17 ELDERS

Many of the political activists of the 1950s and 1960s were jailed, banned and driven out of the country, but there was another method the government used against its opponents, and that was to banish them to obscurity in remote rural areas. Banishment was directed at African political leaders: the 1927 Native Administration Act empowered the authorities, without any prior notice, to order any 'tribe or native to proceed forthwith to any designated place and not to leave it again except by permission'.[1] Dumped in unfamiliar areas where they often could not speak the local language, many banished people were shunned by rural communities who had been warned about troublemakers from town.

The mutual distrust inevitably melted over time. As popular resistance gained momentum in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it became clear how often this method of eradicating opposition had backfired.

“In our township we had a granny called Ma Mokhele, who used to tell us a lot about black history. Later I started understanding that she had been a member of the ANC and she had been sent to Heilbron under banishment. So she used to explain a lot of these things: what they were doing in the Women's League, what ANC was in the initial stages when it became militant, when the young ones like Mandela came into it. She was explaining its historical significance and why we should be proud of it, and why we should take on from where they've left. And that's how we started understanding a lot of things politically. Because of the teachings of that granny in Heilbron, I understood that whites must be regarded as people, irrespective of their colour. She even talked about the problems that were there, and even explained that Mandela himself did have some reservations about whites. But as you grow politically, as you mature, you learn to accept people as they are — not as symbols of colour as such.

When she first spoke to you about non-racialism, did it seem at all strange? Living in the Free State, had you ever met a white who was not racist?

No, not in that little dorp [village], but she had talked about comrades such as the late Bram Fisher, Comrade Slovo, and Comrade Goldberg. First I couldn't understand it: how could a white person die for me, for my struggle? What business did he have in my struggle when he was a free man, had his own vote, he had everything? Then she explained that it was because there were freedom-loving democrats who felt that they were not free until you were free, too.

Did your friends also hold such non-racial views?

Generally, people were against whites. They would say, 'Whites are whites, and you can't say that there's a better umlungu [white person] and a bad umlungu — they're all the same.' But I never gave up, I derived pleasure from explaining, because I was actually proud that I understood it from a person who was much, much experienced and who I regarded as a veteran in politics. And I always felt that I need to sort of give light to the people who haven't yet seen it.

Did you ever meet a PAC elder like that ANC granny?

Yes, I met one old father whom I came to know later on as an old member of PAC before it was banned, and the way he explained PAC principles, one of its many arguments against ANC when they split off was because ANC was dominated by communists. When I asked him about socialism, within the context of Marxism-Leninism, he said to me that those are foreign concepts: in Africa we talk about ubuntu, humanism, we talk about communalism, and we lived as not socialists but communalists, and those foreign concepts must not be allowed to adulterate our struggle.

At that stage I had a fair perception of the class struggle, and what he talked didn't make sense to me at all. It was as if he was preaching some form of traditionalism that I was totally opposed to. Because this old lady, again, had explained to me that PAC was led by a hothead who would shout first and think thereafter. She explained them as that part of the ANC that left before it was 'well-cooked' — she meant disciplined — and further explained that one day PAC will only exist in name And the ANC, she explained, was a government in exile, and after winning our struggle that's the government that will be ruling.

Were you totally uninfluenced by Black Consciousness?

I would say BC, as a philosophy, I was never exposed to, but all that I know was that as blacks we must not feel inferior to whites — and that I got from my parents, I got it from that old lady, I got from some many people in the community. It was not because of BC philosophy. In the Free State particularly, there was no BC at all.

How else did you learn about the ANC, besides from that granny?

In fact, it was just through reading, mostly, that I came to understand a lot of things — through newspapers and books, and even banned literature.

SAHA ARCHIVE FOR JUSTICE

that came to make sense, but first I couldn't understand it –
that how could a white person die for me, for my struggle –
what business did he have in my struggle, when he was a free
man, had his own vote, he had everything – why did he die for
me? Then it became important when she explained that it was

because there was a democrat – peace loving democrat – freedo
loving democrat, who felt that he was not free until you were
free, too. Then I understood those things, and decided that
I'd have no problem to get into the Young Christian Workers.

In the Free State there was banned literature?

Yes. I would say, if you go on a farm where people are completely illiterate, it is not impossible that you should come across an old ANC or Communist Party book or some political book that would be regarded as subversive by the system. There are people who may not be very literate, but who'll always be in possession of relevant books, progressive books, and when he trusts you he'll say, 'I want to show you something,' and he'll show you a very good book that you would never have thought that a person of that calibre would be in possession of such material.

I know, for instance, people in Heilbron whom I had never thought were politically aware, and I got friendly with one and he gave me The Struggle is My Life by Mandela, and he said it's a good book, it'll make me a man. A man selling coal, who was a delivery boy — I had never thought that he had been to school, and I knew him not to be in a position to read anything or write his name, but he gave me that book. So it was like that in townships all over.

In my opinion, ANC propaganda, it's being read like hotcakes, and even a lazy person who wouldn't read a thing, the minute you show him, this is ANC, this is SACTU, this is the Communist Party, that person will be so keen on reading that, simply because the system denied us to read these things. Anything denied makes people to be as curious as anything. ”

MONGEZI RADEBE, an activist who grew up in the village of Heilbron in the Orange Free State

Even imprisonment on Robben Island failed to achieve the state's goals of quarantining political leaders, for ANC veterans used the opportunity to educate the younger prisoners. Thus the Island came to be known as 'Mandela University'.

“ I was 25 when I got to Robben Island, so I was quite keen, together with a lot of other young people, to equip ourselves as much as we could. We read about all the struggles, you know, and it improved my understanding — and contact, of course, with the leadership itself. We studied the revolution in Indonesia, the Chinese revolution, the Russian revolution, the struggle in India, the struggle in Ireland, the struggle in Latin America, the Cuban revolution, the Algerian revolution, reconstruction after decolonization in Africa — you know, all those things. What parallels are there between those struggles and our struggles here? What lessons can we draw? There's no section of political theory that we never touched on the Island.

I had only matric [secondary school] when I went to the Island, but I graduated from there. I got my degree on the Island. I majored in philosophy and English through the University of South Africa,[2] so some of the material I was prescribed. And we got hold of Marxist literature, we were conducting lectures.

In all your political debates on the Island, did the issue of non-racialism ever come up?

It was an important issue, much as it is still an important issue today. I think it's one of the pillars that the ANC structure could be said to have been built on. You take, for instance, the 1976 uprising: it was quite clear that it was the white policeman and the white soldier who was butchering the kids in Soweto. And there were those who would say the struggle was between black and white and point out these glaring examples. You know, it could have gone the other way, had it not been for our insistence on non-racialism as a realistic, historical approach to the resolution of the South African situation.

The ANC addressed all that, you know. We were not tempted to water it down, even in the era of Black Consciousness. We believed that it's quite good poetry to say, 'Black man, you're on your own', but on the ground the situation is quite different. On the Island, the responsibility of the movement was to equip all members of the organization so that we were not wanting more information on any single aspect of the policies of our movement, particularly non-racialism and the alliance between the SACP and the ANC. As a national liberation movement we are a coalition of various classes and social groups, and it becomes important, therefore, that the cadreship of the movement understands how to harmonize the relations, and not to play one class interest against another.

So we had to do a lot of politicization around this concept and emphasize that non-racialism is entrenched in the Freedom Charter. You know, the word 'people', it pervades the whole Charter: 'The people shall govern' and 'land to the people'. We had to engage in intensive politicization, because 'people', as far as we were concerned, are all those classes, those social groups, irrespective of race, colour, or creed, who rallied around the banner of the ANC for a non-racial, united, democratic South Africa. So once you are discussing the Freedom Charter, you invariably cannot avoid talking about non-racialism.

SAHA
ARCHIVE FOR JUSTICE

Non-racialism – no, it was an important issue, much as it is still an important issue today, and it's difficult at times, you know, but I think – I mean to commend, you know, one's organisation, but I think

Now was all this debate purely amongst fellow ANC prisoners, or did you try to move those who held another point of view?

We talked to the [white] warders, we did convert some of them to accept our positions. We preached to them that we are brothers, this is our country and we have to fight for a non-racial democracy. I remember a warder who used to come and eat with us from the same piece of iron zinc when we cooked imbazas, oysters that we pulled from the sea. One day I asked him, 'Look here, there is a civil war going on in South Africa. On which side are you?' He said, 'I am standing on the fence.'

And then I said to him, 'But we are going to shake that fence, we are going to shake it very hard, and in all probability you must fall — but make sure that you fall on the right side.' And then he said, 'Ek is 'n Mandela' — that is, he supports Mandela. And he says, 'When I go to the ANC I will not be going to you, I'm going to my own brothers there: Bram Fischer is daar [is there], Slovo is daar — they're white men, they're in the ANC. I'll go to them.'

That's why we believed on the Island when things really come to the push, the Afrikaner will turn out to be the most patriotic of all racial groups. After all, they were peasants only in the last century and they don't have a long history of involvement in capitalist morality and whatnot.

Were you similarly confident about those who opposed ANC policies from a Black Consciousness point of view?

We knew that it was the responsibility of the revolutionary movement to direct the Black Consciousness Movement into more progressive positions. I mean, we certainly knew that BC could give problems in the long run, by reason of it being colour politics. Colour politics are dangerous. They are just as bad as tribal politics, you know. That's why we know that the imperialist countries were very much interested in boosting Black Consciousness, knowing that politics of the skin are going to blunt the revolutionary drive of the working class, and in particular, the anti-imperialist nature of the struggle.

Toward the end of your prison sentence did you have a sense of what you wanted to accomplish politically upon your return to society?

When you are just about to leave the Island there's a lot of anxiety, particularly for long-term prisoners. I did not know how the country looked like — the currency, the highways and whatnot, all those things were completely strange to me. You get people like Nelson Mandela who'd sort of arm you, in terms of what you are likely to confront and what the expectations of the movement are about you, and you feel very much inspired and encouraged.

The priority was getting people rallying behind the genuine liberation movement in the country, getting people accepting the policies of the ANC. ”

STEVE TSHWETE, who was sentenced to fifteen years imprisonment for Umkhonto we Sizwe sabotage activities in 1964

EXTRACT FROM A POSTER BY THE MEDU COLLECTIVE OF EXILED SOUTH AFRICAN ARTISTS IN BOTSWANA. (SOURCE: SOUTH AFRICAN HISTORY ARCHIVE)

DOROTHY NYEMBE IS ENTHUSIASTICALLY GREETED BY SUPPORTERS ON HER RELEASE FROM EIGHTEEN YEARS IN PRISON FOR ANC AND MK ACTIVITIES. ONE OF THE PLACARDS READS, 'JAIL SHALL NOT BEND OUR LEADERS'. (PHOTOGRAPHER: OMAR BADSHA)

doesn't have to be white to be reactionary, it can work both ways. Prison to me became in fact, the most dramatic period for my conception of our struggle

“Prison, for me, became the most dramatic period for my conception of our struggle, and lots of my views were changed by the experience of being exposed to other people who had been involved in struggle for a long time. It was a combination of both reading from books and being in contact with people who have been in the struggle even before the days of BC. They brought us the tradition of struggle we had been missing in the '70s. And then the realization dawned amongst lots of us that the gap that had been created with the banning of people's organizations in the '60s and the apparent demise of the Congress movement created that vacuum whereby certain ideas that came up as a result of the '60s student movement in America, the Black Power Movement, came to have an effect on the South African scene. Those became the ideas of the day that caught on like wildfire, with us little realizing that as history develops those ideas would run their course and become obsolete.

My previous position as regards the position of whites in the struggle in the '70s was the result of what I would consider a myopic outlook. The historical state in which we were at that time was one where, in fact, we were cut off from our history, the history of struggle, as to what went on before us. When I got involved in politics, it was at the level of the South African Students Movement (SASM),[3] which was essentially Black Consciousness, and growing up in that tradition we had that original aversion for any contact with white people. I think that was a result of that historical gap that was created. But as I developed and got more curious and began to read more, my perception began to change. Then there was a rediscovery of where we stood in history, and lots of us took our ideas from that Congress tradition.”

MURPHY MOROBE, SSRC vice-chairman who was detained for two years following the 1976-77 uprisings, then tried for sedition, and was on Robben Island from 1979 to 1982

“ANC political prisoners released from Robben Island — both the veterans and the ex-Black Consciousness activists — were like yeast in the townships. They spread their non-racial views amongst younger people looking for political guidance and provided a link to the much-mystified movement.

I heard about the ANC from my mother's uncle. He was one of the guys who was in Robben Island, so when he came out in 1976 he was the one who enlightened me, telling me about his involvements in those days and how he was detained, and telling us about Mandela, Sisulu, Sobukwe. So I have become more and more interested. So he's the person that guided me up to this stage, 'Rev' Marawu. He was an organizer for General Workers Union in Cape Town.

He didn't say that he was fighting whites. He used to tell me, took, baby' — because he used to call me 'baby' — 'I'm sure you don't have the right direction, and I feel from the songs that you sing here that you are really anti-white. You know, we've got our brothers in Robben Island, but we've white brothers, too.' He used to tell me of the white ladies and the men who were involved in the ANC. So he's the one who enlightened me about the ANC and about the white man in South Africa, because he said not all of them are the same.

You know, there's this freedom song which said, 'The Afrikaners are dogs — Amabhulu Izinjd'. That was the song we used to sing in 1976, and he said, 'You must stop singing this because not all of them are dogs.' So I used to listen to him. I used to ask my mother and my father, 'What were you doing in that time — were you involved in these things like Rev?' They said, 'Each and everyone, if you are an African, you are involved.' I took all that as history.”

NISE MALANGE, who was expelled from secondary schools in Transkei and Ciskei in the late 1970s and then sent back home to Cape Town, where she got reacquainted with an elderly relative after he was released from Robben Island

No, he didn't say that he was fighting whites. He said - he used to tell me that : Look, Baby - because he used to call me Baby (Laugh) : Look, Baby, you know, don't take politics as something that is very easy, because I saw you are just unruly, and you seem to attend each and every meeting, and I'm sure you don't have the right direction of everything - and I feel from the songs that he used to sing here that you are really anti white.

You know we've got our brothers in Robben Island - white brothers - no, the whites are not all the same. There are whites - he made an example of Rev. - Bishop Russells

He used to take me to places, show me people that : Look, he's one of the progressive guys, one of the progressive ladies. He used to tell me of the ladies and the men who were involved in the A.N.C., so he's the one who enlight-ened me about the A.N.C. and about the white men in South Africa, because he said not all of them are the same.

SAHA ARCHIVE FOR JUSTICE

Yes, it was exciting as a white, but I had always had this total conviction that um, there is a place for the whites; that ah, and the whites, I don't like to say the whites living/? leaders in S.A. it sounds patronising, I don't mean it that way but whites have been there for a long time and I mean they are not going to forget and I do believe there's the possibility for a non racial, real democracy in S.A. I

Whites who had been banned in the 1950s and '60s also began returning to the political fray to play a kind of elder statesman role.

" Then I was completely involved in my domestic life. I mean, I was interested but I had four small children. Until one day in 1977 there was a knock at the door and there was Oscar Mpetha, who I hadn't seen for years and years. And he said, 'Won't you come and help with some typing at the Food and Canning Workers Union[4] office?' So I went along to the office, and that is how I came to work at Food and Canning. And then in about 1979, '80, Oscar came one day and said, 'Listen, we're going to start a women's organization again — come.' And we started the United Women's Organization (UWO) with Dorothy Tamana and Mildred Lesia.[5] We got this thing off the ground and it grew to quite a big women's organization.

I was just about the only white person I knew left in Cape Town who hadn't opted out or left the country or something. So to find these young people who were active — and so many young whites — it was amazing to me. There was a whole new generation of people who weren't scared, who could handle banning orders. The new generation had grown up knowing nothing of anything being legal, accepting torture and solitary confinement — I was amazed by these people. And I found myself being drawn back into things. I've never been a kind of high-profile person, I've always been a kind of backroom girl, but I found myself being placed in this situation of chairing things.

My other role was like a sort of living historical monument. I then discovered there was a generation of students doing research who know more about anything than I ever did. I mean, they were researching the women in the '50s, the Congress of the People, the Congress of Democrats — you know, the whole political spectrum. So every now and then students would pitch up and say, 'Can we come and talk to you about this? And do you remember anything about that?' I still get called on in my historical monument act — like, 'We're having a thing on the Treason Trial, will you come and talk about what happened in the trial?' It's been very nice being in contact with young people.

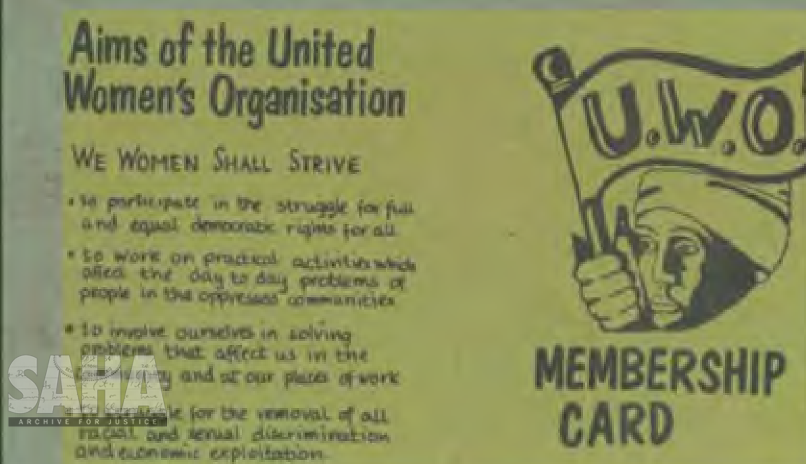
I think I'm reaching the age where I'm becoming an elder, in that I find that, in terms of people having disputes — sometimes personality, sometimes ideological — I have been asked to sit in on a discussion to resolve disputes, along with Liz Abrahams.[6] Why? Because we're both old, we've been involved in the '50s, and they want us to talk about comradeship and discipline.

How would you compare the position of whites, then and now?

I always had this total conviction that there is a place for the whites, never doubted the fact. Speaking to other whites who would say, 'Denis Goldberg was a fool, he stuck his neck out and look what happened to him, he's wasted his life,' I would say, 'Denis Goldberg is a reason that you have a claim to live in South Africa — it's because of Goldberg that you'll be able to say there is a place for whites in South Africa, because he's been willing to be in that position.'

The white population in South Africa is not going to disappear. A lot of racial feeling exists. And I think that the fact that there are whites who have played a minor role in the struggle means that it's not just a straight black-white issue, and I think that's very important. In the same way, I'm always telling my children that 650,000 non-Jewish Germans resisted the Nazis and died in Nazi concentration camps, and I think that is important. All kinds of human resistance to tyranny is important. "

AMY THORNTON, a Cape Town Congress of Democrats activist banned from 1959 to 1973 and then exhorted to return to the political scene by a former SACTU leader who had also been de-activated for more than a decade by successive bans and detentions



AIMS OF THE UNITED WOMEN'S ORGANISATION AS IT APPEARS ON U.W.O. MEMBERSHIP CARD. (SOURCE: SOUTH AFRICAN HISTORY ARCHIVE)

I don't sort of see us as reproducing the 50s. I think that we have like a baton has been dropped temporarily and we picked it up again under different conditions. The baton is a baton in the sense of cross class alliances, the broadest based national alliance against apartheid oppression and exploitation; we have tried, like the Congress Alliance did, we are trying to isolate the racist

Ex-political prisoners plunged straight into sensitive ideological and political debates, offering their political experience as well as theoretical knowledge gleaned from discussions in prison. They included not only ex-Robben Islanders, but also veterans of the white maximum security prison, Pretoria Central.

“When I was arrested there was not this sort of open debate at all. If you advocated the Freedom Charter in the '70s you would have been banned, and most of those people who advocated it were in jail. So it is a completely different situation now. There is a religious attitude to the Charter — anyone who attacks it is an enemy, that sort of thing. People treat it as an article of faith to support the Charter, and it had never really been debated. I wanted to open it, because I felt you can't defend it in that sort of arrogant way. We have got to engage people, we have got to discuss it. Even in our own ranks people have different views. You can't mount a successful challenge to a state unless you have political cohesion.

Do you see parallels between the mass-based movement then and now?

I don't see us as reproducing the '50s. I think there was a baton that was dropped temporarily, and we picked it up again under different conditions — a baton, in the sense of cross-class alliances, the broadest-based national alliance against apartheid oppression and exploitation. Like the Congress Alliance, we are trying to isolate the racist regime and to draw in all anti-apartheid forces to oppose them, and that has shown that, in a sense, we believe that the approach adopted then is valid today. I believe that the only way to free South Africa is to consolidate an alliance of all people opposed to apartheid.

Compared with their black comrades, the white political prisoners segregated in Pretoria Central have had less to share in terms of breadth of experience, different points of view, etc. What was it that helped you get through your time in prison?[7]

Prison is not so difficult if you are a political prisoner. Because in the first place, you go in there with your head held high — you're completely proud of what you've done. And if you remember that all along, psychologically, you start off very well. Secondly, your job in prison is to come out a better person, better able to play a role in the struggle, and I think it's important not to waste your time in prison, but to come out feeling that you've grown. I feel

I grew, morally and intellectually, and my political understanding is better. It wasn't very difficult because I used every moment — there was too little time in prison, as far as I'm concerned. I worked hard, there was a lot of discussion, I understand a lot of things much better now. Morale-wise, it's very difficult, but out of difficult situations you can either collapse or grow, and I think that most people grow in them.”

RAYMOND SUTTNER, who served seven years in Pretoria Central for ANC activities, and upon his release in 1983 played a leading role in popularizing the Freedom Charter

NOTES:

[1]In her autobiography (*Side by Side*, Zed Books, 1986), Helen Joseph describes the two-month, 8,000-mile-long 'Journey to the Banished' she undertook in 1962, when her own ban lapsed. In response to an ANC call for the 116 banished people to be located and assisted, she and fellow FedSAW member Lilian Ngoyi formed the Human Rights Welfare Committee.

[2]Commonly referred to as UNISA and located in Pretoria, Africa's largest correspondence university serves students of all races.

[3]The secondary schools organization instigated by SASO, which played a role in the 1976 uprisings.

[4]This union was founded in 1941 by Ray Alexander, and Mpetha became its general-secretary in 1951. It fell victim to the government offensive against SACTU and its affiliated unions and was revived again in 1977 by Mpetha and a young white just out of university, Jan Theron.

[5]Tamana was a FedSAW founder member who came to the Cape shanties from the Transkei. Lesia had been a trade unionist and ANC activist in the 1950s.

[6]A former Food and Canning Workers general-secretary who helped refound the union from her base in Paarl.

[7]There is also a separate top security section of the prison for female white political prisoners; whereas Robben Island only accommodated males, and black women political prisoners were usually kept at a prison in Kroonstad in the Free State.