

6.29.2025

Struggle and archive

BY

[Sean Henry Jacobs](#)

The formerly exiled ANC activist and later judge Albie Sachs is archiving his life, including a new film that forms part of a larger project of legacy-making.



Albie Sachs and Koyo Kouoh, in a still from *Albie: A Strange Alchemy*.

It is generally understood that, over the post-war 20th century, the leading figures in South Africa's liberation struggle were Albert Luthuli, Oliver Tambo, Nelson Mandela, Joe Slovo, Robert Sobukwe, Steve Biko, and Winnie Mandela. Surrounding this core group was a broader network of activists who sustained the African National Congress (ANC)'s extensive exile operations. Within this broader circle was a small number of white South Africans who openly aligned themselves with the struggle against apartheid—including its armed resistance—and who submitted to Black leadership and lived elsewhere on the continent. Among them were Ruth First, Slovo's wife, and Albie Sachs, a lawyer and writer.

Though Sachs had long been publicly associated with the ANC—fronting several of its media campaigns in the UK during the late 1960s and 1970s—he rose to greater prominence in 1988 when he was severely injured in a car bombing in Mozambique. At the time, he was working as a law professor in Maputo, the capital of Mozambique, when the apartheid regime sent state terrorists to assassinate Indres Naidoo, an ANC representative based in the city. The operatives planted a bomb in Naidoo’s car, unaware that Sachs had borrowed it that day. Sachs survived the explosion, but lost an arm and the sight in one eye.

Rather than intimidating him, the attack only deepened Sachs’s commitment to the liberation movement. In the years that followed, he became more involved in ANC work. After the unbanning of the ANC and Nelson Mandela’s release from prison, Sachs returned to South Africa. Following the historic 1994 elections that brought the ANC to power, he was appointed a judge on the country’s new Constitutional Court. Now 90 and living in retirement in Cape Town, Sachs has spent recent years reflecting on his life.

Part of this reflection involves legacy making and archiving.

Sachs is no stranger to self-archiving. He has written numerous books: *The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs*, *Stephanie on Trial*, *The Soft Vengeance of a Freedom Fighter*, and *The Strange Alchemy of Life and Law*. He was also the subject of at least one other documentary film in 2014. That, along with archival footage, including BBC dramatizations of his writings, used in the documentary film *Albie: A Strange Alchemy*, suggests a man who has long worked to shape his legacy.

The result is a series of media outcomes under the broad title, “The Albie Collection,” which Sachs conceived with his wife, architect Vanessa September. Specifically, the “collection” consists of an online archive, an exhibition at the Zeitz MOCAA Museum in Cape Town titled “Spring is Rebellious: Resistance, Liberation, and Humanist Transformation in the Art and Life of Albie Sachs” (on from July 24, 2025 to May 31, 2026), and *Albie: A Strange Alchemy*, which premieres this month at the Encounters Documentary Film Festival in Johannesburg and Cape Town.

The film, which mainly concerns us here, is worth unpacking. It resists a linear approach and unfolds not as a straight chronology but as a series of collisions, exiles, and transformations.

It presents a collage of vignettes, comprising fragments of memory, intimate interviews, archival footage, and moments of personal and political reflection.

We see Sachs reflect on his political activism—his arrests, solitary confinement, and the 1988 car bombing. But more than these grand narratives of heroism, *Albie: A Strange Alchemy* is focused on his inner life: his relationships, his reckonings, his doubts, and his affections.

For that approach, we should thank editor Khalid Shamis and director Sara de Gouveia.



Albie Sachs and Dumile Feni were in London in the late 1960s. The film features a segment about their friendship.

Sachs' beginnings are both particular and emblematic. As the "Albie Collection" details, Sachs is the grandson of Lithuanian Jewish refugees who fled antisemitism for South Africa. His father, Solly Sachs, was a key figure in the emergence of modern trade unionism in the country. Although he grew up in privileged, white Cape Town—on the Atlantic Seaboard and attending local elite schools—his upbringing was politically infused.

From a young age, Albie's sense of racial equality was not abstract—it was embedded in the fabric of his everyday life. His mother, Ray, worked as a typist for Moses Kotane, the General Secretary of the South African Communist Party, and, like his father, welcomed

black African political figures into their home with deep respect and warmth. “We’d be told to tidy up because Uncle Moses was coming,” Sachs recalls, “and it wasn’t Moses Cohen or Moses Kantor. It was Moses Kotane.”

He was named after Albert Nzula, a Black communist and trade unionist who died before Albie’s birth. After his parents divorced, Sachs’ mother briefly moved with him and his brother into the home of Cissie Gool, daughter of the early coloured leader Abdullah Abdurahman, who founded the African Political Organization, which predates the African National Congress by a few years. This chapter of his experience stands out as an exception to the broader pattern of separation between whites and Blacks under apartheid and, to a depressing extent, still these days.

One of Sachs’ earliest adult memories is being arrested. “Some people remember their first kiss. I remember the first time I went to jail.” After multiple arrests, police harassment, and periods of detention, including solitary confinement, in the late 1960s, he fled South Africa with fellow activist Stephanie Kemp, whom he had been defending in court against charges of sabotage for bombing electric pylons.

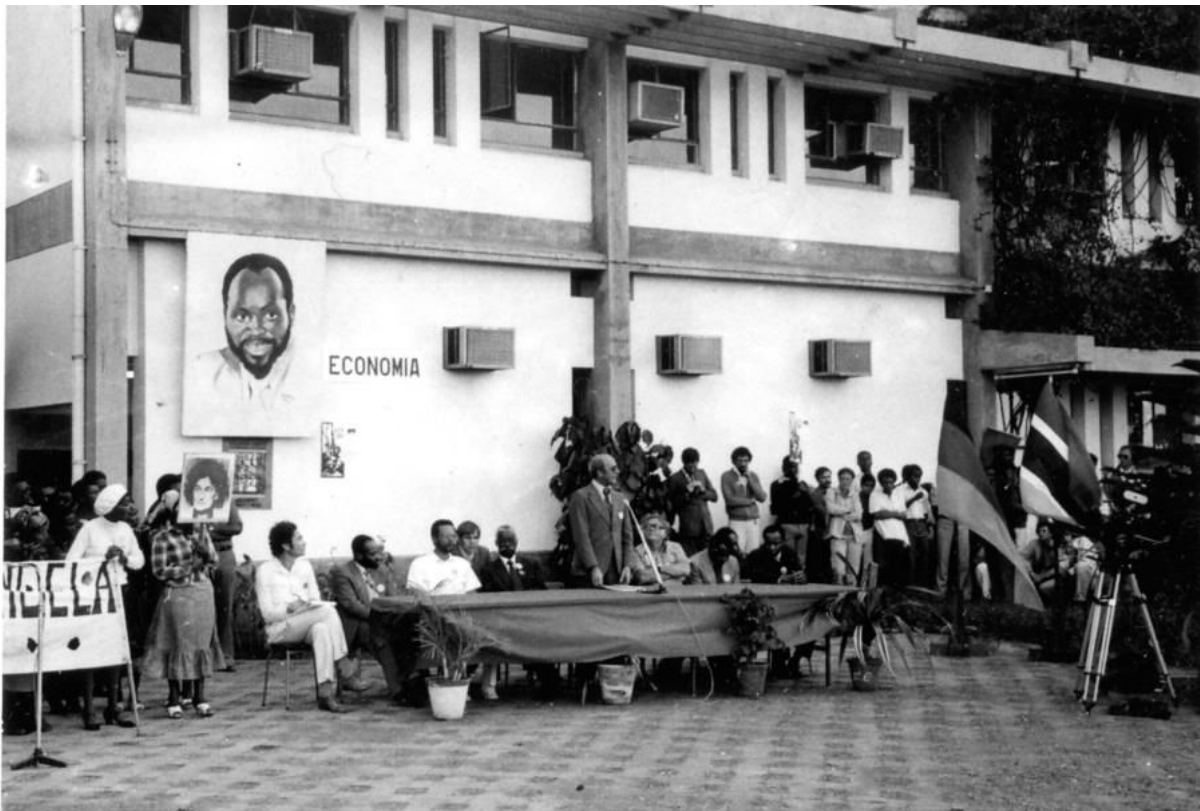
The pair settled in London, married, and raised their sons, Alan and Michael, while sustaining his involvement in the exiled anti-apartheid movement, including the sports boycott. After a while, the marriage broke down, and Sachs, leaving his family in the UK, relocated to Maputo in the late 1970s to take up a post as a law professor in Mozambique, which had just won its independence. It was there that Sachs immersed himself not only in ANC organizational work (then overseen by Jacob Zuma), but also in the Mozambican arts and intellectual scene. He became a patron of artists, such as the renowned Mozambican artist Malangatana, and cultivated a distinct Southern African sensibility.

The Mozambican years are a chapter of his life often overshadowed by the 1988 bombing, but the film’s vivid portrayal of this period, including his relationship with artists and his role in helping to organize a memorable concert featuring Abdullah Ibrahim and Sathima Benjamin, is where the film truly shines.

In Mozambique, Sachs appears to expand his politics of non-racialism (which many white leftists profess but do not practice), absorb new influences, and deepen his conviction in the

power of art and storytelling. As he would say later about marrying his two passions, the law and the arts: “Judges are the great storytellers of our age.”

One sequence captures this best. In 1982, Ibrahim and Benjamin, then living in New York, traveled to Maputo to perform a concert celebrating Mozambican independence. They arrived a few days after a letter bomb sent by South African state terrorists had killed Ruth First. She was a journalist, researcher, and a leading member of the ANC. First, who was white and Jewish, was also close to Tambo.



Speakers at a memorial for Ruth First at Eduardo Mondlane University in August 1980. Seated are Albie Sachs, Jacob Zuma, unidentified speaker, Moses Mabhida, unidentified speaker, university president Fernando Ganhao, Joe Slovo, and two other unidentified speakers.

The film captures the energy, sadness, and defiant mood of the concert, but also adds some personal details. Before the concert, the Mozambican artist João Craveirinha designed a striking concert poster featuring different depictions of Ibrahim, accompanied by a piano and a rifle. The way Sachs tells it, Ibrahim reportedly declined to keep the image, citing religious prohibitions on likenesses, which is how Sachs came to acquire the artwork, which is still in his possession.

Ibrahim opened the concert by honoring First and reading two poems: “Fighting Back” by Bridget O’Laughlin, who had survived the attack on First, and “The Boers Are Not Our Teachers.” Shami edits some of the poetry and the music into the film from a recording of the concert. It is here where you feel the sense that resistance was not just political; it was sonic, poetic, and collective. By the way, it led me to search for the original recording, which is online. It is an extraordinary historical document: one hour or so of Ibrahim’s playing—including his songs “Tula Dubula” and “Hit and Run,” which, unusually for Ibrahim, have lyrics and openly call for armed struggle—and at least two songs sung by Sathima, who was an incredible vocalist. Her first song was addressed directly to members of the ANC and Frelimo, the governing party in Mozambique, as well as the ANC’s hosts, and the second, her signature song, the mournful, longing “Africa.”

The film also devotes considerable time to Sachs’s life after the end of apartheid. Following the unbanning of the ANC and the return of exiles, Sachs met Vanessa and later resigned from the ANC to become a judge on South Africa’s new Constitutional Court. De Gouveia and Shami include scenes depicting some of the legal debates from cases heard by Sachs and his colleagues. This is helpful as it shows the extent of Sachs’s contribution to institutionalizing the post-apartheid legal order. The film also highlights Sachs’s role in curating the Court’s art collection, which contributes to the institution’s uniquely welcoming ethos, setting it apart from similar institutions around the world.

Albie: A Strange Alchemy could easily have been pure hagiography (it is executive produced by Albie and Vanessa), and at times it has that feeling, but the film includes some candid conversations between Sachs and his sons: Alan, who visited him post-bombing in Maputo in 1988 and later became an artist; Michael, an economist who worked in the post-apartheid government and who offers the film’s only critical voice about compromises of that era; and Oliver, his youngest, whom he had with Vanessa, in 2006, when Albie was 71 years old. These scenes feel like a kind of living testament—unresolved, tender, and searching.



Vanessa September, Albie Sachs, and their dog on Clifton Beach in Cape Town.

Some of those close to him but who have passed also get a chance to speak, if only momentarily. Kemp passed away in 2023, and we only hear her briefly, via a recording, reflecting on their time in London. Their relationship left a lasting impression on Sachs. Similarly, Koyo Kouoh, the chief curator of Zeitz MOCAA, who was close to Albie and Vanessa and who passed away this year, also appears in the film. In what is likely one of the last images of Kouoh on camera, we see her alongside Sachs, collaborating on the planning of “Spring is Rebellious.” Originally from Cameroon and raised in Switzerland, Kouoh offers one of the film’s most profound reflections on what the next stage of South Africa’s nation-building project should embody: a country that, at its best, is welcoming, whose identity is continually evolving, and that belongs to all who live in it, regardless of where they come from.

“People who are filled with love and generosity meet,” she says. “And when they meet, they form a connection. I think that it’s spiritual somewhere, you know. Those people find each other wherever they move around in the sphere.”

The film also suggests that the bombing that maimed Sachs was not just a tragedy but also an inflection point. After the end of apartheid, one of the white South African state terrorists responsible for planning it, Henri van der Westhuizen, requested to meet Sachs. “When he saw my [maimed] arm, it shook him,” Sachs recounts. They spoke, but Sachs refused to

shake his hand, instead urging him to testify before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Years later, they met again at a party. Van der Westhuizen told him he had confessed. “Only your eyes can tell me it’s true,” Sachs said. This time, they shook hands. “It’s not forgiveness. It’s transcendence,” Sachs reflects. “The triumph of values. That’s been my journey. It still is.” Sachs refers to this approach as “soft vengeance.”

For Sachs, soft vengeance amounts to a form of justice achieved through the practice of democracy, equality, and the rule of law; essentially rejecting retaliation in favor of fulfilling the ideals denied by past violence.

One senses that Sachs can afford to be forgiving and that he realizes it—he won the post-apartheid ending so many others were denied. He married Vanessa, who is from Cape Town’s townships. He was blessed with another child. He became a judge. He lives in Clifton, a sought-after part of the Cape Town coast. His life and art are being celebrated in the country’s most dynamic museum. This has not been the case for many others.

As someone who believes Sachs’ generation of freedom fighters deserves their due, there is no resentment in these observations—only reflection. The South African project remains unfinished. Stories like Sachs’s not only testify to the hard-won gains of the past but also confront us with the urgent, unfinished work still ahead to achieve justice, dignity, and equality for all.

About the Author

[Sean Henry Jacobs](#) is the founder of Africa is a Country and Professor of International Affairs at The New School. © 2026

Reference:

Jacobs, S.H. (2025). *Struggle and archive* from *Africa is a Country*, 29 June 2025 (online). Available at <https://africasacountry.com/2025/06/struggle-and-archive> . Accessed 30 June 2025