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MK Special Operations Unit Project

Interviews

Oscar Marleyn

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Tell me a bit about your personal and political life, how you became politically aware and how you ended up in Mozambique.

I was born in Oostende, a small-ish, poor coastal town in Belgium, in 1947.

My father was a labourer and my grandfather a carpenter who worked in shipbuilding. Both were trade unionists. Most of my politics comes from my grandfather's side – he was also called Oscar. He was active in the underground in the Second World War and did a lot of sabotage against the Germans. He told me a lot about his experiences and influenced my thinking.

All my family voted Socialist. They were not Communists but pro-labour like the Labour Party in England at that time. I grew up being very aware of the class system in the country.

My mother had a very small flower shop and I was expected to take over. But I decided to study landscape architecture. When I finished my degree, I had to work at least nine months in another country to get practical experience. So, I went to Liverpool in England.

After my practical experience I was offered a job there. I think at the time I became more of a liberal because I had a profession and I thought there's quite a lot of money to be made now and I moved politically more to the centre. Except that I saw in Liverpool the decimation of working class communities because they were moved out of Liverpool and were stuffed into a totally new area, where the government was giving credits to big industrial firms, for whom they created a labour pool in these new industrial areas. The working class had no say in this move. And, of course, it split working class communities in Liverpool. And as individual families they had to build a new community, with all the difficulties in doing that.

I left Liverpool and I went to work in the private sector as a landscape architect in London. I eventually ended up doing work in the Middle East. Very well paid. Bahrain. Oman. Designing oriental palaces and gardens.

Which years would that have been?

That would be in late '60's, but I decided that I wasn't going to stay in that sort of work anymore. I couldn't stand it, especially after one particular incident. The Sheik of Oman inspected a complex which I had designed while working for a firm of architects. We had cut marble into very specific pieces to be used in his palace gardens. I presented it to the official representative and the Sheik. The Sheik looked at the thing and said dismissively: 'what is that?' The assistant came back to us the next day and said the Sheik doesn't want it. But it was all cut. Millions of pounds of marble! I thought who's going to pay for this? 'No, no,' I was told, 'there's no problem, they'll pay!'

So, this is the sort of thing that made me decide I'm not working in this sector any longer. And I went to do development studies at the Planning Department of the Architectural Association (AA) which worked closely with London University. While there I joined Mozambique, Angola and Guinea Bissau Information Centre)). I met journalists Paul Fauvet and Polly Gastor, both are still residing in Mozambique.

One day there was a lecture on Mozambique by Albie Sachs, who later became a Constitutional Court judge in South Africa, who at the time was residing in Maputo. He was joined by a representative of the Ministry of Education who recruited us to go and work there. That was the beginning of 1977, my baby daughter was three months old and it took some convincing of the grandparents that the move to a place nobody had ever heard of before was a good thing to do. And so on 17 September 1977 my wife, Bernadette Nee, and I went to Mozambique.

Bernadette started working immediately at the International School, which was desperately short of English-speaking teachers, and I started in the Department of Public Works dealing with rural development and communal villages. I realised immediately that this work was politically very sensitive. I loved working in community development, having had experience in this sector in Liverpool and Glasgow.

You could speak Portuguese?

No. I couldn't learn because my wife, Bernadette, and I had six months to pack our things and leave. My Portuguese was so poor I could hardly ask for a bottle

of water in Lisbon Airport. But I learned the language pretty quickly. And we could speak English.

And were you fine to go to Mozambique knowing it's one of the poorest countries in the world?

Yes.

And how did you manage with having electricity intermittently, rations for meat and bread and the lack of availability of other usual essentials?

We were prepared to do that. We had a six month old daughter, Rebecca. But we managed after a while. Queuing for meat at six in the morning became a monthly practice. We became part of the local food cooperative, had ration cards which meant that food was distributed equally in the community and organised ourselves so we could get our daily loaf of bread. The bread run to the bakery included JS and other members of the ANC. At the time it felt that whatever was available was shared.

This changed once the Mozambican government and party officials began to think they needed to be treated a bit better than other Mozambicans! This change of attitude was particularly noticeable when meeting rural communities in the presence of party officials. As one party official put it to a group of local farmers, 'you need to produce more so we can eat better'!

Were you a Marxist or a social democrat or how did you see yourself then?

Bernadette came from Liverpool, and was very left wing. Part of her family was Irish and Bernadette was very aware of the discrimination against Irish immigrants in England. There was more than a bit of support for the IRA. As somebody who grew up within an Irish community in Liverpool, she understood emotionally how discrimination felt and was very opposed to apartheid practices in any country.

I could easily relate to that because of being Flemish. Bernadette also taught in an Irish community in London. In fact, now that I think of it, segregation and poverty in these communities must have been one of the contributing factors for her to want to move to Africa. While in London Bernadette's youth experiences crystallised more and more into a clear political stance. This was in fact the case for both of us.

My studies at the Architectural Association had a Marxist approach and made me look at development and change from a totally different perspective. The course introduced me to leftist scholars such as Ben Fine and Samir Amin whose main contributions to radical theory have been in the field of international political economy. I didn't see myself particularly as Marxist but I definitely had a set of ideas of what the goal of economic, social and political transformation should achieve in the end. So, we were quite willing to contribute whatever we could in Mozambique.

At that time FRELIMO presented itself as Marxist-Leninist? Did that draw you in any way to Mozambique?

No. Coming from working class families we were both very class conscious and we had read about the role of colonialism. Belgium had colonised the Congo, Rwanda and Burundi and we knew what damage it had caused. So, we were quite willing to engage in Mozambique to deal with the problems of colonialism and see if we could help in any way. We weren't actually sure before we left where we would fit in and what, if anything, we could contribute at all. In fact, Bernadette insisted we should get married before we left London in order to fit in better in Mozambique. And so we did!

When you got to Mozambique what was it like?

Difficult, I mean, at first because of the lack of food and other consumer goods. I remember the first day after we arrived in Maputo, we visited the local *loja* across the road and were greeted by empty shelves with the exception of a neatly arranged stack of Cuban cigarettes. I tried a packet straight away but didn't have any *meticais* and they wouldn't accept British pound notes!

We were accommodated in *Pensão Nini,* a small guest house along Avenida Jules Nyerere where we often ate mackerel three times a day, struggled with bed bugs and, for us, monstrously large cockroaches. But then I think we took that on quite easily because we were conscious about the difficulties that certain working class families had in Europe. I'd seen that in Liverpool, in my own community in Belgium, and other places. We just got involved in helping to improve people's lives generally.

Did it seem then that Mozambique would try to achieve its high socialist ideals? Did it have the resources and capacity?

I think it was clear what the government wanted and FRELIMO was quite well organised. It was unfortunate that most of the skilled Portuguese had left, including farmers. Some of them went to South Africa or Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia). Many had left their enterprises and farms in a state of disarray,

often destroying whatever they could and taking cattle and farm machinery with them across the border. So, the government had very, very little technical expertise to take over the economy or what was left of it. It was an enormous challenge with very few doctors and nurses. It was a poor country anyway so it was very difficult.

The government's ideas of socialism came mainly from Eastern Europe and therefore from a very different set of conditions. A lot of rather young, left leaning *cooperantes* (the internationalists) came over to work and do what they could do. It was a daunting task and I learned a lot about human behaviour in a very short time.

Oscar Marleyn and Bernadette Nee in the 1980s, Supplied

How do you come across the ANC? And how do you get recruited and for what?

Basically, I came in contact with ANC cadres through my wife's contacts at the International School in Maputo which was being run by the Ministry of Education. The children of ANC members were being educated at the International School where she taught. My wife taught Sue Rabkin's children and they became very close friends. One day Sue came with Bernadette to the house, I mean she just walked in, you know, Sue was an enormous talker. She really chats (laughter). So, while she was there, she tells us that she's with the ANC, etc. She convinced us that we should not only support the struggle in Mozambique. More could be done. She recruited us.

The first trip was to go to Swaziland with pamphlets. So, we all, three adults and four kids, piled into Sue's car (laughter), which was a little yellow Volkswagen Golf. We go through the border and the customs officer asked her for her passport. She couldn't wind her window down because of all the pamphlets stuck underneath the window mechanism (laughter) so she had to open her door, get out of the car. When she got back in, 'fuck, fuck' (laughter), 'what the hell do they think they're doing?' So, you know, that obviously overloaded her temper (laughter). So, we did one or two trips to Swaziland and that was it.

It was towards the end of '78. We'd been there for more than a year and she got to know us a little bit. She was very careful building that up. By then we knew several other ANC people, including Bobby (Sunny Singh, MK member

and Robben Island prisoner), Indres (Naidoo, MK member and former Robber Island prisoner), his wife, Saeeda Vally and Farouk (Mohammed Timol, ANC Military Intelligence). Some of the residents of the ANC safe house further up the road sometimes dropped by if they needed anything – although they shouldn't have done so.

We also got to know Klaas de Jonge (Dutch internationalist in Special Ops, Hélène Pastoors (Belgian internationalist in Special Ops) and Guido Van Hecken (Belgian internationalist in Special Ops) later. We framed our engagement on a political level through working for and contacts in the *Centro de Estudos Africanos* at Maputo University directed by (SACP leader) Ruth First. The yearly field studies were a real eye opener on the blunders being made by the Mozambican government and I found it increasingly difficult to come to terms with some of the government's directives.

And then in the beginning of '79 suddenly Joe Slovo (SACP and ANC leader) appeared on the doorstep and said, 'can I have a word with you?' I think I addressed him as Mr Slovo at the time (laughter). He said we needed some work done in South Africa. I said. 'what sort of work?' He said 'we need to find out where the oil pipeline runs from Durban to Sasol.'

By then I had a good idea of the quality of the ordnance mapping in Mozambique and thought that the South African maps were likely to be even better. I responded that I had no doubt that it would be possible for him to find out. He paused for a second and said, 'but we want you to do it'. And he said 'could you think about that?' I said, yes, okay. So, two days later he was back – he didn't wait very much (laughter) – and he said, 'well have you thought about it?' I said, yes, I had discussed it with my better half. But I'm only going by myself, I'm not taking the family.

Did he ask you to do that? Maybe as a cover?

No, he only spoke with me about me doing it. He got aerial photographs from the Russians and he had an ordnance map. I was used to using these – perhaps that's why he came to me. Anyway, he brought the stereoscope so we looked at the maps and we put a route together of where the pipeline runs on the map, and copied and cut the maps up so it was not directly obvious that they were in any way connected.

We then looked for a story to cover what I was going to do. So, I like birds, love nature and I had field glasses. I took these along together with Roberts *Bird Guide* as well as the *Field Guide to Trees of Southern Africa* to use as an excuse if I was asked what I'm doing.

I had mapped the pipeline out starting from the Durban terminal, going through Pietermartizburg, Ladysmith, Harrismith, Kroonstad to Sasolburg indicating interesting gardens, nature reserves and places of scientific interest prominently on the maps and in July 1979 off I went to Swaziland and then South Africa.

Joe had given me a sort of a folder given to him by the East Germans where I could put notes in the back for him that you couldn't see. He had that specially made. I only made notes when it was absolutely necessary and took some photographs of key installations mixed up with nature pics.

I must say it took a bit of time to get use to focussing on my task as I had never done this sort of thing before. I was particularly nervous about trespassing onto private land as this would have given me away. It took me about two and a half weeks to cover the pipeline, staying in small bed-and-breakfast places along the way.

And when I was back in Maputo, much to the relief of my family, I drew up a report and a map where you can see on the aerial photographs where the pipeline is. Joe also asked me to mark clearly where it would be possible to attack the pipeline. Obviously, that required some information on what type of attack that would be. What type of ammunition would be used, how much damage was it likely to cause?

I had received military training in the Belgian army but had no idea at that time what sort of weaponry was used by MK nor how they operated in the field. What I did know from personal experience in Maputo was that ANC organising often was not as smooth as it could be.

Joe wanted to know where we could do the most damage. But along the line you couldn't do much damage at all because the oil pipes ran underground, often too deep to get to them in the short period of time that would likely be available to the MK unit.

You would have to dig a sizeable hole to do real damage to the pipeline. The main oil installations in Durban were heavily guarded, so that left Sasol as a target.

And that was it. I handed in the reconnaissance report. 'Thank you' – and he disappeared. I didn't know till late much later that the Sasol refineries in Sasolburg and Secunda were attacked over 31 May and 1 June 1980 by an MK unit based in Matola. I mean I wasn't informed how my reconnaissance was going to be used, by whom, etc.

You took photographs of the Sasol plants?

Yes. Starting from the Durban side because I was asked to see where there were any guards, access from the road, and so on. These are huge things. I didn't know before I went there that these terminals were so bloody big (laughter). So, when I got to Durban and saw this I thought, bloody hell, how will anybody get in here without being noticed! I waited to see if there were any changes of the guards, whether the gates were opened and things like that. I drove around because it's not always accessible on all sides and I was worried that I might draw the attention of the security personnel. I decided that the only way in would have been from the port side but could not get near enough to check the options from that side. I decided it was just too dangerous for an MK unit to undertake such an attack.

When Slovo approached you, you were clear that what you were doing was contributing to the armed struggle. Of course, supporting the anti-apartheid struggle was to be expected but taking part in the armed struggle was quite a big leap. What made you so readily agree? You agreed within 48 hours of being asked.

But it wasn't 48 hours. The issues of inequality, the lack of development opportunities for the majority of the people and the need for struggle came from a long way back.

Also, I saw that South Africa was basically a fascist government who excluded the majority of its population from development and that you needed political change to move ahead. Admittedly, what I was being asked was a bit more than walking with a placard in an anti-apartheid demonstration in London or Brussels. But there is also a nagging moral responsibility for the fact that the society one comes from was benefitting from the apartheid system. The question of how much one is prepared to do to change is a very difficult one. The fact that the Afrikaners speak a language close to Dutch is for some reason an added incentive to do something about it.

But why wouldn't you play a role in the anti-apartheid struggle generally in political terms rather than contribute to the armed struggle?

Well, you could've done that. But I was asked to do that by Joe and I didn't have to think very long about it at all.

Was Bernadette fine with it too?

Yes. She was very aware of the level of oppression by the apartheid government and was very supportive.

Well, there was a discussion about risks involved and the children of course. My eldest daughter, Rebecca, was just two and a few months old in July 1979. My second daughter Els was born in November 1981 so she would've been about a year and a half by the time we left Maputo in 1983. So, we had decided to not operate together.

Of course, you could have been arrested and imprisoned? Or even worse…

I was also prepared to do it because it was easier for me to go through the borders because I'm White, I had a Belgian passport, and the security was not going to check-up on me as they might do with other people. So, it's easier to cross the borders with that sort of material. And it was looking at plans, identifying the route of the pipelines and taking photographs. I mean, there was nothing else involved in that.

So when do you find out that your reconnaissance was used for the Sasol bombings?

Much later. I didn't know if they had done anything with Sasol with that information that I'd given them or not, and I also didn't ask because I didn't think it was my place to. I was very careful about that.

What other operations or other activities were you involved in after that?

On four or five occasions I took material from Maputo to Swaziland. Probably limpet mines but I am not sure of that because the stuff, as it was often called, was hidden in a vehicle which I left behind in Manzini and collected later on.

Did you ever come back to South Africa?

No.

Did you do these operations into Swaziland using the same vehicle each time?

Yes. It got to be risky as well. Often these vehicles weren't very well prepared because I remember once driving this six-cylinder Ford and I knew it was loaded with ammunition and you're going in the evening and the headlights failed (laughter).

Would you help to load the van with others? Or was it always other comrades?

Only on one occasion did I know what I was transporting because I had to fix the stuff underneath the car myself with the help of two Belgian comrades Guido and Marc Wuyts. The vehicle used was a massive Ford F-100 pickup truck which wasn't exactly a vehicle that could nicely be hidden away in a public car park. For some reason the vehicle had to be fitted a day before I left it in the back yard of the Wuyts family in Sommerschield in Maputo. When I arrived at around 5pm I realised that the stuff was a 2,54m long artillery piece. Probably used in the Voortrekkerhoogte attack but I am not sure of that. It was a crazy thing to have to fit the pipe underneath the truck at night because the clanging and banging could probably be heard three or four houses away in this quiet residential neighbourhood of Maputo.

To my surprise nobody came to check what was going on! I parked the pick-up in a rather busy street around the corner from where I lived and didn't tell Bernadette what was hanging underneath! I set out the next day around 4pm to the Swazi border to get there just before it closed, when the border guards are already thinking of going home, rather than doing a thorough inspection.

The only problem to get there on time was that the pick-up lights hadn't been fixed properly. While cruising along the rather steep slopes of the Lebombo mountains the headlights switched off and on, and I had to hang out of the window to make sure not to end up 25 metres down the slope. I had to stop several times and bang the headlights and then roll on for a little while without lights (laughter). It wasn't exactly a calm ride but I got to the border post five minutes before it closed.

I talked to Farouk later on and he said, they were using this car for other things. So I asked him to please do something about the lights. He fixed it.

So why did you stop in '83? What happens?

We went back to Belgium and later the Netherlands for political and practical reasons. Firstly, my work in Mozambique in the rural areas became almost impossible because of the civil war supported by South Africa and Rhodesia. I was being paid by the Mozambican government while not being able to do the work I was contracted for. FRELIMO became more and more authoritarian in the face of the armed onslaught in the rural areas. The party had lost the political high ground and was punishing ordinary citizens for its failures. Secondly, I got a scholarship for development studies at the Institute of Social Studies in the Hague.

And then in '87 we had an opportunity to go to Zimbabwe. And that's where I got to know Muff (Andersson).

Riaz Saloojee (MK name Cal) was the Commander in Zimbabwe and I agreed to work with him, but then Muff became Commander, and Riaz introduced me to her.

So, when you go back to Zimbabwe did you consciously decide to link up again with the ANC's armed struggle or did Riaz reach out to you?

Sue Rabkin knew that we were coming back so that's the connection. Unknowingly to myself I'd been transferred from Special Ops to Ordnance. We got to know Aboobaker Ismail (Rashid) much better during this period.

I was working for FOS – Fund for Development Corporation – a Belgian NGO linked to the Belgian trade unions and the Socialist Party. We were developing a programme along the Beira Corridor, from Beira port to Manica. I was therefore working not only in Zimbabwe, but also in Mozambique. The programme was to provide technical and material support to small scale industries along that corridor so we were going to set up infrastructure to do so. The programme became very successful and continues up till today.

Rashid wanted to use that infrastructure to bring arms up from the port of Beira through Zimbabwe into South Africa. We had to be careful to maintain a clear separation between the government funded FOS project and ANC ordnance activities.

I don't think the ordnance supply idea ever got properly off the ground. I suppose it was to be like a smaller version of *The London Trader's* thing (*a truck taking safari tourists from Lusaka to South Africa that transported large amounts of arms hidden in secret compartments, unbeknown to the tourists. A documentary on this, 'The Secret Safari,' can be viewed at https://youtu.be/foqURw31gmc).*

So, what do you do from '87 to '90 in respect of the armed struggle?

I worked in Muff's structure with Ed Wethli (Special Ops member), John Spyropolous and others. Again, rightly so, I did not have a clear idea how the structure was organised. Ed was more involved in fixing cars. John went into the country to help with some of the things later.

Oscar Marleyn, 2012, Supplied

Were you told that your initial work was part of a specific unit called Special Ops? Did you know anything about its specific role?

The fall-out from undertaking the Sasol mission for JS in 1979 came a couple of days after I arrived back in Maputo. The side door to the yard swung open and in stormed a very irate Sue Rabkin. Why had I chosen to work for JS? And as she put it, for one big bang instead of remaining with her unit to build underground structures in South Africa? According to Sue, the plan had been that I would be working for her structure, the political structure, and I was supposed to go and work with communities in South Africa which was similar to the work I was doing in Mozambique. 'Wouldn't you have liked that?' she asked? And I said, of course, I would've done that, but JS came and asked, and it's not up to me to decide what I was going to do.

I was a bit baffled because I had no idea of how the ANC-MK decision-making structures worked. So I realised that I had, as she put it, been poached. I apologised and asked Suey to check with JS. Why didn't she tell me to say no to JS?

So, the Political section recruits you first, then, as seems to happen so often, the Military section poaches you (laughter)?

Yes (laughter). Apparently, Sue was very upset and she repeated a couple of months later that this whole thing will be just big bangs and is not going to be so important in the future as organising local communities (laughter). I must say that based on my experience in Mozambique I thought she was right, and I would have loved getting involved in the community work – as she put it. I responded by saying that she might well be right but that it wasn't up to me to decide what should be done. So, she walked out of the room and slammed the door (laughter).

But did you know what Special Ops was? What its specific role was?

No idea whatsoever.

Looking at where we are now in South Africa and where Mozambique is, if you knew then, during the struggle, how we and Mozambique would turn out to be, do you think you'd still have done what you did for our struggles?

Yes, I would.

Why?

Because I think you have to have political liberation of a country. It's a part of development. You know with people being oppressed by fascist regimes like the Portuguese and South African, you can't move forward. I think that's also why even Mugabe is still revered as a political leader because he liberated Zimbabwe. Of course, once you have a middle-class leadership which starts to loot the country, as is happening in Mozambique and South Africa, you've got a serious problem. The ANC government's policies are not as we had imagined they would be. There is no intention to realise the ideas first put forward in the Freedom Charter.

There is considerable disappointment in Europe about the direction in which the ANC is moving. Just recently when I was in Belgium I had a discussion with a friend, and he said that he would not have supported the Zimbabwean and South African struggles at all if he had known how it would turn out. But, perhaps we should all have read Frantz Fanon a bit more carefully.

And again, as we should know from our European experience, workers' rights are never won in one go. We have been too relaxed after 1994 by thinking it would all come by itself! It is painful to see how little South Africans identify themselves with the past struggle. It is still us and them, with the us being the political and economic elite in this country. The majority of people have been left out of the development process. Do we ever learn anything from history?

Is there anything you want to say about why several Belgians – Helene, Guido, Nora (Bogaert), you, others – ended up in Mozambique and contributed to the ANC's armed struggle?

Because we can't do it in Belgium (laughter).

No, I think we felt part of the anti-apartheid struggle because we colonised Congo. Secondly, I think at the time of Van Riebeeck we and the Netherlands were one country. We speak the same language as the Dutch, and the Flemish also came as settlers to South Africa. Thirdly, many people in many countries supported the anti-apartheid struggle because they believe in basic human rights and are willing to engage in one way or other to realise such rights.

Just let me add here that there also is an enormous amount of work to be done to decolonise the minds of the Belgians. Nothing about the colonial period is being taught in schools. Twenty five percent of the population still think that Belgians did a marvellous job in the Congo!