

An interview used in "Attacking the Heart of Apartheid: The ANC's MK Special Operations Unit" (Penguin, 2025), Yunus Carrim

MK Special Operations Unit project

Interviews

Jackie Cahi

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Harare, Zimbabwe (telephonically)

Can you give us a brief overview of your personal and political history? Who and what influenced you to become politically active and what role did you play?

I was born in Bulawayo in 1956.

I've never been a happy Rhodesian. I have Lebanese ancestry so I'm not completely white, and was not completely fitting in (laughter). I just felt so suffocated in the then Rhodesia. And I sort of ran away from here when I was 17 to the University of Cape Town. Cape Town felt like liberation. I studied English and Philosophy at UCT for three years. But I had a bit of a breakdown in my last year and failed.

And then I went to Europe in '77. I wasn't really in touch with the ANC there, or the Defence and Aid and so on. But started to get more aware although I was very much on the periphery. I didn't meet Jeremy (Brickhill) or any other Zimbabwean exiles activists ever.

And then, I went back to UCT and finished my degree in 1978. I went to teach in Lesotho in 1979. I already knew Desi Angelis from Cape Town and after a visit to her in Lesotho, I was offered a job at Morija High School where she was teaching. We were neighbours and became very good friends.

She introduced me to Phyllis Naidoo. And I began to meet other political people. There were not very many Zimbabweans there. But I started to know much more about the ANC and other movements and I became much more politically conscious. I was about 23 at the time, and a lot of my students were South African exiles, (many who had been active in the 1976 protests and uprisings) and they were a big eye-opener for me as well. And I'm still in touch with some of them actually.

So, I was leaving behind the closed, sexist society I came from.

I came home at the end of 1979, as the Lancaster House talks were happening. And I met Jeremy very soon afterwards, probably early 1980, and we became friends and my political awareness grew more.

My main focus is on your role in connecting Rodney Wilkinson and Heather Gray, who were involved in the Koeberg bombing, to Jeremy Brickhill

So, Desi came to Zimbabwe in 1980 or '81. We talked a lot about how we'd embraced communism. She was talking about possibilities of further training within the ANC and MK.

I probably introduced Desi to Jeremy but she may already have known or known of Joan (Brickhill), Jeremy's wife, as she's also South African. We were all part of the same social circle. Because of my South African links, several South Africans would visit me or stay over. Rodney and Heather turned up at my place in their Renault having driven from South Africa.

I was still young and a bit wild, and there was a lot of partying at my place and among my friends.

Jeremy started to talk with me about his intelligence work and recruited me as an informant, to keep my eyes open for other possible recruits and to keep ears open generally (in white society). on an unpaid, voluntary basis. I started meeting many more people from Zapu (Zimbabwe African Peoples' Union) and Zipra (Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army) and understood more about the role of the South Africans in disrupting and undermining Zimbabwe's democracy. So, we were all quite cautious and paranoid at the time.

And my role really was just to pass on information to Jeremy about what I would hear through my social connections about who was doing what, and whether there were any suspicious South Africans who could possibly be apartheid agents pretending to be progressive. And also about progressive people who would defend Zimbabwe's liberation, you know, as a solidarity thing.

And so it was in that context, I would have talked with Jeremy about Rodney and Heather.

And they later told me that they wanted to connect to the ANC.

Did they tell you why?

No, they didn't talk about their Koeberg plans to me.

Since you're a Zimbabwean why would they ask you for an ANC contact?

Well, they knew I was connected to people in Zapu and knew ANC exiles. The ANC sometimes put up people in my house and I didn't ask them what they were doing for the ANC. I didn't ask questions.

And Rodney and Heather also spoke with Desi about wanting to contact the ANC, and Desi and I would have spoken about it.

Do you know anything about them handing over documents to Jeremy?

No. There was some social occasion at my place and space was made for Rodney and Jeremy to go off for a walk and talk. And they talked again. But I don't know anything about that. There was no need for me to know.



Jackie Cahi, early 1980s

Did you have any idea that they were going to be involved in the Koeberg operation?

Not until a few days before it happened, when Heather came back to Zimbabwe. Heather, Jeremy and one or two others – we were together at my place – to sit together, and light candles for Rodney's safe return the day the day before the operation was going to take place.

Lighting candles?

(Laughter) In my modern language, I call it holding space, but I didn't use those words then.

And then there was that tension of waiting to know, listening to the news broadcasts.

So, when you heard that Koeberg was hit, what was your immediate response, can you remember?

A sense of achievement – he'd done it – a hit at the heart of the beast.

What do you make of the significance of the Koeberg operation?

At the time, it felt like they got to the heart of the apartheid system – a new nuclear plant. Finding the system’s vulnerabilities. Also, it was whites – it was turning the apartheid systems racial stereotypes upside down; using their racial classifications against them. The questions then were how do you bring down this beast; what were the different ways. And the Koeberg operation was one of them.

And they were so brave, Rodney and Heather, that focus of purpose. I think that was another important thing, carrying it through, being actual warriors.

Did they strike you as the sort of activists that would carry out such a daring operation?

I would say not at the beginning. Heather and I were quite close, we’re still in touch. I haven’t seen Rodney in years. He doesn’t do social media. I saw him in the early 90s in Knysna and then much later. I really liked them a lot.

They just struck me as really genuine with strong hearts for needing to do something. So, in that way, I guess I wasn’t that surprised that they did it. It was a question of bringing it together. And Rodney was like an arrow that just needed some help in zoning onto a target.