

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

Maria Overeem

1 September 2023

Amsterdam (telephonically)

Let's start with a bit about your personal details, and what were the influences on you becoming politically aware?

My full name is Maria Cristina Overeem. My calling name was Marijke. But I changed it to Maria as soon as I arrived in Botswana. I told others that it was because people couldn't pronounce 'Marijke' properly but by being a little different obviously, my name wasn't easily traceable. I was born on 24 October 1952 in Nieuwer-Amstel next to Amsterdam.

My father was a journalist in the newspaper of the Catholic Workers' Movement Union that in the late '60s had become the most progressive daily newspaper. I perceived my father in terms of a generational conflict as conservative but in hindsight he played a rather progressive role.

In secondary school I became politically aware. It was the spirit of the day those days. And socially very much aware. I suddenly realised that there was a class difference within our school class and that people from the lower class struggled more. I realised also that we knew nothing about the Second World War really and we were not being taught about it. And I had a history teacher who put me – I think it was in form 1 – on a chair in front of the class and said, 'See, here, the perfect example of the German race,' and I hated it!

My best friend was of Indonesian descent, and she obviously didn't count in the teacher's eyes. So, this incident also helped me very much to become politically conscious. Both anti-fascism and race factors were present from basically an early age, when we were about 13 or 14 years old. So, I'm a perfect example of the German race, if you want (laughter)...

In secondary school I was active in the student school movement. We protested against exams, and wanted to change the education system as we

found it too elitist. And I started participating in demonstrations in Amsterdam because there were plenty of those.

When I went to university, I studied sociology, non-western sociology and cultural anthropology in what was considered the most leftist faculty in the university, and by the end of the first year I got into contact with a Maoist group. We formed the Socialist Students' Collective and very soon it became a very strong force within the faculty. I think we were up to 30 in all. But I didn't become a member of the related Maoist Party. It was very much a fringe splinter party.

I left university before graduating in 1978 and I went to work in a huge steel factory, which was the trend among Maoists in the context of class betrayals. The factory had about 20,000 workers. I became a crane driver – the position and working in shifts had just been opened to women. I worked there for 8 years.

Through the Maoist grouping we got involved with ZANU (Zimbabwe African National Union). We organised press conferences for them when they came to Amsterdam, because the anti-apartheid movements supported ZAPU (Zimbabwe African People's Union). I went to Zimbabwe several times from 1980 onwards.

In the '80s, I also had a lot of friends who were part of the various solidarity movements with South Africa in support of the ANC.

I worked at the steel factory for eight years till 1986, where I joined a trade union. In the trade union there was quite a strong representation of people from the Moscow-supporting Communist Party. They apparently recommended me to Conny Braam from the anti-apartheid movement AABN – she was recruiting people for *Operation Vula*.

I met Conny in the street one day and she asked if she could meet me. We met and she said, 'What would you think of doing work in South Africa?' and I said, oh yes, immediately, I said, I've been waiting for this. Because a lot of friends of mine had gone to Nicaragua and to other parts of the world where international solidarity was required. So, I had felt I missed the boat.

But she said, 'No, go and think about it,' but I said I don't need to think about it, get me going. And then it still took another two years, I believe, with meetings in a secret place once in a blue moon with one of the Pahad brothers – and nothing moved.

He came to Amsterdam once or twice a year and we would have a meeting in a secret location – and then nothing would happen. Apparently, Rashid heard that nothing was happening and then he got cross because he said he needed people, and then things moved very quickly, and I left for Zimbabwe in October 1986.

I met Rashid in Harare and then went by train to Botswana, and there I met Sunil, whose real name is Anton Christopher. He was Sri Lankan but involved with MK. Rashid was known to me as Khalid. I only found out that other people called him Rashid much later. I settled in Botswana to be able to bring people and weapons in and out of South Africa. I got a job at the Polytechnic in Gaborone.

I first settled in holiday houses, mostly of Indian people who worked for government and who would get three months leave and would need somebody to look after their houses and pay a rental. We would use these houses to store weapons and also for comrades to stay. I sometimes had two or three houses at the same time. I would occupy one and then the others would be used for operations. I met Rashid once or twice in Botswana. Usually, all contacts were through Sunil. He passed away last year. He knew a lot and he had all the contacts. He had a very good memory.

Were you involved with Special Ops or MK generally?

No idea. I was recruited by Conny for *Operation Vula*.

That was a political underground structure. Do you know if you contributed to any of the operations carried out by Special Ops?

I had rocket launchers in my house and they were used for this attack on the air base between Pretoria and Johannesburg. And there were a lot of people in the house I house-sat, who would be taken into the country, and they were part of Special Ops, I think. Robert McBride was there with others, whose names I can't remember. I think maybe Gordon Webster too?

Chris (Nungu – real name Lester Dumakude) through Sunil used to ask me to take weapons in and provide safe houses.

I met T-man. I tried to not look at people too directly and looked at the ground. I wouldn't look at people's faces much because I knew if I would be arrested, I would remember faces. Even when I met Chris afterwards, I had no idea how he really looked (laughter).

You could have supported the anti-apartheid movement in different ways. Why did you agree to contribute to the armed struggle?

Because I had for quite a long time been convinced that the armed struggle is a continuation of the political struggle and that in Zimbabwe and Mozambique it was the armed struggle that had brought liberation. I was also strongly motivated by the anti-fascist struggle during the Second World War. So, to me it was necessary to use arms to finally push out the forces that you need to push out.



Maria Overeem in the 1980s

**What exactly did you do inside the country?
How many times did you come in and for what?**

Recently I met a Dutch couple who were more in the north of Botswana. And they had exactly the same letter boxes and the same meeting places, and it was very interesting because we didn't know each other.

I went into the country I think only two or three times and once to Zimbabwe to collect weapons and dynamite. I had very good friends, Reiny and Klaas van Twillert, from the Netherlands who were there, and they were also involved with Rashid. I didn't know that. Rashid used to visit them regularly. But I don't know if it was for Special Ops.

I took my car to them and it was loaded and brought back and I took it to Botswana. They had visitors in Harare who wanted a lift to Botswana. I had a loaded car full of arms and explosives and they were sitting on top of it and having cordial discussions (laughter). But apparently, we were in the same thing with Rashid. But I don't know whether it was Special Ops or not.

In South Africa I would leave a car in Hillbrow, and I would put a message in a letterbox near the Market Theatre. And then I would phone Sunil. We had some code agreed, but it never worked somehow, he couldn't understand (laughter). And anybody listening in would get very suspicious (laughter). So, I would say something about buying him some clothes and whether I could count those clothes and there were codes hidden in that conversation.

The next day I would be able to collect the car. It would be parked in the same spot. I did that two or three times.

I also went somewhere between Soweto and Lenasia. And there was a tree and an empty coke tin and I had to leave something there. They had also

asked me to go to rural areas to dig holes, but I said, I'm a city person and if I have to go to rural areas and dig, and if a rabbit passes I get completely scared (laughter)... I will panic. I did look though for places for DLBs (Dead Letter Boxes), especially in the area that later became Midrand, but with little success.

I had a conversation with Jenny (Evans). Her MK name was Kate. Which fits her much better because she's really a type that would be called Kate (laughter).

She said what she remembers most about me is that I said, 'I don't want a lot of political and ideological discussions, just tell me what to do and I will do it'. I did have a discussion once with Rashid about the Church Street bombing and the bombing in Durban by McBride and I asked, can't you look for targets that are more clearly military? We had a quite a heated discussion on that. He said 'They are collateral,' and that, 'the enemy puts military places in the middle of civilian areas'.

So, where are you now?

I'm in the Netherlands. I only came back three years ago. I stayed in Gaborone in Botswana because my husband is Motswana. We've divorced. He was also involved in things. But we didn't know about each other, so we hid it from each other and only found out after 1990 (laughter).

What's your take on South Africa today? You had some expectations during the struggle era. To what extent have they been realised or not?

They've been realised because white domination has ended and the particular vicious ways of oppression and superiority and all that were ended. The dehumanising aspect has been ended too – which is a good thing, and it had to happen. And I helped to deliver that. For the rest, South Africa has become another capitalist country with a lot of corruption and oppression and poverty and it hasn't been able to deliver on the promises.

What oppression today are you referring to?

Well, mostly economic – in terms of poverty and lack of chances and then self-enrichment by others.

Your take on China today? You were a Maoist in the '70s.

My son went to Vietnam for holidays, and he came back and kept on talking about Saigon, and I said, why do you say Saigon? It's called Ho Chi Minh City. And he said, 'Well, nobody there calls it Ho Chi Minh City, everybody calls it Saigon'. He was totally amazed that I knew so much about Vietnam because he hadn't known about my involvement in the Vietnam support movement in the '70s. He said that to the Vietnamese, the American occupation was just a blip in history, just as the French occupation. The Vietnamese are more worried about China – their dominance, the sea, the fishing, their economic power.

What I see of China's economic policies in Africa is really bad. Not offering employment, underpaying people, exploiting people, delivering poor quality so-called development projects, airports and stadiums and so on, and thereby opening the road for themselves to get economic power. So, I don't see that China plays a very a progressive role at all. And I don't see much difference between the old imperialist forces and the Chinese way of doing.

Are you still a Marxist or how would you define yourself today?

I can't define it. I'm still on the left. I still think a lot of Marxist concepts are valid, but I don't believe in Leninist principles. I don't believe there will necessarily be, after imperialism, socialism, and that communism is the highest type of society. I think it's far too simple and won't happen that way.

You believe in some sort of egalitarian society but not in a Marxist form? Is that so?

Yes exactly, and so I think I've moved more into the direction of social democracy. You know like we have here (the Netherlands). But at the same time the Social Democrats here, I cannot vote for, because they're completely capitalist.

If you knew when you participated in the South African struggle that South Africa would turn out to be what it is today, would you still have taken part in the struggle?

Yes, definitely because the White supremacists would have never given up power without that. And that had to happen. Now there's another struggle. We thought you do A, B, C and then the struggle ends, you have a socialist and then a communist society.