in another room. In his senior position, he obviously knew more about me than I about him and his work. But from him, I – and also the kids – learned what it really meant to be secretive, to keep to the need-to-know principle, even in an intimate setting and without it being obvious or explicit. It was just our way of life that was also warm, full of laughs and affection.

Then Ebie went inside the country for several months in December 1984, just before I went to Joburg. His work, logistics and underground structures were quite different from ours. But importantly, he went inside the country illegally and stayed underground, whereas I was there legally and could move around freely.

In 1985, Ebie had problems crossing back from South Africa to Swaziland and asked me for assistance in providing security on the South African side. This also involved some communication with Ronnie and Nkosazana on the Swazi side. I said okay, it seemed natural. He trusted me. It was not because we were lovers but because, for such a senior leader, crossing back safely was very important and right then he had no one else he could trust the same way.

In my line of command, I actually was already frustrated. I had seen Rashid once in April in Botswana. That was when he told me I could now perform operations myself. But I had sent him several reports after that. Nothing important, more like interim reports. Also, a first report for Joe on the Da Costa project. These didn't really need a reply. But I did want to know at least that they had received them. Especially as I was also trying out communications, I was tasked to set up in Joburg, such as a first P O Box under a false name for communication with Rashid and places for blind meetings with comrades. We also needed to test the coded communications with the command we had set up. For instance, I had a code book with Rashid and another one with Joe. It's a lot of work to code and decode with a code book, but it's 100% safe.

We also had different code names. My general code name was Judy or Judith, one of my four names. For my communications from South Africa with Rashid, he had chosen the code name David Steel, who was then in the news as the leader of the British Liberals.

As far as I remember, I sent at least one report to check on communications the way Rashid had told me. I think it was to Botswana. This was also to check my new secret P O Box in Braamfontein. I checked the box many times for replies but nothing came. Then I also sent some through Ronnie who was MK Military Intelligence, thinking that was a safe way to be sure they arrived. No reply.

Apparently, T-man got my communication data from Rashid but I still had none for him in Botswana if only for an emergency. I would have needed that because Rashid was always moving around. What if I urgently needed to skip the country? From Special Ops side there was no plan, I had no idea where and how to jump the fence into Botswana for instance. And I also wondered what kind of operations Rashid was planning for me to do. I guess I knew enough about basic weaponry but had never actually used any except pistols. And would such operations not clash with liaison work?

Anyway, I never got any reaction to the mail I sent and was getting irritated. I began to feel like dropped in the jungle, cut off. Mid-April in Gaborone, Rashid had asked me to assist Klaas with a load within the next weeks. That was to be a one-time job, I wasn't going to be Klaas' teammate. Klaas came in the first days of May.

After the job, we discussed struggle issues and I asked him to convey to Rashid ideas I had about getting a smallholding for storing and distributing weapons. I'd been looking around for suitable areas and smallholdings, but there were several issues to discuss, for instance it might not be wise for me to actually live in the place myself. I didn't get feedback on that and other proposals either but hoped Rashid would put them on the agenda for our next meeting.

Of course, I didn't want to abandon the Special Ops projects. I thought I can lie low for a while, perhaps stay in Swaziland for a bit, I'll discuss it with Rashid. I was anyway planning a trip soon to Europe to see my sons and would then meet Rashid somewhere.

Ebie still insisted he absolutely needed to leave South Africa. I'd begun to understand there would be a conference, something big, which turned out to be the Kabwe Conference. Of course, that was kept secret, especially in the

forward areas. And I understood that Ebie needed to report on his mission and the political situation inside.

On the home front meanwhile, Brigitte and I had important discussions. In the days before I met Ebie in the Blue Waters Hotel in Durban on 17 June, Brigitte decided to keep her baby and not give it up for adoption in Belgium. She'd stay with me, we would take care of our baby together and she would continue her studies. So, I needed to rediscuss my project with Rashid and Joe. Brigitte took a letter for Rashid to that effect to Zimbabwe the day before I was arrested. I doubted I could continue to work from Joburg with her and the baby living with me. It was too dangerous. Perhaps from Swaziland, where she could continue schooling at Waterford for her A-levels. I think Brigitte gave the letter to Ronnie who rushed to Harare after I was detained to take care of her and Klaas's son's safety and their departure to Europe.

In other words, at the time of my arrest, my whole Special Ops project was uncertain. The SB found the text of that letter to Rashid on my typewriter ribbon. Although the content was strictly personal, they concluded Brigitte was an accomplice because she carried a letter for the banned ANC. Due to much pressure from Belgium, she was finally given a safe-conduct for my trial but banned from entering SA afterwards…

Klaas lived in Zimbabwe and his main task was to bring in arms. But we had no contact and I didn't know what he did and with whom he worked in Special Ops. On the phone he says I want to come in two weeks' time. Of course, he didn't say what for, we had no codes for that. I tell him I can't see him because I'm ill, meaning security is bad. In other words, I tell him not to come. But he insists and insists, so to give myself time to think I said okay, call me back on a certain day. Then it dawned on me he might be bringing an urgent message from Rashid.

Klaas said he went to see for a job at the University of Bophuthatswana and as it would be a pity to come empty, he asked comrades to load his car. It was T-man who did that.

I ended up agreeing to help Klaas with his DLB in exchange for him taking the mail – mine and Ebie's message – urgently to Lusaka. Yes, I knew of good places for DLBs but not around Joburg. I said there was one perhaps but it's not very good, in the veld close to Kempton Park. So, he said, 'Let's go have a look'. We went there in the afternoon and he said it's good enough. It was open veld, with bushes crossed by one small road leading to a housing estate in the distance. It was not good because everything around the cities is too open but as we might plan some attacks in Kempton Park or Halfway House it felt okay.

What attacks were you planning around Kempton Park?

Not a specific target yet, I looked at the Kempton Park Command and in Halfway House at Alfa Romeo HQ along Old Pretoria Road, which was a new major investment in the country. Of both, I had sent preliminary sketches among the reports I'd sent to Rashid. There was a new policy that the ANC had announced, that we are now also going to attack economic targets – companies which invested in South Africa in breach of the boycott. As I had begun to look at some of them, one also looks where to hide arms not too far from there. But I hadn't done enough work yet on finding the right places.

Anyway, we went at night, there was no traffic but it was a light, cloudless night. We could see far around, including a small housing estate at several hundred metres distance on the edge of the veld. We drove into the veld on a small, little used track and chose a spot among some humps. We managed to get the stuff Klaas brought buried – explosives, detonators and some complicated electronic stuff.

Then we saw a car coming by on the tar road, there was one chap in it. Police usually have two or more people in a car for surveillance, so we thought it's unlikely to be them. Then he drove slowly along the edge of the housing estate, first we thought he might live there, but he drove a bit too slow for my liking, as if looking for house numbers or something. So, I said to Klaas let's leave, I'll do better camouflage later. I usually did that job, but it has to be done with care, it takes time and now we felt in a hurry to get out of there.

It turned out that the chap was a policeman and perhaps he saw light in the veld. When he drove by, we might have had the car's headlights briefly on to make it easier to bury the stuff, but we surely drove off without lights till we were back on the road. I seem to remember having heard that the policeman was off duty but after we left, he decided to go and see what we had been doing there. And then he found the thing that wasn't camouflaged well enough yet.

Was it purely coincidental? Was he an ordinary policeman? Or was he from the security police tailing you?

From what I heard in detention, I thought he was a normal policeman. And from his testimony at my trial, I took away that they were lucky and could easily have missed it.

Winnie Mandela with Hélène Passtoors' family during her trial, 1986, Sunday Times

Do you think Joe and Rashid were not sensitive enough to the tensions between you and Klaas?

Thank you for the question. The answer is yes and no. They knew it of course. In Maputo they were both house guests, Joe more frequently than Rashid and more sensitive to the emotional charge of our break-up. Or perhaps, I should say, to my anger and disappointment. Perhaps Rashid thought these things should have no impact on MK work. True, they shouldn't. But they did. Anyway, by the time we all left Maputo Joe and Rashid seemed to have definitely given up on a revival of our team.

However, in 1985, Rashid obviously thought that after a few years of separate work, Klaas and I should be ready to work together again, if only occasionally. Klaas told me he specialised in Special Ops ordnance but they hadn't found a suitable new teammate for him yet.

As for Klaas, you know, in his world, friendships and relationships overlap, one just slides the cursor a little. He accepted a separation but he didn't accept a break.

Of course, a confrontational break-up like ours frustrated commanders. I don't know how many times things went wrong in MK because of personal or personality problems that might have been foreseen. Ronnie Kasrils writes about his regrets in the case of the Broederstroom MK unit, of Damian de Lange and others, that was infiltrated into the country at great cost. Due to personality problems, it ended dramatically in one comrade trying to desert, one being turned and three in prison. In Swaziland, I had also known of comrades having lost their nerve and put their comrades in danger.

Klaas always wanted to be free. He also had different ideas about strategy and tactics. One of the things he was critical about, was the policy at that stage, that there were only Africans in the leadership, the NEC. And already quite early on, we asked Joe and others about this, about non-racialism and the African leadership issue. Joe explained why it should be an evolution, a gradual development. I listened to Joe's explanation and accepted it. But Klaas said that's ridiculous, you're non-racial so you have to go all the way – in the struggle, race should not matter.

Klaas told JS that?

Yes… Well, he wouldn't have said it to Joe with such rudeness. 'Ridiculous' is Klaas's favourite word for criticising, but he wouldn't have used that with Joe.

There were other issues although I don't know how he socialised in the long run in ANC culture. He knew the pillar of international struggle very well and that was like his homebase that he returned to later, he didn't stay in the ANC. But I think, at least in the beginning, he would have liked a more brazen armed struggle and talked about other liberation struggles and revolutions that observed less restraint than the ANC. Citizenship shouldn't be an issue either. Klaas saw himself like the internationalists fighting in the Spanish Civil War. Why not? There were also foreigners fighting in the Bolshevik revolution and the Russian Civil War. And in the French Revolution, when the term internationalism was coined.

Within the ANC, there was a lot of learning to do between the lines of texts and speeches. I felt one needed to try and get a feel of the ANC's instincts – you might call it culture – that informed its fine-tuning of tactics and social and political approaches. In that sense, the ANC seemed more psychologist than ideologist. Such as the implementation of non-racialism needing a gradual approach on the issue of African leadership. But also, the ANC's concern for reflecting at all levels more or less the demographics of diversity, as well as gender and so on. If possible, the movement always seemed to prefer a delicate approach rather than bluntly imposing. The ANC was forgiving. Sue (Rabkin) used to say – you must, so to speak, have killed not only your father but also your mother, before the ANC will expel you! In all those years, there was only one major expulsion, the Group of Eight (ANC members who campaigned against the role of non-Africans and Communists in the ANC). It must have been painful because it still left scars. All that stood in sharp contrast with apartheid culture and its Calvinistic mindset. Or perhaps with White culture, Whiteness, in general.

And the soul of resistance lay in songs rather than slogans. To me, that said a lot. Songs reach your guts and rise up from the guts, they are a powerful language well beyond slogans. But for Klaas, they were music and as all music to like or dislike…

We had silly issues like that standing in for more basic differences in our approach to the ANC. I thought Klaas relied too much on book knowledge and theory. He always had some quote for argument, sometimes that made me go out of my mind, really. Discussing with quotes as tennis balls doesn't get one any closer, does it? Although I loved his overloaded bookshelves, one always found answers to all questions there and good literature.

He took to calling me a communist and a Stalinist and when we had real bad fights, he would say things like, you know, if you were in the Bolshevik Revolution, you'd be able to bump me off because I'm not ideologically correct (laughter). I felt he was talking about other people, other times, other places. Awful fights I'd read about on occasion. Europe in the 1960s/70s. Politically, when I met him, I knew nothing about left-libertarianism and, at first, it seemed a bit of the fresh air of May '68 I had missed because I was in Congo. But I couldn't share many of his views and found them left-Eurocentric despite his interest in Africa.

I think Klaas saw himself as a Marxist but not of a Soviet disposition…

He is a Marxist, yes, especially in his work as a social scientist. But at the personal level, he said he was a 'situationist', an ideology he adhered to from his time as a student in Amsterdam and in Paris in May '68. We had a thick White bible on the bookshelves called 'Situationnisme'. It's far left, libertarian, avant-gardist, anti-authoritarian, and thus anti-Soviet Union, anti-Stalinist of course, anti-China, anti-Trotskyism and not really anarchist either. Ruth (First) wasn't Stalinist. I wasn't. But Klaas thought everyone was Stalinist, including me. In order not to be seen as a Stalinist, you kind of had to shout it from the rooftops. But I don't see why one had to polarise in that way in a liberation movement that received considerable Soviet support. Not only weapons and training, but also medical treatment, university studies and even holidays.

As for the SACP in MK, I remember a Special Ops comrade telling me membership of the Party was like reaching the highest level in MK. This shows the stature and influence the Party had especially in MK.

Well, these are your subjective views about him that he and others may well not share, and I can't speak for him obviously, but do you really think he didn't appreciate that because of the support the Soviet Union gave to the ANC it may have been difficult to be critical? Maybe he mainly felt that you accepted too much the Special Ops discipline, that you wouldn't question anything?

Question for the sake of questioning? Well, as for MK discipline, yes, I'm not a libertarian. As I said, I accepted MK discipline because I didn't want to decide what I wanted or liked to do and what not. In my view, that comes down to judging off-hand the choice of tactics and projects and I felt I was not competent to do so. I think if one doesn't trust the command, one shouldn't join the military. And our line of command was OR himself, then Joe, then Rashid - should I have wished better? One could discuss with Rashid and Joe,

we did it all the time, although Rashid was also politically more rigid and didn't have Joe's social and verbal talents. But orders come at the end of a decision-making process by the command, so one doesn't question orders. And, of course, there never were immoral orders that one would have to refuse in conscience.

In my understanding, a good guerrilla army needs basically three things: political cohesion, military cohesion and mobility. It should be acting as one person in one mind, so to speak. Often one has to act far from the command. So, a reliable guerrilla fighter needs to be disciplined and follow the rules of engagement as decided on by the ANC. As well as to be in tune with ANC politics – strategy and tactics – debates and customs. If you come from abroad, this really means trying to be in tune with the South African people's mentality, opening yourself to the people's ways to resist and conduct their struggle.

Klaas said I was a fanatic, which was his favourite insult. The Dutch, I feel, often don't know the difference between passionate and fanatic. Their highest value, it seems to me, is being permanently blatantly critical of everything, everyone, everywhere; they can't resist it. So don't take it too seriously if he says I supported the Soviet Union because they gave us all these weapons, of course, we all did up to a point.

With my Polish colleague, Eugeniusz Rzewuski – we were two in the African languages department - we talked almost daily about Soviet style socialism. It was the time of the increasing Solidarity trade union protests in Poland. Eugeniusz was a member of the Party, but less and less in agreement with it. It was traumatic for him and his wife. At some point he left the party and was miserable. So, I could hardly be a staunch Stalinist when I heard Eugeniusz. And that was live practice, not binary theory for the sake of binary purity.

With him, I witnessed a painful process that would repeat itself in the Eastern Bloc during the next years. Then came Gorbachov and other discussions and hope. Those were years when one had to think much more subtly than in terms of Stalinist or non-Stalinist. And to listen, because I didn't feel theoretically so sure. There were Joe's stories from the USSR and Prema Naidoo who came back from a long stay in the USSR and also had lived experience and more nuanced criticism. He came very often at home.

It's true that some in the ANC were utterly enthralled by the Soviet system, but others were lucid and had nuanced views. Comrades like Prema who had spent time there told quite a few critical stories, eye-openers often. I'm wary of black-and-white thinking and am the kind of person who would have liked to have first-hand experience instead of just theory. So I listened and personally,

most of all appreciated, the Soviet Union for its anti-colonialism and anti-neo-colonialism, the Soviet support to developing countries – even if we weren't blind to the Soviets taking care of their own interests in the process.

And, of course, their massive opposition to capitalism. Nowadays there no longer exists an anti-capitalist force of that stature to encourage people to challenge the monopoly of capitalist thought and resist. And, of course, their defeating Nazism, and the tremendous heroism of the Soviet people in World War II. But that doesn't make me a Stalinist.

And yet Klaas was big friends with Joe. He didn't dare tell Joe to his face that he's a Stalinist.

He may have?

Not really. Not after Ruth had asked him if he was a populist. That was not in relation to the struggle, but to what he said about his work in community radio on a collective state farm. Well, you should ask him.

He speaks very highly of Joe and Ruth…

I know. He admired them very much. But he said himself he was afraid of Ruth, of her sharp tongue and mind. Many men were. And like all of us, Klaas learned a lot from Joe.

I must add: I also learned a lot from Klaas and we worked very well together in MK for some time. Even if it couldn't last.

Hélène Passtoors with Klaas de Jonge, shortly before his assisted suicide in 2023, Supplied

There's something similar about you and Klaas in your involvement in the armed struggle. You speak of adrenalin and being hyperactive and then being told you must just relax and be a sleeper for a while but you couldn't, you became restless. You wanted action. Klaas also wanted action and speaks of his involvement in the struggle being, to some extent, an adventure. So, besides your moral outrage at apartheid, your principles, values, the political choices you made and your proximity to ANC leaders in Maputo and other considerations, what may also have drawn you – and

maybe Klaas too – to the armed struggle is a sense of adventure, political adventure, if you like? What do you think?

At the level of action and story-telling it might seem similar. At a deeper level, Klaas and I are different. Being involved in something as huge and – to me – existential as the liberation struggle excited him, he gave it all his energy and brain power. But it didn't shake his roots – nothing shakes the mindset and persona that he made since early adulthood. The struggle added on to them, enriched them. Well, that was my impression. But I admit I never knew or understood Klaas's background and backyard very well, nor the image he treasured for himself. So, it's hard to say something about his perceptions beyond what he said, for example, about internationalists in the Spanish Civil War.

As for me, no, not adventure. The adrenaline and excitement come with subversion, with fighting the enemy masked if you like, in the guise of an innocent person. The real feeling was much deeper. It was nothing like the challenge and excitement I'd felt crossing the US on my own in a rickety old car as an ignorant twenty-two year old, or the adventure of the long journeys on the huge, capricious Congo River with Pierre. No. The struggle gave this heady feeling of being in the middle, not of the Congo River, but of history in acceleration. On the road or in a prison cell, it was history that pushed us all on.

I know this is, well, lofty language, not the way one speaks so easily in everyday life although Joe sometimes alluded to it. But in jail, we had the leisure of actually expressing it, thinking about it and one held onto it consciously when the going got tough. Ebie put it differently – he said the struggle gave his life meaning. That comes down to the same. History pushes you on in a purposeful direction and that's what gives your life meaning. That's also why it felt like a privilege to be part of history, for your life – or even your death – to acquire meaning.

But in daily life, it's easier to speak and laugh about adrenaline, close calls, daring moves, the fun of misleading the enemy. You know, when I drove or walked in Johannesburg, I used to look at all those people who had no idea of the deadly game that was going on under their feet. And they had no idea who was a bona fide passer-by and who was involved in the underground world. It was a different world down there, people were not what they seemed, actions had a hidden rationale. It was like gripping spy fiction, except that it was real. And deadly. Hence the adrenaline, the intensity, the gloating and so on.

So, was action the attraction? Perhaps, in the sense that I always had surplus energy, so it wasn't easy to sit back and look on when there was a need for

action. So in that sense, yes, Joe seems to have judged me well when he decided to approach me. It was a privilege to join the front ranks rather than stay in the rear expressing solidarity, although that was also crucial to the struggle. And it came with closely associating with incredible people. Perhaps you'll say I was attracted to the kind of brave, committed people who were the heroes of my childhood: the resistance fighters. It's possible. And Ruth in particular had definitely impressed me before Joe came. But she had chosen the pen as her weapon and so although she had experienced underground struggle in the old days, that doesn't explain my choice.

Another woman I admire is the Spanish communist 'La Pasionaria', Dolores Ibarrurri, who coined the famous anti-Franquist slogan 'No pasaràn' (They shall not pass). She was a lifelong politician who engaged in armed struggle when needed. But those days I didn't think of her or the Spanish Civil War. And now when they call me an internationalist, I find that very nice, but I still don't know what exactly people mean by that. The internationalists joined the Spanish Civil War as a Belgian, as a Briton, as a Frenchman, etc. I never felt linked that way to a country, a nationality. I prefer cosmopolitanism which is about meeting across cultures and barriers.

I see no good reason why nationality should override other components of our rich, complex, and by nature dynamic identities. Through the struggle, South Africa became my country insofar as I can ever consider a country mine. It's the only country I fought for and so I still identify strongly with it. I still read South African media daily, keep up with the ANC as much as possible and read *Umsebenzi* and other publications of the movement.

Armed struggle was definitely not my idea of adventure. But I understood its necessity and so when I was approached, I couldn't refuse. But, yes, I did have a strong urge for action. Of course, the underground struggle needs people of action. I don't know what you say, but it's not adventure. I don't think so. But frankly, I don't know why people need a psychological explanation, why would it be so exceptional? Some good-meaning fool wrote on Dutch Wikipedia that I joined the struggle because I was upset about Ruth's assassination. But she was assassinated a year later!

And what about a comrade like Michael Dingake from Botswana? He was a lovely man and a writer. Why did he join, why did he end up on Robben Island for 15 years? I'm sure it's basically like me – time and conditions made him come into touch with the ANC and he thought it was important to join in the efforts to overthrow the scourge of Africa and all of humanity.

As I said, it was much deeper - it was actively engaging in history. In my life, I had plenty adventures, I didn't need the ANC for challenges and adrenalin.

Mind you, when we talk about adventure and adrenalin, we talk about the recce missions and weapons transport into South Africa from outside. When one lived in South Africa, the underground meant permanent stress. I'll tell you something intimate – that stress took away the desire for sex. I mentioned that to Ronnie as my trainer, because I didn't understand. And he said sorry, that is actually a part of the MCW course that I skipped because I thought it might not happen to you. That was funny, why not me?

But I thought it was a tremendous privilege to be able to act for once, and especially to do so in a meaningful framework, a liberation movement like the ANC that sooner or later would be victorious. I didn't doubt that. And with that, colonialism and racism worldwide would get a tremendous blow, hopefully the death knell. That's what I thought, my utopia. Whether you're communist or not was secondary. The roots of injustice had to be fought and swept into the dark past forever.

Okay, you find a relatively good theoretical frame for it – I thought that Marxism and Leninism helped the most. I have to tell you something very weird. With all the tensions in Kinshasa at the time with the resistance on campus against Mobutu's dictatorship, I hid forbidden books under my roof for Congolese friends and I used to read them. And sometimes they'd changed the covers or I simply forgot what I'd read.

Then in Mozambique, I started reading some of the Leninist material. I asked myself – how come I know how this text continues? I didn't even realise I'd read all the Lenin stuff in Congo, although too fast, under pressure because they were banned. In fact, the tendency in Congo in the '60s/'70s was rather Maoist, about peasant revolution. There was no working class. Mao's Little Red Book was very popular. That means over time ideas settled, cross-pollinated and matured in my mind into understanding and convictions. But often, I can't pin down where my thinking comes from. I am very bad at quoting; I pick up and integrate ideas, not quotes.

I got more grounding in Maputo from a Belgian Marxist economist, Marc Wuyts, who worked with Ruth First and was also close to Joe and the ANC. He held a seminar at some point for a small group of us and was an excellent teacher. For me, that tied up many of the loose threads I picked up in the course of time. So, this was for me a nice, useful frame. I think I'm still a communist, very much so, although don't ask me to be a communist in a country like Belgium. That's a different matter. I've tried, but coming from my political home of the ANC and indirectly the SACP, and more generally from Africa, it wasn't easy. They have different issues. And the real, national Belgian Communist Party doesn't exist anymore as such, except for some small groups.

The country-wide Party, who call themselves communists now, are recently more or less renovated Maoists.

You know, Joe always came back from trips to the Soviet Union with lots of stories and great Soviet jokes. The children also loved them. He also sang political songs for them with the guitar. They loved Joe and still remember some of his Soviet stories.

Joe didn't conceive of a South African socialist revolution mirroring the Soviet mould either. It would have to be South African as conceived by South Africans. Joe was an original, flexible thinker and in that sense, I always found the label Stalinist with its connotation of being uncritical didn't fit him. He already developed, among many other ideas, the notion that the market belongs to the essence of human economy and the fundamental mistake was to try and eliminate it. And he was always full of anecdotes and jokes with a deeper meaning about what was referred to as really existing socialism.

To come back to your arrest…

Recently I read in Thula Simpson's book, *Umkhonto we Sizwe*, that the lonely cop who saw us at the DLB that night was my 'weekend surveillance', whatever that is supposed to mean. A comrade from Intelligence I spoke with burst out laughing, he'd never heard of one-man weekend surveillance either. Surely weekends were bound to be busier times for undercover work and therefore for surveillance teams than work days, so would it be advisable to cut down the teams to one man on weekends? We were taught standard practice was two- or three-men teams. So, one man seems unlikely unless perhaps in cases of very light surveillance. Simpson's source is the police. Did they try to polish up their badge by twisting the truth a bit?

Brigitte and I were about to leave the country, at least temporarily. I booked Brigitte on a flight to Harare on 27 June. The plan was for her to have holidays there with Klaas and his son Enno until I'd come back from Europe. I was booked on a flight to Luxembourg on Saturday. On Thursday, at the Johannesburg airport, surveillance was almost open. So much so that, contrary to my habits, I left the airport as soon as Brigitte passed customs in order to – hopefully – take the tail with me. Then, knowing I would leave on Saturday, the SB arrested me on Friday although they had still been hoping to find out more about my activities and links to Durban. What they had got meanwhile about my MK activities was all several years old and before I moved to Joburg, except for that last DLB. It was basically what Klaas and I had done together until our team broke up early 1983.

In the beginning, my interrogators in John Vorster Square either pretended they didn't know who Ebie was, or really didn't know. They called him Ahmed, which was his code name that we never used between us. One day, an officer stormed in during an interrogation with the big news that he was Ebrahim Ismail Ebrahim and an ANC leader. They were furious they'd missed him. Or did they put this all on?

What date did they arrest you?

On 28 June, five days after Klaas who was arrested before crossing the border to Botswana. I picked up intensive surveillance during those days.

During my detention, they told me that comrades in Durban had been arrested. That's when I told them I had only done some security checks for a border crossing, but that I didn't know them and they had absolutely nothing to do with the military or Special Ops. I realised they hadn't caught Ebie. So, I told them we were lovers and the crossing security was for him, hoping that would help the other arrested comrades.

Klaas had invited Brigitte for a holiday with him and his son in Harare instead of her waiting for me in Swaziland. The SB knew she would find that Klaas hadn't returned and raise the alarm. We were very lucky they let her go on her flight, perhaps because she was only 17 and so visibly pregnant which would cause a lot of diplomatic trouble. So, they decided to arrest me, and also those comrades in Durban who they suspected of links to the Military through me.

Did you know that Klaas had been arrested?

No, I didn't, not before my arrest. And I only read many years later in Ronnie's autobiography that Rashid had known in Lusaka that Klaas had disappeared. Ronnie writes that Rashid asked him to get a message to me from the forward area to tell me to leave the country immediately. But, as Ronnie says, they were too late.

Klaas was supposed to pick Brigitte up at Harare Airport, but he was not there. On the evening of her arrival in Harare, Brigitte phoned me to say Klaas had not come back to Zimbabwe. And now they knew that I'd suppose Klaas had been arrested, and had been told to go to a lawyer for him.

As soon as it became clear that first Klaas and then I also had disappeared, Ronnie came to Harare to put Brigitte and Klaas's son Enno in safe houses until they could fly to Holland.

The police arrested me and took me first to John Vorster and then home for the big search. Then they got these sniffer dogs and took me down to the John Vorster garage where my car is. The dogs sniffed but my car was completely clean. No TNT or gunpowder smells. And the house, nothing there either. I saw Klaas's car in the John Vorster garage, sawed open like a carcass, compartment and all.

What happens then? How long do you spend in detention?

It was exactly eight months to the day… on 28 February 1986, I was charged in the Magistrate's court and transferred to Diepkloof prison as an awaiting-trial prisoner. Section 29 of the Internal Security Act provided for indefinite solitary confinement until, as the law said, you had satisfactorily answered all questions.

I was in John Vorster Square. Except when they took me on trips to point out places, then I slept in small police stations. They first tried this whole wild thing, threatening, you must stand up against that wall till you drop down and all these funny things. And I finally sat down and the guy screamed and all that, like in a film. But I said if everyone's sitting down why would I be standing up? Col Erasmus, the head of the SB at John Vorster, kept saying you'll break, everyone breaks. And he boasted that Ruth First also broke, he had been on her team. I said, no, she didn't break.

The ANC had this booklet, *If You Are Arrested Comrade,* published in the cyclostyled SACP underground journal *Inkululeko*. It explained all these forms of torture and how you should respond. It said don't let yourself be tortured for something they know anyway. That's also why later I stopped denying about Church Street and told them the story when I believed they knew my involvement. I made mistakes but I followed that booklet as well as I could.

A chap called Nick Deetlefs, who turned out to become the investigating officer, threatened that when they'd be through with me, I'd no longer be a woman. They were careful with the physical side. They didn't want to leave any visible evidence of torture but I knew it was going to be tough – more psychologically.

They didn't assault you?

No. But they had become masters at mental torture.

Six months into detention, there were indications that there was probably poisoning with neurological means, 'chemical torture'. I collapsed and was eventually hospitalised.

I kept insisting the Durban comrades were not in the least involved in the military and had no idea who know I was. Then the interrogators said that seemed to be true, but the SB was only prepared to let them go if I cooperated. I knew that promise was probably a lie but I started admitting what they already had and then also things I had done on my own and that they might have some clue of from surveillance or otherwise.

I started a hunger strike on 19 July. After four days, the doctor persuaded me it was too early for such action and I would need all my strength for the long stretch ahead. Although I didn't trust Dr Jacobson yet, I felt he had a point so I stopped it. It had worked. And thanks to the Belgian Consul I then also got reading material.

Didn't Klaas, as he said in his interview, take the police to the DLBs that he knew had been emptied?

Exactly. Except one little one in a series of two or three was not empty and I gave it away unwittingly. That's when I realised he only gave away empty ones. So then, I refused to go on any more pointing-out trips because I couldn't know what else he had concocted, in particular with the DLBs. He obviously didn't want to give away the weapons that had been so hard to bring in and hide. But he also took them to recces and other places. He convinced them he cooperated fully. That way he prepared his escape. He says that's all he thought about – escaping.

Then I got a visit from the Belgian Consul, Mr Neven. He was a very friendly, lively man. We spoke in Flemish Dutch and these Afrikaner security police didn't want to admit that they didn't understand much Flemish even though Flemish is not very different from Dutch (laughter). For good measure, the Consul also mixed in a bit of slang and dialect, and French. He'd also been in Congo, so they were also quite lost when we talked about that. And he took the habit of weaving news for me in between typical tabloid stories. So, he tells me some crazy story of a big accident in Zurich. And suddenly he says, 'Le Jeune has moved house.' Now Le Jeune is the literal French translation of de Jonge. I asked – the house was too small? He said yes.

That's how I knew Klaas had escaped. I was relieved, because they couldn't play us against each other anymore. Only later I heard he was holed up in the Dutch embassy. Someone once asked me if I wasn't angry he left me alone with the mess. But no, of course not, I was happy for him.

There were two interrogators initially, van Niekerk and Deetlefs. Plus a female SB escort, required by law, Lt Rossouw – my personal tormentor. They went

through the whole list of our recces and DLBs, and also some of Klaas's that I didn't know.

Then one day, Van Niekerk gave me a long look and said – then there is a big operation, a very big one, in which only you were involved, not Klaas. Deetlefs sat on a chair literally against me. It was a tactic he used at apparently crucial moments to physically intimidate and feel my reactions. This man sat and walked giving the impression to be much less dangerous than he was. But when I felt his chubby body against mine, all my danger signals were blinking. Meanwhile, they repeated looking at me intensely. Like this now was the grand finale of the show. The Church Street bombing. What other very big attack could it be?

I still held off – I don't know what you're talking about. They bluffed me, I was stupid, I had kind of been waiting for it, especially the first days, seen as we'd always thought my name would be on some list of suspects. I did ask myself why only now, after that series of relatively minor recces and DLBs? But at some point I thought, well, if they really know, then what? I have to be careful where I tread now. Afrikanerdom felt deeply humiliated by this attack. So I admitted it, but I said I'll never admit it in court. I'll never sign a statement. They can't do much in court without a statement in due form or hard evidence. And that saved me, in the end they weren't able to charge me for the Pretoria bombing.

So you told them you brought the car bomb in?

Yes, I said I drove the car from Swaziland to Pretoria. And throughout the months in detention, they interrogated me about details. They asked who else was in the operation. I knew Victor was involved but I said I don't know anything. We work on a 'need to know' basis. Whatever I told them, I made sure could only damage myself, no one else. They did know Rashid was the Commander of Special Ops, there was no denying that. But they knew amazingly little about him and I tried to make sure it stayed that way. I couldn't figure out how they got to know about my role in the Church Street operation but the harm was done and I had to concentrate on staying alive and sane in the ordeal.

In general, I agree, all in all, over time, I talked too much, but all that could only hurt me. For instance, for eight months they asked about Rashid…but I didn't give them anything. I also tried to convince them a photograph, that they said other comrades had identified as being Rashid's, was not his and I hope I succeeded. Now we know they confused Rashid with Barry Gilder, who was in MK.

Early on, I got frightened how much I suddenly remembered, well beyond need to know, in solitary between four bare grey walls and how I manipulated my memory. Detention is a deadly but strange mental game, there were many turns and things they tried, it's not straightforward. And your mind goes bad. At some point, you can't read anymore, can't even concentrate long enough to get till the end of a sentence. It's scary but you keep fighting back. Or else you're lost. You know, no long Section 29 detention in solitary confinement is a hero's story, or very few are. All of us have things we are not proud of.

A bit more about memory in solitary confinement. I don't know how it works, but it was amazing to find how one can manipulate one's memory. I realised I knew far too much, far more than I'd been aware of, and in solitary, my memory started churning up things and connecting bits I'd never connected. I also remembered verbatim whole conversations, for instance with Joe, and things I'd overheard but not wanted to know and had consciously forgotten. Because one was always aware it was dangerous to know what one didn't need to know. I replaced memories with cover stories, so that even when my mind would get distracted, I'd only have access to those. And after detention, it was quite a job to recover reality. My lawyers had big problems to get the real story. I was unable to answer any questions. Dennis Kuny, my chief counsel, was good at that. He refrained from asking questions and patiently led me to trust my lawyers and tell them what they needed to know about all the counts of the indictment and what Kuny needed to lead me when I took the stand at the end of my trial.

There was one very strange event. On my birthday, on 9 August, suddenly they fetch me. They put me in a SB technician's room full of wires and stuff, and show me some crazy film of cowboys. And then they come with tea, with cups and saucers and spoons which I haven't seen in months.

In the cell, we got food on metal plates and cups and no spoons or forks at all. You ate with your hands. And then they even come with a chocolate cake. They made it look like a tea party, my lady escort and one or two other SB all politely having tea and cake with me. There must have been doilies on the tray. The SB women also had doilies in their office, it was crazy. Imagine, John Vorster Square, the apartheid torture centre, with dainty doilies! That also was apartheid. Their idea of upholding White femininity.

Anyway Rossouw, the female escort, gave me half the cake that was left. And I ate it all greedily in my cell. But I still wondered what does it mean?

Why were they doing this, do you think?

To disorient you.

And then they tried to poison me.

How did they do that?

You can't prove you were poisoned, that's the thing. Or you can only prove it indirectly. One day at supper, they came suddenly with a container with homemade food. I said who's that from? Someone who cares, they say. So stupid me, I think, well, it's somebody sweet. I ate a bit and then the next morning, before I gave it back to the wardress, I thought I should try a bit more.

And then suddenly I was just getting so sick and within hours I couldn't walk any more, nothing, I just lie on the mat and wait for what was going to come. Before collapsing, I even wrote a farewell letter to my children, that's how bad it was. What happened to me I didn't know. First, I thought malaria but then the fever didn't go up so it can't be.

I saw no doctor, no one. This was after six and a half months in detention, just after New Year 1986.

And then later, little by little I started to walk again.

And after 10 days of being sick, finally I see Jacobsen, the District Surgeon. He says tomorrow you're going to Johannesburg Hospital. Whatever they say to you, you stay in hospital, don't let them take you out.

The night before, I'd written a letter that started with 'Doctor, It is easier to write this than to talk tomorrow' followed by a description of my detention conditions. I hid it in my clothes. And I pass on the letter to the doctor. And he reads it. He picks up the phone and says – it's a hell of a story. That letter later came out at my trial. My lawyers got a copy, I think from those doctors, and it was read out in court as proof of the bad treatment and mental torture.

I spent about two weeks in hospital. They got me back on my feet.

So what were you charged for?

I'm charged on 28 February 1986 with high treason, alternatively terrorism.

When I applied for a South African residence visa from Swaziland, it was as a single person as the Dutch court was expected to pronounce our divorce by

mutual consent any time. Home Affairs came back to me asking for details of my current relationship with Klaas.

The question of my having applied for residence but had not yet been granted it at the time of my arrest became a major issue in my 1986 Treason trial. My lawyers argued that I could not have committed treason as I was not a resident as a resident one owes allegiance to the State like a citizen. But the judge decided I had clearly wanted to be a resident and convicted me of High Treason.

By the way, I think I was poisoned once more. When I was already a convicted prisoner, I was isolated again in Kroonstad prison and something similar happened to me. And then one day I had the same kind of attack as at John Vorster. That time I was suspicious that they'd mixed something in the food because it was too sudden, my sickness.

So again, it takes more than 10 days for me to finally be transferred back to Pretoria despite a young doctor in Kroonstad insisting. Later, I find out from my psychiatrist in Belgium that both stories point to chemical torture that induces sudden deep depression. It takes ten days for these neurological substances to get out of your blood. So both times they waited 10 days or longer. It's pretty clear what that meant.

My sudden deafness was due to nerve damage, and according to a South African specialist, might have been caused by those chemicals. It was in prison that it was noticed. My hearing was perfect before, it was my basic tool for research of African languages. That deafness broke my career as an African linguist.

Then I met Thandi Modise after we were both released from prison. She and the other Black women political prisoners were also in Kroonstad and had been transferred to another prison not long before I arrived there. Thandi said they'd also poisoned her in Kroonstad, but apparently, they didn't know the dosage yet. They'd given her too much, she almost died. And so they had to get her to hospital. There, they discovered this poison and they told her.

Moreover, there was a long list of places in the world where proven chemical torture had taken place. For South Africa, there was only one entry - Kroonstad prison. This must have been well before both Thandi's and my imprisonment there.

About your trial? For treason?

Yes. Treason is based on intention. So, anything you did with the intention of overthrowing the apartheid State – the ANC's purpose – was an act of treason.

You get a 10-year sentence?

Yes, 10 years. Very lucky. We thought even if it was fifteen, it'd be a victory.

And they didn't try you for the car bomb?

No

Why?

I guess the Attorney General didn't want to risk it. But they kept telling me they could still charge me anytime.

But they didn't have corroborating evidence. Nor admissible testimony and they would have needed both to prove the charge. I made no valid statement, no pointing out, there was no witness. They had a Mr. X who had been in MK apparently, I'd never seen him in my life, but he pretended being from Special Ops and said he'd seen me and Klaas load a car with some comrades in Harare. But I didn't ever load cars there. He spoke in isiZulu, I think. So after the interpreter had interpreted what he said, he came back in the dock where he sat all along besides me to interpret Afrikaans – and to read ANC material I was given as part of evidence! Among others of Kabwe, very recent then! He whispered to me that Mr. X is a bad chap and he was lying. Of course, he was, I said, he never met me, he is one of their secret state witnesses behind closed doors.

It so happened that this Mr X gave evidence in another trial at the same time where Kathy Satchwell was also an attorney and there suddenly, he was not in Special Ops, but in some other unit. So we caught him out. And they didn't try and bring in a Mr Y.

Now for a charge that carried the death penalty, like the Pretoria bomb, using a turned comrade like that phony Mr X would be very risky for the Attorney General's case. Such a trial needed three judges and, of course, very good evidence. In the absence of an official statement - that is, before a magistrate - my recorded so-called confession that they apparently sent to the embassies was not admissible evidence. So, it seems they preferred to keep the charge in reserve hoping they'd find hard evidence.

So, you expected a longer sentence?

About 20 years, I think. Advocate Denis Kuny said not to count on less. Political sentences depended mostly on the judge, on the weight he gave to the politics. I think the leniency might also have been related to the fact that my trial aroused much international interest – with international legal experts, journalists and observers in attendance. That's probably another reason that kept the Attorney General from still trying to add the Church Street charge.

You spend four years in prison and get released because the Belgian government negotiates for this…

Yes. Thanks to mobilisation by the solidarity movement.

Hélène Passtoors, on her release, with Shona, her granddaughter, 1989, Wikimedia Commons

Looking back at your role now, how would you respond to the view that supporting the ANC politically was fine, but not the armed struggle?

That's the western idea, it's hypocritical. I'd been alienated from the ideology it belongs to long before I joined MK. I've always considered that underlying that view lays a persisting colonial and racist mentality.

One reply to your question, is that it depends on what you understand by solidarity and internationalism. If that means that as a foreigner you consider you exclusively owe allegiance to your own country, but can choose to help others in their struggles, then by all means pick from a menu what you might want to do for a liberation movement and what not. That's fine. In my case I would then definitely have excluded armed struggle because I didn't like it.

But I don't think that way. I am a cosmopolitan – in the sense of Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah. I consider I owe allegiance to the wellbeing and just causes of people at any place and time. My passport has just as little to do with that as the colour of my skin. Or my level of education or sources of income.

A cosmopolitan identifies, and grows as a result. He or she acquires a multiple identity. Well before the defining meeting with Joe in 1981, I knew I could

identify with the world view of the ANC. Then, by working in the movement and learning, it became part of me – I felt at home and still do. The language, thinking, relationships are familiar, even as they adapt and change after 1994. And I didn't need a South African passport for that. Nor did I need to disavow my origins, nor other places where I feel at home. What's special about my ANC identity as compared to my other homes, is that it became and remains my political home. Plus of course the intensive, life-changing struggle experience that marks one forever. But I think that's what it means to be a cosmopolitan. It's also close to Ubuntu saying it's the relationships with others that make one who she or he is.

On the other hand, from the start, I was no longer naïve enough to think liberation could be obtained in a reasonable time without the support of armed struggle against a regime as violent and aggressive as apartheid. Nor, by the way, that everything would change as per a magic wand into an ideal society as soon as democracy began in 1994… I had seen the tremendous psychological damage of colonialism. I had read Frantz Fanon and although I didn't think he really said armed struggle was the only means of recovering dignity and self-respect – the frequent reproach against him – I did believe crushed people should stand up for their rights and defend themselves. This often in history, unfortunately, meant taking up arms. Whether little White me liked it or not, this was not for me to decide, but for the people themselves. I think basically no one likes violence, but fighting for one's rights is something else.

The general European idea is that we may agree with the cause, but reject violence. This was also the policy of Western progressive governments and parties, such as Sweden which gave the ANC a lot of funds, but not for the armed struggle. Now the obvious thing to ask Europeans is why? What about the Resistance movements against Nazi occupation, should they have avoided violence against a violent regime? What if Africans from the colonies would have said during the two world wars, we'll help you but not with arms, not as soldiers? So, is it perhaps only colonised peoples, or non-Western peoples in general, who are not allowed to take up arms for their freedom?

You asked me what Joe explained to us. In fact, I can't tell you how much I learned from him, including to not necessarily agree with him. As Ruth's husband, you can imagine he was not in a habit to be satisfied by just imposing his views. And he liked to discuss with women…

One day, the Dutch social-democrat leader, Joop den Uyl, came to discuss with Joe in Maputo. Joe chose our house as the venue and invited Klaas and me to sit in. Den Uyl was a long-time sympathiser of the struggle and had stopped the Dutch cultural accord with Pretoria. And now he came to persuade Joe and

the ANC to lay down arms. The main argument from western politicians involved in silent diplomacy was that they couldn't persuade the apartheid regime as long as the West didn't succeed in persuading the ANC to lay down arms. And the other demand of the regime was a stop to the boycott and disinvestment movement.

Western governments gladly conceded the second demand, as it was in their own interests. And what did they gain? The regime intensified violent repression at home, continued to spread war in Southern Africa and violently occupy Namibia. So what could be expected from the apartheid regime if the ANC unilaterally laid down arms at that stage? Joe explained the ANC had nothing to gain from reducing the pressure on the regime at that stage. People's resistance was booming and it wasn't minor reforms the people wanted.

But what in the end struck me most in that long discussion, was the nature of den Uyl's rejection of armed struggle. He couldn't contest the legitimacy of armed struggle against apartheid and the ANC strictly followed international rules. So den Uyl ran out of arguments. He became emotional and said things to the effect of anything but violence, violence begets violence and so on.

So the answer to your question is - it's not me who offered my services according to my personal tastes and distastes. I was asked by the ANC and I had no reason to reject the movement's armed struggle. As for my personal makeup, I might have preferred to be involved in political work but as a non-South African, not raised here, not having a network here, it was not going to be easy.

But later I did political work with the ANC not as part of the armed struggle.

Doing what?

I worked with the solidarity movement and civil society representing the ANC in conferences, meetings and other solidarity activities. And I was in the Language Commission of the ANC and worked on elaborating aspects of our policy proposals. I also wrote articles in Dutch and French about the struggle for all kinds of journals, gave interviews and so on. I was also invited by solidarity organisations in other countries like the Netherlands, East Germany and Poland and travelled in Europe for internal ANC purposes. For instance, I was in the Paris ANC office – where comrade Dulcie September had been murdered in 1988 – to consult with Dulcie's assistant and reported to comrade Aziz Pahad at our HQ in London.

In 1989, I was invited to East Berlin and to Warsaw by the respective governments' international solidarity departments and in Poland also to an international linguistics conference organised by my old friend and colleague from Maputo, Eugeniusz Rzewuski. At the border between West and East Germany, the East German officials read on my visa papers that I was a member of the ANC and welcomed me warmly! It was overwhelming! It is the only border in the world where I have been welcomed enthusiastically.

However, a week or two later, when I came back to East Berlin from Poland, with comrade Indres Naidoo, we witnessed the first opening of the Wall and the crowds who passed to West Berlin for the day. Indres stubbornly stuck to his belief that the people would never give up socialism in favour of western capitalism! But, of course, what we witnessed was the end, other socialist countries were also in upheaval and would follow.

I was also invited by a West German university to give a conference on South African language policy and also spoke about that more informally with other linguists and Africanists.

I applied for my old job in Maputo and was at first informed by the university that I was welcome back. Then FRELIMO decided against it. They feared problems because at my release the apartheid government had banned – and listed - me for life not only from South Africa but all neighbouring countries, of course in blatant disregard for their sovereignty.

I had to find peace with my growing deafness... That meant that if basic research in African linguistics, that was my passion, was not already out of my reach, it would soon be. It needs the fine hearing I had probably already lost.

It's been suggested that your arrest was seen as a major setback for Special Ops by some? As I understand it, you feel you had no choice but to get involved with comrade Ebie's attempts to leave the country to go to the Kabwe Conference and you couldn't inform Rashid because of the difficulties in communication. Also, that you didn't work with Ronnie on military intelligence issues outside Special Ops. And that Klaas contacting you in Joburg out of the blue with a load of weapons may have complicated the issue...

You summarise it rather well. It was a complex succession of situations, decisions, moves and unexpected incidences, as well as mistakes, affecting several parts of MK: me and Klaas of Special Ops, Ebie in the regional PMC (Political-Military Council) heading the political underground and Ronnie in Military Intelligence. And between Swaziland, Natal and Johannesburg. Not to

forget the enemy with the NIS and the SB making their own analyses and moves.

Yes, people say that my arrest was a major setback for Special Ops. For example, Sue Rabkin told me this. I said but Sue, I was doing nothing decent in Joburg, they couldn't even reply to my reports. How could I be a huge loss? But I suppose it's because of the experience you get over the years that you can't easily be replaced. Klaas not either. There were not enough people to do that work.

1985 seems to have been a bad year for Special Ops for several reasons. Barney and his comrades were killed not long after our arrests. The state of emergency also came about that time. 1984 had already been very bad. Then in early 1986, Marion Sparg was arrested after her first operations. She was also newly settled inside. And so on.

Before settling in South Africa, Joe had insisted I was the one who at any moment had to decide to go ahead – or not – with any meeting or operation. I shouldn't give into any pressures, even by him. Of course, in order to decide whether and how to let a comrade come near me with minimum risk, I should normally get previous notification of the purpose through my own secret communication channels. Or at the very least by using decent phone codes.

In fact, the not-crossing-lines principle wasn't so watertight. Comrades of different units knew and met each other, might cross the fence together, and I guess helped each other when needed. Frankly, I've never seen a comrade sit back and look on while another comrade is in trouble, just because he is in a different unit and there is a risk.

If I had managed to help get Ebie safely out of the country then or later, everyone would have been happy. Because of our arrests, initially Rashid, Klaas and perhaps others were understandably critical of Ebie and my decisions. But in the end, Rashid wrote 'Regarding your interactions with Ebie inside the country and your assistance to him inside the country and trying to safely get him out of the country is a matter for history. We all do what we have to do in crisis situations.'

I am grateful we thus came to an understanding, as comrades and friends should.

Rashid said to lie low for six months or whatever. I said Rashid that's a bit much. I come out of all this hyperactive Special Ops work and then you expect me to sit back? So, he said you must prepare for liaison and prepare communications

Now, lack of communication on the part of commanders affected many comrades. You might call it psychological, but it was a recurrent source of problems. Very well trained, selected comrades or units were placed in forward areas or inside the country, eager to enter into action, and then heard nothing more for a very long time. It even cost some comrades their lives, because frustration got the better of them. Thus, one of our units had a shoot-out with Swazi police in Mbabane. One can say the cause was their lack of discipline. True. But even the best trained soldiers are not puppets. It was a time of intense political struggle inside the country. We were all action people impatient to contribute to the advancement of the struggle. From the camps, through the forward areas, to the sleepers inside the country, frustration should have been taken into account. However busy commanders were, silence was not the answer.

Perhaps I should at this point tell you about a dark side of Special Ops and MK in general. Some commanders forgot we were not just soldiers, not puppets, but comrades. The stories of the mutiny and the way the cadres on standby in the camps and also the students were treated during the negotiations are eloquent enough. But after liberation, it got worse. As far as I could see, when I came back in 2003/2004, only some of the old political comrades, who were now in the Defence Ministry, were concerned about comrades with problems. I myself also got help from them for a medical problem. And I met committed comrades in Luthuli House and offices of MKMVA (MK Military Veterans' Association) around the country, volunteers devoted to help comrades in many ways. Where were the Commanders?

Do you think that Rashid was upset about your going outside your Special Ops mandate?

Of course, he was. But he seemed to see it as a breakdown of discipline. By me, Ebie and Ronnie. And he still seemed to feel that way when MK and Special Ops were history! I took that decision because I felt I should. And now Rashid agrees saying we all do what we feel we need to do in crisis situations. So that issue is settled and our old relationship saved.

On the military side, MHQ extensively examined the issues around my arrest when I was in Lusaka after my release from prison, in early 1990. At the hours-long debrief at MHQ, I didn't hold back and accepted whatever mistakes I had made. Chris Hani led intelligently, critically, not evading any aspect, and for example, when I said what I had gleaned from the Security Police and my analyses, he often brought up alternative hypotheses and stressed the enemy's capacity for manipulation and disinformation.

Other commanders also sometimes asked questions or gave their opinions. As did Rashid, who had been promoted to Chief of Ordnance. It was like an intensive work session, nothing like an interrogation. Chris had a talent for being humane and opening one up, so my nervousness quickly evaporated. There were no recriminations. We just worked to get the story straight and complete, including my regrets, where regrets were due. I don't think anyone doubted my sincerity throughout.

In Lusaka, I stayed with Rashid and his family, he cooked delicious dinners, helped with everything, organised MK cars to take me where I needed. All was well. At his flat, we didn't talk about the debrief anymore and Rashid started preparing my next mission, which was to be training in Cuba. I also saw Joe several times in Lusaka and later in Paris during his visit to the Communist Party of France, which was the last time I spent time with him. He didn't talk about what had gone wrong and didn't criticise.

I was also warmly welcomed back in MK by Comrade Florence Jackie Sedibe-Modise – we called her Jackie Sedibe – the only woman commander in MHQ, who organised a little party with MK women after the debrief.

So, I was happy the hard issues seemed laid to rest and devoted myself to the ANC Commission on the Language Policy and the ANC office in Brussels, while waiting to go for further training. Then the ANC was unbanned, comrades began going home and the training in Cuba never happened.

Unable to return to South Africa, besides the ANC work, I then took a job as an editor at a weekly journal sponsored by the Communist Party in Brussels and learned the journalist trade – in Mozambique both Klaas and I had occasionally done freelance work for European media but as that meant drawing the attention of the apartheid regime, even using pseudonyms, Joe had asked us to stop.

Then, with South Africa out of bounds for an indefinite time, I needed a new challenge, and in 1992 I left for Chile as a South America correspondent for radio and several journals. Chile and other South American countries had recently been freed from military dictatorships. But in 1993, I lost my appointment as a correspondent at the Belgian National Radio news service, my main job, due to relentless pressure by a far-right political party.

Later in 1994, Rashid wrote to ask if I'd be willing to work in the Army on the language question. I immediately wrote back that I'd come the very day he'd tell me to. But then I didn't hear from him anymore. I was sure they were all just too busy at the time, so I didn't blame him. But after being abruptly fired as the correspondent of the Belgian national radio for several South American

countries and realising I should expect more refusals - as a terrorist still in the eyes of many, I longed for peace… and moved to a small farm in the Chilean mountains, put journalism on the back burner and only returned to it full time in 2002 to edit a small North/South journal in Belgium. Then I received journalism grants for reportage in South Africa and travelled across the country in 2003 and 2004. That was my first return.

In 1996, there had been a message via Guido not to return to South Africa under any condition because a docket was opened again. Then followed the amnesty application, I wrote in his house in Antwerp with the help of ANC lawyers. Then followed a long silence until I received the amnesty decision early 2001, except for the interview for *Beeld.* The next time I saw Rashid was at his home in 2003, during my first trip back in South Africa.

I realised since 1994 many things had changed for everyone. Some comrades had attained their ambitions or their dreams, some were frustrated, some were suddenly very well off while many were in dire straits. For our comrades in the army, the integration had been exceedingly difficult with even very ugly incidents, such as poisonings and murders of comrades by Whites of the old apartheid army. Such stories were confirmed to me in a meeting with former MK cadres – by Sue Rabkin and Lazzie Mpela – another comrade I knew from the 1980s, who was in charge of handling those issues at the Ministry of Defence. At the MKMVA offices in Luthuli House, I met an old comrade from Maputo who, as a senior officer in the SANDF, had survived poisoning not long before. He looked so awful that I didn't recognise him even when he said his name. And so on. More in general, many comrades seemed to have had a hard time finding their place and fulfilling their ambitions.

You know, I sometimes think there's also fate involved. Because after all, perhaps both Klaas's and my arrests resulted in more political benefits for the struggle than our secret work in Special Ops might ever have had. And even more, during Moe Shaik's detention in Durban, he managed to turn a security policeman who became an invaluable mole for the ANC for many years. I guess in value for the movement, this largely outweighed our loss as operatives. Well, one can't know…

Going back to Joburg 1985, did you feel that now that you were based inside the country instead of doing reconnaissance, finding suitable places for DLBs and other preparatory work for comrades, that you should rather also carry out the operations yourself?

Very clear answer – no. And you're wrong, the last years since May 1983 my main tasks had been communication, not even recces for targets or DLBs. But no, I never thought of actually carrying out operations before Rashid said so.

Why?

We had never talked about that possibility. But the last time I saw Rashid in Botswana, he suddenly says to me, 'MHQ has decided you can now also do attacks yourself'. I said, oh! But how, what kind of operations? He said 'we'll talk about it'. So, I didn't ask to carry out operations. I'd never even thought about that, and I was a bit taken aback. I mean, I couldn't refuse. But I didn't know what exactly he meant either.

So it was never followed up?

I didn't see him after that. They definitely would have had to train me a bit more. Although things like limpet mine attacks should be easy, T-man had shown me different ways of detonating. But Rashid said they had talked about it without my knowing and taken that decision.
…

You have answered this in various ways – but I think I should put the question to you directly. You and Klaas had six children between you when you were in Mozambique. Both of you decided to take part in the armed struggle. You may not like me saying this but it was, well, noble. You did what you did because you are who you are, is what I think you're saying, and that makes sense. But don't you think it could be said that the two of you were perhaps irresponsible? Both of you could have been arrested or killed. What would have happened to the children? One of you could have taken part in the armed struggle and the other could have engaged in other political activities that did not make you vulnerable and allow you to focus adequately on the children. Was that not something you considered…discussed?

That's an arrangement I had of old with the father of my children, I wouldn't have that with Klaas. I wrote from time to time a letter for my kids, in case I'd get killed. That was mainly when we were in Mozambique. Of course, there always were worries. The fear was that we'd suddenly get caught in a shoot-out in Swaziland or South Africa, or even assassinated in Mozambique. The children had instructions to immediately go on the flat roof of my house in case they heard suspicious noises downstairs where I slept, and wait there till someone came to fetch them. But strangely enough, I never mentioned in those letters to my kids the possibility of being arrested, or only as an afterthought, in the last sentence.

But yes, that's what Joe also said, 'You have four children, why didn't you want to think it over?' I said because I immediately knew I didn't want my kids to ask me later – you once got the opportunity to act, but you didn't do it. Why? Because you're an intellectual, because you're a Whitey, because you're this or that?

So apart from convictions, I thought everyone's got children, if all the people who have children stopped fighting for justice, we could just as well stop the struggle. So that's the one argument. Why are my children more important than other people's children? And as it was, they were already very privileged compared to the vast majority of children in the world, let me say. Although it's very difficult to say that to your kids, they remain special, they have the right to feel they are your priority – but still… The kids knew Joe – and if they knew he gave me an opportunity to do something about apartheid and then I said no, how can I face my kids? I refused this for their sake? They would feel guilty if I told them that…

Secondly, I always did criticise academics for just sitting there and talking and not doing anything. The ivory tower syndrome. So now I couldn't say no. I told Joe all this. I also told Joe it won't be easy for me to be in the armed struggle, I'm not that type of person.

But don't forget the children had a father and I had confidence in him. And we had this agreement from back in Kinshasa with him, Pierre, as I said, that one of us must be there for the kids if something happened. So, I had this arrangement, that if something happens to me, he will take responsibility for the children.

So Pierre knew you were involved in some way or the other?

He did. He sensed it when he came on holidays in Maputo. He happened to be there when Ruth First was assassinated and he sensed from my reaction I was close to her and also to the ANC.

That you were going into South Africa?

No, he didn't… I told him I sometimes went to South Africa to meet linguists. Ruth herself encouraged such contacts. And, of course, he knew I went to Wits.

He knew when I was arrested… With our sons he went to fetch me at the flight to Luxembourg I'd booked for the weekend after my arrest. I wasn't there and couldn't be reached. Pierre then reported me missing which set diplomacy in

motion. After several awful days for my family, the government had to admit I had been detained.

But Pierre definitely didn't know about any underground activities, the children didn't tell him either. Let alone armed struggle. He knew I used to hate anything military, I even forbade my kids to have toy guns and play war games. Well, in Maputo I couldn't stop it any more, with their friends they all played MK, as it were, but they still tried to hide it from me. But that's why Pierre refused to understand when I tried to talk about it later, when we were close again in Belgium the last years before his death in 2009. In military service in Belgium, he had trained as a commando, he was good at military strategy and history, and at the time I'd often taken that for militarism. So my turnabout, as he saw it, angered him. Not the anti-apartheid commitment.

What do your children think today of your involvement in the armed struggle?

My kids have taken it differently. On the one hand, they're very proud, but the youngest one, Yves, for years said why wasn't he most important to me? He said I once told him that I was doing it for all the children, but he said he 'didn't want to be all the children, I want to be your child'. And he had big problems with it. Now that's the one who does research on South Africa, he comes here often. But he had problems as a child because he wanted to be special and he felt he'd lost his mother to a cause. The older ones felt more that they lost their mother to the criminals of apartheid. But they all have suffered from it in some way.

Even if I had not been arrested, there was the insecurity for the children anyway. We had rules at home in Maputo on security. There was a civil war going on in Mozambique. One of my daughter's best friends was killed in a RENAMO attack on a bus. None of the children is unharmed psychologically. It's the same for all struggle children although some are more affected than others. According to my children, the issue is not my being in the struggle, but their being assigned a passive role. They say 'You decided, we had no choice...' We had the active role and knew what we risked. They had no choice but to support and admire us. Our children are the real victims, not us.

Have any of them gone for any therapy?

Specialised therapy was offered to them but they didn't want to. That was soon after my release. My second son, Fabrice, seemed most affected then, he was such a rebel, he wanted to join MK. But they were all off balance. Pierre had made the mistake of telling our sons their participating in the anti-apartheid movement would be bad for the negotiations for my release. And he cut them

off from ANC comrades who might have understood them better. He didn't let them see Joe when he came there and asked to see them.

My daughter Brigitte definitely should have accepted therapy then, she now suffers from C-PTSD (Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), a chronic debilitating condition. She finally followed five years therapy and now can cope much better. She already suffered major trauma when at age 15 she was raped by a comrade in Mozambique. Not of Special Ops, but close, and I thought a trusted friend. She only told me many years later.

Like other girls - as we heard in the Fezekile Kuzwayo case, where she was referred to as Khwezi - she said she had not wanted to upset me, there was the all-important struggle and so on. Then there was a prescription issue in law – that you can't pursue an allegation if it happened before a certain time period. So, a comrade who knows us well started a procedure in the ANC in the early 2000's, but they didn't recognise the merits of Brigitte's story, the usual indignity. Meanwhile, the comrade admitted the rape to me and asked forgiveness. But by then, Brigitte had lost confidence and wanted nothing more. She has two more children and is a wonderful mother.

Sue Rabkin says we didn't know that they'd be harmed because we did what we could to protect them. Of course, it's also my personality. And I probably changed through detention and prison. I am aware that as their mother, I am a heavy load to carry. I try…

We always loved them, we never abandoned them. But we also put them in danger. We put them in danger of comrades who were damaged psychologically from torture, oppression, loss… And we didn't always realise it. I mean there have been dramas and dramas, there have been rapes, there have been other problems, not because the people concerned were bad, people were damaged. Although that's not an excuse for rape. And certainly not for being a coward and keeping quiet for so long. This comrade could have saved my daughter from a lot of life-long damage, had he talked to me in those days. He is a well-known comrade. I don't want to damage his family and it's anyway up to Brigitte. But I think I speak for many struggle mothers if I say sometimes I'd like to scream out loud for all to hear what a disgraceful coward this man is.

I'm very sorry about this. It's a pity the culprit wasn't exposed…To something else. Did you at any time take the children with you when you went into South Africa on any of your missions?

No, never.

Now looking at Special Ops more generally, what did you understand its specific role to be?

It was very rewarding to belong to Special Ops and also to work with such good leaders, and it was all this spectacular stuff and we were an elite. I mean, it's like belonging to the paratroopers or commandos, the elite forces in a regular army, that's what we were supposed to be. So there were great people, I've never known Obadi – he was killed before I joined, but I heard so much about him. Same for Barney who died fighting.

I suppose from the camps they always took the best. So, there was of course the pride of being an elite unit although in daily life you didn't really see the advantages, you saw the problems. But today people say, 'Oh, you were in Special Ops' - and on the one hand I want to play it down and on the other hand I'm proud of it, honestly.

But on the strategy of Special Ops, what did you understand it to be? How was it different from the other units in MK? What were the criteria to choose targets? What was, as you understood it, the relationship between your spectacular operations and mass struggles? Did Slovo take you through the theory and the strategy of Special Ops before he recruited you?

When he recruited me, just the basics. Then, of course, he taught us about the stages of the armed struggle, we studied the strategies and tactics of past and present. Also, the different publications and the 8 January speeches of the President which set out the theme and tasks for the year.

We were in the stage of armed propaganda, hit and run, and in principle advancing towards People's War. I learned Special Ops operated nationally while the other military units operated on regional basis, as did the Political Department. The task of Special Ops was to carry out big attacks with national and international impact. That is, political and mobilising impact, armed propaganda. So, for instance, attacks related to the international oil and coal embargo like Sasol or the phenomenal Koeberg operation – my all-time Special Ops favourite – that drew attention to South Africa's nuclear capacity and its developing nuclear arms. Also, attacks on strategic centres of the SADF such as the Voortrekkerhoogte Army base and the Air Force HQ referred internationally, of course, to the wars in Angola and Namibia, the proxy war in Mozambique and attacks on the ANC in Lesotho and elsewhere. These attacks had a very strong mobilising force among the oppressed and the military sophistication began to seriously worry the enemy.

On the other hand, as I understood it, the regional military units focused more on local targets and should be able to play into the day-to-day political struggles. I am thinking, for instance, of the unfortunately ill-fated landmine campaign against the border farmers, who had in reality been integrated into the enemy's armed forces. And many other local operations around the country.

Overall, I didn't know much about the structure of Special Ops or of MK in general. Well, I knew what I needed to know. But it was clear – and I also heard that criticism from several comrades – that Special Ops was taking the big role in MK. Personally, I always worried that so many trained cadres were rotting in the camps who should have been operating in the regional military structures. But especially in my work on Swaziland I saw how difficult it was to get units operative, and then one remembered that also they had to come all the way from Angola. Same in Lesotho. After Nkomati, it became desperate and I don't know how MK and Special Ops fared with new routes through Botswana and in Lesotho, but I do know Zimbabwe was very difficult as well. By the time the Self Defence Units were set up tremendous progress seems to have been made but how I don't know. I was in jail.

Another eternal problem was that the political and military structures and actions didn't manage to get on the same line and coordinate. Political comrades were not only critical but frustrated because the military was doing its own thing – Special Ops in the first place. Inside the country, the military lagged far behind the political underground, it mainly stayed hit and run without coordination with political action and mass struggles. Even for matters arising from operating in the same space, consultation at commanders' level was needed. In Swaziland, we sometimes tumbled over each other. That could be very dangerous.

Okay. Were you told why Special Ops was formed?

Yes, Joe told us the whole history in the beginning, I think with Klaas at the same time. But I told you, I also worked on monitoring the press and the reaction of people to the attacks and on the different things that happened. I wanted to also see how armed propaganda worked, I wanted to make sure that it really encouraged the political and mass struggles. That our work really did the right thing in that sense. And I was also a bit confused after the Church Street bombing because, actually, as far as we were able to know, people in the townships were actually quite happy with that.

I would think so…

They were! People said they attacked the air force! Our boys, our ANC did! People felt empowered and emboldened in their resistance. But soon after, there was the Kabwe Conference. I was already in detention by then, but I read the documents during my trial, they were part of evidence. And the ANC decided that they accepted that there'll be more civilian casualties as the armed struggle advanced. But then some comrades misunderstood that and started attacking civilian places.

You mean the Wimpy Bars and the like?

Yes. Also sports…

Ellis Park?

Yes, sports fans at Ellis Park Stadium. And then OR had to intervene and even go on the radio and clarify the policy. So that's why I was worried – that the enthusiasm for the Church Street bombing might lead to this. It's tricky – the people say our boys can now do this, attack them right in the heart, the air force. That helps - but it shouldn't lead to the 'Kill the Boers' kind of thing. I don't mean the song, that was nice. To us, 'Boers' meant the enemy, not civilians.

Did you have any sense that there was some resentment towards Special Ops because it was seen as too elitist and because it was getting resources that other sections of MK couldn't get?

There was resentment. For example, the Political Section felt we were too militaristic. The discussion about the Church Street bombing was a case in point. But when they recruited me, I knew the ANC was not militarist otherwise I wouldn't have joined. But there was always this danger because you have this elite unit that carries out big operations, that it becomes distant from the political struggles. If it wasn't for Joe, and of course OR as the Chief Commander, there would have been a lot more resentment.

As for elitist, remember how angry Indres Naidoo and his comrades were when Joe kind of appropriated Klaas who had been recruited by Indres and already worked for them. There was a question of attitude.

As for the means, I don't really know if we got really more than other units or less. Weapons, probably yes, but only the weapons we needed. They might have been more sophisticated weapons because we did more sophisticated attacks. Like I said, there was this heat-seeking equipment to attack air planes and there were big pieces of artillery at times. But I don't know if we got a lot

more. Some other units did very well too. But to get angry at us for what we were doing was not justified.

Besides OR, what do you make of the other Special Ops leaders?

I was very fond of Joe and I know as a commander he wasn't always easy, he could be difficult. He fought in WWII and had a lot of combat and command experience. He was very straight. What was nice, he was absolutely not arrogant. He had no ego problem. I remember always this, it must have been 1984 before I was infiltrating into South Africa. As I told you, the last thing he said to me, comrade you go and live there, you make your decisions. We will be pushing you to do this and that. But if you think you're not in the right position, you must refuse. Even if it's me, he said, you refuse.

That was quite nice, for a Commander to say so, it's to give you a green light in that sense. But I made mistakes anyway, I should have listened to him better. Joe gave his trust. He said you can do it. Self-confidence is the key to this work. You could see when he was not pleased or disappointed, but he wasn't one for reproaches and didn't nit-pick. With him there was no need to go on the defensive, you'd simply try to find ways to do better.

I remember once before that, he'd been to Tanzania to a conference with the ANC youth and they gave him a tremendous ovation. And he cried, he said his tears had started flowing in front of all the youth. He said – I didn't even know they knew about me, I never expected that. So, there's this big Slovo who's completely unaware of the myth he is in the movement. That was also him. I have seen him argue in political discussions and academic meetings, he puts his points very clearly. And he writes well. In the military he was a real Commander, but he was unassuming.

Before I met him, I knew Joe's name as a strategist, as a tremendous politician. I knew about Ruth of course, but Joe was a better-known person. I was very amazed because I didn't expect him to be a Military Commander. But he became a personal friend, a very good friend. After Ruth's death, he visited almost daily at home. Then he would put his heavy little bag on a high bookshelf, walk to the kitchen and look in the pots to see if he liked the supper menu. Sometimes he didn't like it, made some comment, had a drink and went to have supper elsewhere.

The kids would come running down from their rooms and sit around him. They'd glance at the small bag and wink to each other – they all knew his heavy pistol was in there, the one he received as a present from Samora Machel – but somehow no one referred to that aloud and we thought the kids didn't know. After supper, there would first be light talk, jokes and often songs

with the guitar. Then usually political discussions, my older children still remember quite a lot of that. And, of course, their – and Joe's – favourite song: this train, has no station, this train… is going straight to liberation…

MK business was always talked about in my study, in other ANC houses usually in a bedroom. A comrade would say, 'I want to see you'. Joe would just give a sign. There was a popular ANC joke in Maputo – two comrades are alone in a house, they chat and have a drink. Then one comrade says 'I need to see you, and they both stand up and go to the bedroom'!

After Ruth' assassination, Joe went to London and brought back a copy of the TV film 90 Days of her detention in which she plays her own role. He set up a player and screen in my house and brought friends and comrades to view it. He lived in the protected area in Maputo and it was not easy to bring friends there. I was in his house only just after her death, to help with the stream of international guests together with other women comrades.

One day he brought three solemn, eminently respectable old Black gentlemen. Joe behaved very respectfully, they were leadership of the old guard. They insisted on calling me madam despite my shy protest, only wanted to sit on straight-backed chairs in front of the screen and drink water. They made some comments during the viewing and talked a bit among themselves, all in low voices, and never made conversation. When they left, they thanked courteously.

That is how I learned how to behave towards the highest ANC leadership… It stood me in good stead when I met OR a few months later, although he was very warm and hugged me. But there also Joe showed by example how to behave in an ANC respectful manner. Joe influenced me a lot – without being too obvious, he contributed most to my political education. I developed politically with him.

What did you make of others? Rashid?

Rashid was very different. He knew he was very good, but not very long ago, I heard the story that, when Obadi was killed, Rashid was second in command and should have taken over from him. But some comrades were not happy with this. Not because he wasn't good. And so, Joe Slovo took over, and then gradually transferred power to Rashid. I don't think Joe was so involved with Obadi. I guess he was the Commander between Obadi and OR, like he was again once Rashid had taken over.

But could it also be that comrades were opposed to Rashid because he was not seen as senior enough for such a major post, or because

some of them felt that they should be appointed to the post, or maybe because they felt it should be led by an African comrade?

Could be that some comrades might have had different or multiple reasons, but that's not what I heard from a friend of Rashid's. The Special Ops comrades all agreed that Rashid was excellent and they seem not to have had problems with him being number two under Obadi and then under Joe. Maybe it was a personality issue. Mind you, some comrades had similar problems with Mac, but he is a real politician and knows how to persuade. Pallo Jordan also received some of that criticism. Those are brilliant comrades, but not diplomatic by nature…

Everybody agrees that he was excellent in his Special Ops work but, perhaps understandably, they differ in their views of him. Madiba also had his faults. And maybe Tambo too. And who knows maybe even the great and much-loved Walter Sisulu too? Of course, some of what you say about Rashid is in the public domain, at least that he was supposed to be temperamental…

Yes, he was, of course. On the other hand, he always pulled off things. He was crazy. He had almost like an animal's sense of danger from kilometres distance – and so he had instincts that few of us had. T-man had that as well, and he was the sweetest chap around.

I think Rashid's temperament showed less in the time when he lived with Guido and his family in Maputo. And when he got married – that was more or less the same time – with Marge Urban and his son Ernesto was born. When I stayed with them in Lusaka in 1990, it was nice and Rashid seemed more relaxed. He had reached the top of MK. But then everything changed and they all went home. I understand those were very stressful times for everyone.

There was a bit of a contradiction. He composed the teams quite well. Who was best able to do this and that. He selected people quite easily in the camps apparently, with Joe or alone, I don't know. So, he was able to understand people's make-up. He also was a very good teacher and could be patient when he was in control. He loved to play 'Risk', did you know? When he lived at Guido's place they played it very often. He always claimed the red army. Is he still a communist?

Well, he's not a member of the SACP now…

I wonder why.

I know he can be quite demanding, even by his own accounts. I was bemused to hear that when the operatives came back from missions where they could have been arrested or killed, he would want them to explain how they spent the money allocated and he kept meticulous records of this. I understand that he still has all those records. He even told me how much the 1980 Sasol operations cost. He saw himself as accountable for monies he disbursed. Maybe there's both a good and bad side to this?

He seemed worse than the ANC Treasurer, comrade Thomas Nkobi (laughter). So, for instance, he would ask us about our expenses and he would say why such a big hotel? We would say sometimes there was no other hotel. But he said it was because of Nkobi who was notorious for passing all accounts under the microscope. He wanted receipts for everything, but it was too dangerous to go around South Africa with receipts from the places where one had been. So Rashid sent the accounts and whatever receipts to Comrade Nkobi and they came back with remarks. Rashid was usually quite happy with us. We never had a problem with our accounts once the issue of receipts had been cleared with the TG.

But yes, there is also a very good side of Rashid being such a perfectionist. We all trusted his decisions and thorough preparations for action. He felt responsible for all of us. Our first debriefs he did together with Joe. And as Joe, especially in the beginning, also focused on psychological aspects because that's important. Rashid, I think, learnt a bit, and later he would also try to take that into account. I'm talking about operational aspects, reactions in tight situations, close calls and so on. But sometimes he just wouldn't… well, by then we didn't really need that any more either and could tell ourselves if there was a problem. Like once, I think early 1983, I was really overstrained and took a week off in the Swazi mountains – for Joe to send me immediately on a mission again. There was no mercy.

Rashid was demanding, but we shouldn't underestimate how precious that was. I learnt so much in such a short time. Also, the fact that he – like Joe also – not only trusted that we'd be capable of doing what they asked of us, but gave us often free rein. As Joe used to put it – 'You guys will find something'. And Rashid also gave me almost total autonomy in Johannesburg, with only a few indications of what he expected me to do in the short and long run. So as a Commander, he had no problem delegating and trusting one would do well. That pushes you to constantly learn and surpass yourself. Remember, I started off as a total amateur with zero training in a totally new field of action. Klaas at least had been in the army.

I mean, if you imagine for example how Rashid sent me out several times to try and contact somehow a comrade in Swaziland at a time of life and death when communications were down completely. To make it worse, there was also a period of floods and one had to find backroads and bridges that were still intact to get from Maputo to the border. The fact that he showed he was confident that I'd manage to make contact was almost a gift, a precious gift that galvanises one. I mean then one feels one has to prove a Commander's confidence right and one finds the craziest ways to succeed. Then, when I lived in Joburg and found it not easy to cope with slowing down and feeling isolated, I guess one can say I had been spoiled with the intense contact and stimulation during the previous period.

Rashid was also a good friend, I must say. I makes me sad that that friendship has taken some blows after the struggle because I treasured it, we had lived so much together. Brotherhood, comrades-in-arms. It's like a brother and sister falling out. It was common in MK in fact but then it often was patched up. So, Rashid and I also patched it up again. It's just not easy to see each other nowadays.

One night, I drive with Rashid in Maputo at night and we see those old garbage trucks there. And the truck doesn't stop, it slows down a bit but it carries on and those poor chaps collecting the rubbish barefoot, they were running behind this truck with all kind of rubbish, not like in the Black bags we have nowadays. And Rashid stopped the car and we watched in silence. Then he says – 'We should never forget why we fight'. So he obviously had feelings that sometimes get lost in the Military.

You're saying he was quite compassionate, humane?

Yes, he was. Rashid has deeper feelings than he wants to show.

Well, about the garbage trucks, that used to happen in South Africa too.

Well, that's what Rashid meant. He thought of South Africa, of the same awful scenes there. I don't know why that still happened in Mozambique at the time, FRELIMO tried to get rid of all those forms of oppression and humiliation. For Mozambique, it was shameful because it was like in colonial times. For South Africa, it was still normal. But it was South Africa we both thought of.

Rashid also told me a story that I only remember the gist of. Before going into exile, one day he was in the home of some well-off family in South Africa, I

think a White family but they could have been Indian. There, he saw how a Black maid and her small child were sleeping under a table in the kitchen, on the cold tiles or concrete. Not only sleeping but in fact living under that table. Rashid got very upset. He said that's when he decided to fight.

Also, one day when he still lived with Guido and his family, I came into his room. He sat at his desk and looked miserable. I'd never seen him like that and asked what was wrong. He pointed to what he was writing and said that was the most terrible task he had. A comrade had been killed and he had to write to the family. He was truly miserable.

You described Rashid in an e-mail to me as one of the greatest soldiers of ANC?

I think so. He was one of the greatest, no doubt.

Why? That doesn't come out in what you say overall today?

In Special Ops he was great, I've said so. His military work was perfect. In MHQ apparently also. There's no question about that.

I heard that Obadi was also excellent but easier to get along with, more human. And Joe, well, he could also be distant. Perhaps hard as well, I never experienced that, but he was also tough. All Commanders have to be tough, also to themselves. And all exiles had their hurts. And comrades dying and disappearing all the time was terrible, one doesn't ever get used to that. Or falling in the hands of the enemy. Commanders would obviously somehow blame themselves even if it wasn't their fault at all.

I heard Ebie was devastated, totally lost when I was arrested. Of course, we were lovers and he felt responsible. But even so. He told my daughter it was the first time in his life he considered leaving the struggle. Of course, he didn't, but it shows. Even if the struggle is your life, your whole life – as it was his, and Joe's and Rashid's and of so many – you never get used to its perils, to all that's at stake, you can be hurt again and again. You always can be hurt deeper. And then you try to escape from that hurt, to cover it up with whatever means you have. And, of course, by fighting harder, by picking up the spear as it was said, and that was not an empty metaphor, it was very real.

For veterans, those spears continue to weigh heavy. It's not just that vets are angry our dear movement is in shambles. When you visit Freedom Park, that full weight falls on you again. And you want to be alone with it again – or perhaps with a dear comrade – in silence. And mind you, I have never actually

lived so much of it personally. But it's there all the time when you're in MK. You start without it, like a child, and then it comes, it penetrates you.

You know, I haven't seen Joe weep at the time of Ruth's assassination. Once I saw him very emotional and all he said was – 'She was vain'. I felt that might have been the way he, at times, criticised her pride and now he sorely missed it. And it sounded worse, so much sadder than all the praise she got. He refused any tranquillisers. He said he must feel what he had to feel. And, yes, I remember what someone told me who was close to the blast but fortunately only got lightly wounded. He said Joe arrived at the door of Ruth's office where the parcel bomb had gone off in her hands, they made way for him to go in but he didn't and said, 'No, I know what it looks like'.

So yes, if it hadn't been for Obadi, for Joe, for Rashid, you know Special Ops wouldn't have been Special Ops. For Barney, Chris, T-man and others. But, of course, there were other very good people in other units of MK that I didn't know but I heard of.

What about others in Special Ops you worked with?

The comrades closest to me were T-man – that's General Ernest Pule, still a dear friend – Victor Molefe (real name: Johannes Mnisi) and Chris – that's Lester Dumakude - who saved my life in Swaziland. They were incredible soldiers and genial, good- natured personalities. They were brothers closer than my real brother, there was affection, one felt totally at ease with them, always delighted to see each other, always worried something would happen to them.

T-man had been an instructor in MCW in the camps. We never had a lot of time during the struggle to discuss politics because we were always underground. Except a few times he came to my house in Maputo. I was still doing some journalism and wanted to know more about the comrades in MK, getting to know them and their stories, especially the June 16 generation who were then the majority of the soldiers. So, I did a long interview with T-man, about his youth, his family, his June 16 experiences, and so on. His strong bond with his mother, his feelings about exile and MK. We became friends from the start. Only a bit later, after our first big missions in South Africa, we got to work together quite often.

For a while, T-man had put up in Swaziland with an American sympathiser, Cathy, who was the partner and later wife of John Daniel, the late South African activist and academic. There was a security threat and T-man had to go into hiding. This was early 1983, before the Pretoria bombing. I was sent to thoroughly clean her place of T-man's stuff. Without her knowing, he had, as

usual, hidden all kinds of things, small weapons to detonators, documents, plans, maps. It was incredible, he had hidden stuff everywhere – in the kitchen, TV, Hi Fi, in and up and under whatever furniture, and in the hems and seams of the curtains! That was T-man.

T-man was always delighted to be with my family, he loved my kids and they loved him. When my youngest sons left to join their father, he insisted on saying goodbye to them in Swaziland. I said it was too dangerous for him at the time to be outside in daylight. And, of course, he couldn't come to Ebie's underground house either, where we stayed. But he got angry and said, 'Comrade, these are not only your children! They are children to all of us, they are also my kids, I must see them before they leave!' So I took them at the appointed time to play football in the park in Mbabane. T-man slipped out of the bushes, signalled me to stay on guard, played with the kids, laughed and hugged them, and disappeared again in the bushes. He had feline body movements when he was in underground mode, you could hardly see him come and go. Like a cat on the hunt.

T-man was the Commander under Rashid. I see him each time I go to South Africa. He lives in Pretoria and was also Ebie's MCW instructor in Angola after Ebie came out of prison and South Africa, and had basic military training. I think in 1980. We usually see each other at Ebie's place and have a great time all together.

Rashid and T-man worked so closely together for so long. Of T-man's family, three were actually under his command in Special Ops. One brother was sentenced to Robben Island. He'll tell you what happened to them, it's sad.

When I first saw T-man again in 2003, he told me he had difficulty adapting. He said that during the struggle it was easy. I said, T-man, how, easy? What do you mean? He said 'We didn't have to worry about food, about clothing, we didn't even have to worry about who was paying the rent for the house – we just had to fight'. We laughed, but it's true. Then he said – 'I know you were also happy in the struggle' (laughter).

Did he say that?

Yes. Which was true. I was happy, life had meaning. So I mean they all had these challenges now after 1994.

There was Chris (Lester Dumakude) who also died. He was in the unit with Victor, and T-man as the commander. And I believe he saved my life and that of others in Swaziland. He was arrested and tortured and though he got horrible treatment, he never broke. It was the time, '83-84, when the South

African SB and military were openly present in Swaziland. And they directed interrogations. That was in Manzini, after Nkomati in 1984. We were kept informed by contacts in the Swazi police. So we knew Chris was tortured and constantly questioned about whom he worked with and who his Commanders were in Mozambique. And he was asked again and again who did the communications between the command in Maputo and the comrades in Swaziland.

Chris knew it was me, he knew me and my car. Rashid gave me the choice to stop the liaison work, which was very intensive at that difficult time. But there was no replacement, and so no choice, comrades were dependent on it. The same for T-man – we couldn't stop. So, I continued with very frequent trips back and forth, and Chris never broke. He saved my life I believe, because the Boers would have done anything to break our communications at that time. And he saved others as well.

There were a lot of killings there in those days, during raids or border crossings into South Africa when comrades moved forward. Or also in so-called accidents and ambushes. You know, we were aware that it was in a real sense then more dangerous for us in Swaziland than in South Africa. Precisely because it was not South Africa, so the regime wouldn't be held responsible and felt free to do as they liked.

You know, whenever Special Ops comrades meet in South Africa, we have hours of stories and memories to share and laugh about. Often, about what was not so laughable at the time, certainly not in the eyes of outsiders. We laugh so much that we tear. I think it shows just how close we were in Special Ops.

But also, we lost so many comrades. It's always a mixture of laughter and sadness. And it continues that way.

Chris died in 2004, of cancer I'm told. He had a young family by then and was a colonel in the army. With T-man, I went to see him in Military 1 Hospital in Pretoria. He never told us he had a terminal disease. He said he'd had an accident. He looked bad. But we had a great time together. And I could finally thank him for saving my life. Then a little later Rashid wrote to me that he had died. It's so sad. I hope someone looks after his family, he was such a lovely comrade.

I already mentioned Barney. I'm not sure if I met him personally, but he was brilliant and already a legend. I also heard a lot about his personality, comrades liked him. Then I had a very good friend with the MK names of Socrates or Sandile. His real name was Trevor Nkululeko Vilakazi. He was a

student at Swaziland University and an extremely good element in Special Ops. We knew each other from some extraordinary underground encounters. It's to find a way to connect with him that Rashid sent me when communications were broken. We met again in London in 1989-1990. He was murdered in South Africa soon after his return. Rica Hodgson called me with the news. I hardly ever cry, but then I wailed.

Perhaps I should also mention Chris Hani. In my time in Maputo, he was the chief Commissar of MK. The first time I met him was in Indres Naidoo's house in Maputo. There was a group of comrades having a conversation about the struggle at home. And just when Chris was walking to the door to some appointment, I asked Indres a question. To my surprise Chris turned back, sat down next to me and said 'What is it you don't understand, comrade?' Then followed a long conversation and thorough explanations. And I wondered about his appointment… Afterwards, I said to Rashid I was amazed Chris gave me so much attention. And Rashid smiled and said – 'Of course, he is your commissar'. Chris didn't come often to Maputo, but every time I met him there, it was as our commissar. That's another comrade I am very privileged to have known. He was just marvellous, very patient and attentive. Like OR, he made you feel at ease. I last saw him in 1989-90 in Sweden, at the welcome for the released leadership, Govan Mbeki and them. I'm happy to have lovely photographs with Chris.

After your release from prison, what do the Special Ops leaders suggest you do?

I was debriefed before the full MHQ led by Hani, who was the Chief of Staff. They asked me what I wanted to do inside the movement. I said I've always been very happy in MK. If you want to transfer me, you can do that, but I'm happy in MK. Joe Modise decided I'd stay in MK.

I first suggested I might go back into South Africa incognito, in heavy disguise. When Modise turned that flatly down, I said then how about my joining the cadres in the camps who would have to stay on standby until such time that negotiations succeeded and MK would be demobilised. I thought the cadres might appreciate comrades of my profile, who'd be of little or no use during the years of negotiation, spending that difficult time with them. But from Modise's 'nyet' I understood they were afraid of trouble.

I had noticed some kind of class problem in the ANC in exile, between elites and cadres. But after the return home, it seems that solidified in socio-economic ways despite efforts by some of the former Commanders and leadership. Many returnees were left to their own devices. In 2003, I met young MK comrades including former junior commanders, officers, instructors,

who were in dire straits. It was almost heroic how attached they still were to MK and the ANC. It was MK that still gave their life meaning. But they felt abandoned by what then had become an ANC elite deployed in good state jobs or business.

As for me, in 1990-1991 the ANC applied for indemnity for me to work for the language policy group that counselled the negotiators, but the apartheid government refused twice at the last moment. Twice I had my air ticket ready and my bags packed. Of course, I would have been delighted to be useful in my field.

Going back to Lusaka in 1990, I was also approached to join the Security section that had to detect and interrogate traitors and subversives, Imbokodo. I kind of exploded. You know why? Because I came just out of prison. I'd spent almost half of my time in isolation. It had not been easy and now they ask me this. It was just after the Thami Zulu (suspected of being a spy, he was detained by the ANC and is believed to have died of poisoning during his interrogation) – and I'd asked them what happened, how come he died. And then they want to recruit me. And I said, comrade, are you guys crazy? I said I've just come out of jail, I am full of aggression. It worried me myself. I said I don't trust myself if I find myself facing a traitor, a real one, I just don't trust myself.

What would you have done?

I don't know, how would I control myself, my anger? I've never been a violent person. I've never killed anyone. Never even touched anyone. But at that time, I didn't trust myself. I felt full of violence. It took time and therapy to get it out of me. Perhaps one interiorised the enemy's violence. Or perhaps it's because I always fought back, kept reacting with anger.

Once outside I had nightmares every night, they say I screamed every night, and this lasted two years.

Well, by 1992 the training in Cuba seemed off and Hein Grosskopf, myself and, I think, one or two other comrades were told to stay outside because there was a security risk if we went to South Africa. We were high profile and particularly hated by right wing Afrikaners. The ANC said they couldn't provide bodyguards for all of us and I wouldn't have wanted them either.

To come back to Special Ops' role as a whole, there has been some criticism that it was a bit elitist and a bit militarist and it didn't connect with the masses in the country. That all these explosions were great, but apart from boosting people's morale, inspiring their

confidence for a while, it didn't really help to effectively mobilise the masses in the political struggle against apartheid? Your views?

It was supposed to be armed propaganda. At the time of my arrest, I think we were at the edge of changing to a very different approach, to the People's War strategy, eventually to arming the people. But some of these criticisms, I think, existed also inside Special Ops. At least Joe was thinking about this. Armed propaganda was correct. Whether it really galvanised people enough, I can't really judge. But I know that even the Pretoria bombing was very positively received by the people.

If you think of the main people in Special Ops, OR, Slovo, Rashid – they were political people. On that account, you wouldn't suspect them of militarism. I think Special Ops was quite complex and it played an important role. But by going it alone, especially with the idea of being the elite, the danger existed. I've pointed already several times to the lack of coordination and even discussion with the Political Department although the Political was supposed to lead. I believe that would have helped to control any militarist temptation that I was well aware of.

As to connecting directly to the mass struggle, as I understood it, that was more the task of the regional military units. They didn't succeed very well either. Although, of course, Special Ops should also have taken this into account much more than we did. Typical Special Ops operations involved so much planning and time that it would be difficult to have them coincide, for instance, with a big strike. Yet, not all Special Ops operations were big blasts, we still continued with smaller attacks such as placing limpet mines in strategic places, like Marion Sparg did in 1986 at John Vorster Square and other police stations. In those cases, the spectacular related mainly to the target rather than the blast.

Elitist, yes, Special Ops definitely was. And in a structural sense, the criticism is also valid. The blasts did boost morale for a while, as you say, but did they help build up people's struggle, weaken the enemy at strategic points, open up areas of struggle? I'm not so sure…. The discussion at the time was that MK including Special Ops had to move much more permanently inside the country in order to be able to react fast to the people's struggle.

Smaller operations, such as Marion carried out, one could prepare for and then time them according to events of repression or mass struggle. I guess that's one of the things Rashid had in mind when we last met in 1985 and it would have silenced the critics.

At some point, Joe came with a plan for us to infiltrate the rural areas. He asked Klaas and me if we couldn't live as a couple of religious ministers heading a rural parish – it was a bit of a laugh because Klaas doesn't know anything about the Bible and religion, and I was brought up as a Catholic. You know, Catholics don't care much for the Bible, unlike Protestants. It's only in detention that I read the Old Testament, initially it was all they gave to read. The idea seemed good of Special Ops doing combined political and military work in the much neglected rural areas. I don't know why Joe dropped it, perhaps because of lack of suitable candidates for the ministry… But I found it attractive and asked him if we couldn't imagine another cover.

Part of this Special Operations project involves – without making too much of what's possible – trying to understand the operatives as human beings, as people, with all their strengths and weaknesses. Trying to understand what motivated them and why. Why did they take to the armed struggle in particular? How they survived, how they managed their personal lives while playing an active role in the armed struggle. In this context, let me raise an aspect of what was in the political domain about you: it was said that while you were in detention you converted to Islam. Why did you?

I didn't fully convert, I think. I mean, I've never been fully religious. I was interested in Islam rather than in faith. Now, also you're right, all my comrades in prison saw a priest or minister. In prison and especially in solitary detention, somehow, even if you're completely Godless you start thinking about your whole life; you have that time. You think about meaning in life, philosophy, existence in the world, metaphysics. Suddenly you're so alone. I mean, you're so without any means to control your life that you think maybe if there exists a higher being he or she could at least be a witness.

Once I was awaiting trial, it was more that my interest in Islam came really from Ebie and his family. And so, I thought if we can have a religious advisor while in prison, then rather study Islam. It was quite a struggle with the authorities - a White woman's spiritual needs attended to by an Imam, a person who's not White! Instead, they sent me a Catholic Jesuit who told me there was a brand new law of freedom of religion, so he said the authorities must be consistent with their own laws, and he supported my wish.

There's Ramadan, that's very, very good to get yourself disciplined. I did the fasting three times and I was really happy. It disciplines your mind, it's a psychological thing, and it's very good. And if you do prayers five times a day you regulate your day if you're alone in the cell. You have a ritual, restful moment beyond a reality that wears you out, although I only came to that when I got mentally exhausted. I think all these things in Islam are very well

thought out. For me, it's a religion not so much in the sense whether you really believe in God or not, but it makes you live better, control yourself better.

And yes, reading the whole Quran is very special. Once you learn how to read it and what society was like in the Prophet's time, it's beautiful. The comrades in prison were also very interested in the Quran, I had to tell them about each Surah (chapter) I read with the Imam. It says revolutionary things like you're not allowed to let yourself be oppressed. If you can't fight, then you must resist in words. If you can't resist in words, then you must at least resist in your heart.

Well, to tell you the truth, each year when I see the Haj on TV, I am moved. They say the Vatican is the biggest multinational and it's powerful, politically and also financially. But then Islam may be called a multinational of the people, don't you think?

There was also the Muslim community of the Imam's mosque in Pretoria. They made incredible Eid meals for all of us. I don't know how the Imam managed, but it was the only food from outside we were ever allowed. They also gave me a beautiful Quran, it still has a place of pride on the bookshelves in my home. Muslims always notice it immediately.

In prison, the Imam was my only regular visitor. Only one of my three sons could come once a year and my mother came once to Kroonstad, that's all. Except also the Belgian embassy who made sure I got my letters and brought news from the kids. My daughter was banned from South Africa after my trial. So when I was isolated again in Kroonstad, the Imam came all the way from Pretoria. His name is Yusuf Hassim. He arranged my meeting with Ebie the day before his departure to the Island.

For me, Islam gives you the time to think things out, to become better. I'm not saying all Muslims see it like that, it can also be just routine. Like the Catholicism of my childhood was. But to me it was that. I really have a Muslim name, two actually.

Which are?

Of course, it should be Yaseerah, you know from Arafat's first name – and then the Imam, he found it was very far from my western name and added Halima. So I got two, Yaseerah Halima.

Of course, you don't have to answer, but are you a practising Muslim at the moment?

No.

You're not into any religion?

No. Not in a practice sense. But I like the social and other parts, the cultural aspects. And I am in an action group against Islamophobia.

Of course, you did what you did because of who you are, your values and principles and you didn't expect any personal reward in return. But do you think that the post-1994 democracy has sufficiently acknowledged the contribution you and other internationalists made?

In my case, I think too much (laughter) because lots of people have done more and have not been acknowledged. And because I became very high profile with my conviction for treason, I've received such attention. But there were other foreigners who contributed and who are hardly known, and what about the sacrifices of thousands of South African comrades who did far more than me, and many of whom died. And I never really felt as a foreigner – I was and am just a comrade.

So, I'm really always a bit embarrassed to have so much recognition. I really see it more as a political thing, that people recognise me because I am a reminder of the meaning of solidarity. When I was on trial, I found out how important it was for people that I as a foreigner was helping in the South African struggle, that I understood their situation. Every day there were Black students attending after their courses who didn't know me personally. Then there was a tremendous crowd of township activists in the last days of my trial and that's when I realised how important this was to them. It was important for South Africans to see they were not alone in the struggle. They had others who wanted to fight with them.

So, I'm happy to accept public recognition if it is as a symbol of solidarity and shared values. It would be even better if it was also a symbol against the harmful constraints of national borders and exclusive citizenship on people and human society. I mean borders as barriers. There are boundaries and borders at all levels, from village to country to continent and so on. They make sense for many practical matters and for passionate competition of football and the many other ways humans like to meet and show their prowess, singularity and whatever they value or wish to do together. But frankly, what sense do barriers make? If people would understand these hard borders of the nation-state with their exclusive citizenship are actually rather new in history and already, they have caused lots of trouble and pain… They can't be the future of humanity and that's why I was in the struggle.

I wish people knew we fought for the liberation of South Africa, but in fact for much more. As long as apartheid was allowed to exist, it legitimised racism and systems based on racism and exclusion. I hoped liberation would change that. Mandela did all he could in the world to spread that message. But the evil is too deeply rooted, it needs much more struggle.

Hélène Passtoors, with the SACP award for her contribution to the struggle, Independent Media

What do you think of where South Africa is now and what do you think its prospects are?

Strangely enough, in Belgium and elsewhere people say - aren't you very disappointed, you did it all for nothing, see what's happening there now. I say no, not at all. In a certain sense, as Ebie said to me years ago, some of this was inevitable. And I think he also prepared me a bit that the ANC had its faults, that I must keep my feet on the ground. Joe also raised some issues. There were very different people in the ANC; it was a very diverse movement, we all fought together for the same goals and according to the same tactics and strategy. That I found most attractive of the ANC as I knew it. But you knew there were also, up to a point, different values and personal projects.

And what I didn't like was a certain sense of elite, elite versus cadres. It didn't affect, by any means, all comrades in higher positions everywhere in the movement, but yet they seemed too many. So I'd say the political diversity is not something that worries me. I am very happy that the Communist Party stayed in the Alliance up till now and I hope it continues, because I saw in the ANC in exile how important that was. It's only later when I came out of prison, that I realised that outside MK, the ANC was a bit different, more difficult politically. But no, I'm not disappointed in the sense that, yes, I would like the ANC to be fixed, this corruption and the leadership issue, and most of all the long-delayed transformation.

You know at that time we had strong strategy and tactics that everyone followed. Now it's all a bit wishy washy. It needs to be clarified- not just in words, but in action. But on the other hand, I know, I've lived in other

countries which just became independent in Africa, and the first twenty years or so are never easy.

So I don't see the end of the ANC. I can't see the opposition doing much good for the new South Africa we fought for. But even if things are messy, I think the ANC will somehow find itself. The country needs that.

I think ANC policy is generally very good. But as you well know, global capitalism is against the goals of transformation and it's still very powerful. Full liberation with transformation will still be a long uphill battle and no country can succeed on its own. So it worries me that South Africa still seems so self-centred. If one reads the press, it looks as if problems like corruption and governance only occur in South Africa. But they are everywhere, even state capture in different shapes, even in the West. All this is part of global capitalism's ways of weakening states and dividing society in order to exploit better. So that should be fought systematically, structurally. We should never forget capital doesn't know any borders. There is an urgent need for much more internationalism and, in the first place, Pan-Africanism. That has always been a weak point of the ANC and of South African society as a whole.

Since we first spoke in 2017, the crisis has been deepening. Covid-19 has added greatly to it, but much of the crisis has its origins inside the ANC. I won't deal with this analytically here but just say I don't think it is still a matter of punishing or distancing individuals who go rogue. It seems much more complex than that, something like a life crisis of tremendous proportions. Which wouldn't be amazing after so many years of conquest, slavery, colonialism and apartheid. We always knew it is a very heavy heritage to turn around in depth. But I am very worried. And yet, I believe in the ANC and I believe in South Africa. When all is said, I remain optimistic. But I insist: the road goes by Africa, not by the treacherous West.