

PROJECT: EXILE PROJECT
VENUE: ANC OFFICES (SHELL HOUSE)
INTERVIEWEE: PUMLA WILLIAMS
INTERVIEWER: THOMAS
TIME:
DATE: JULY 23, 1991

A: Err... my name is Pumla Williams, aged 31. I was born in Pimville in Johannesburg from a family of two sisters. We were brought up by my mother after they separated with my father when I was eight months. And she worked as a domestic worker from that time right up till I was six years. And we went to schooling and she was funding our upbringing in general. I was living in Pimville in Soweto. We were staying with my Grandfather. We didn't have a place to stay the reason we actually went to stay with my grandfather it was that after my mother separated with my father we had to move out from the house which they were occupying because my mother couldn't afford to pay the rent. So we had to move and stay with my grandfather and other family members. Infact I think ...

Q: Was this your mother's father?

A: That was my mother's father he was in Pimville. So we were all staying in Pimville but different houses. So when they separated we had to move and go and stay with my grandfather. And in that house I think we were about eightien. That was cousins and other family members.

Q: How big was the house?

A: The house was three bedroom, dining room and a kitchen. But it wasn't big for eighteen people and it was, seven kids and then adults. And we stayed in that house in that arrangement until 1967 when my mother got a house. And we then moved to a two roomed house to stay with my mother and in that house it was a little bit better because it was my mother and my two sisters, so we were four. At time to get work and a job at a clinic and then she was able to ...

Q: Which clinic?

A: Pimville clinic. Before she was working as a domestic worker and she used to visit us on weekends.

Q: Do you know where and for whom?

A: Ja she was working for some white couple called Rothchild in one suburb in Johannesburg. She was staying and visiting us only on weekends. So that was also another experience for us because it was n't easy being brought up in a family with seven kids and everyone for herself because most of them were staying with their mothers and so it was only us were staying with the grandmother so she was only able to attend to us when she comes on weekends. Cousins would help.

Q: Did that kind of background affect your study ?

A: A great deal because one thing my mother couldn't afford uniform for school and we were managing from what we got from other kids from the other family members who would just give us some gymdress from the other cousin of mine who couldn't wear because it was too small or so. With shoes it was completely out we had to walk without shoes barefooted and this went on like I was saying until 1967 when she got herself the house and she was able also to get a job at the Pimville clinic as a teagirl. So in that it was a relief for us because we were able to stay with her to share whatever thing she was able to get with us.

Q: Do you have an idea how much she earned while she was working for the white couple?

A: Ja, I think she was earning , she said two pounds something and that amount she actually had to contribute at my grandfather's house, so we hardly even notice she was contributing . So when we were staying with her it was much better but still she was pulling very hard because even food at home; I mean I remember at the, she was only telling us now that we were are grown that in some evenings sometimes you'd find a situation where she'd dish out for only us ; three of us and she does n't eat and she says; she only tells us now that she actually realised that the wasn't enough. So , she says , she only tells us now that she actually realised that there wasn't enough so she had to just sacrifice and say that she is not hungry and then give us the food.

With my schooling I think I attended school at a Roman Catholic school. Maybe perhaps I could explain a bit with this school. The reason that we actually taken at this is that my mother actually looked where she would be allowed to pay less because she would be allowed to pay less because she couldn't afford to pay school fees for the three of us because we were more or less at the low standard all of us. And the catholic school was the only school that would allow her to pay a schoolfee for one child and give her a discount for the other two kids. So that's how we got into the catholic school. And we studied there

Q: What do you mean by discount, what kind of a discount ?

A: I think she to explain to the principal of the school that she couldn't afford. She wanted us to study and she couldn't afford the fees. And at that time I think the fees were R10 for a year and it actually meant thirty for the three of us. And the catholic school was the only school that was prepared to say: " Ok you can bring your three kids and you 'll only pay for one but on condition that your catholic, at home we were Methodist so they said they'll only take us on condition that we became catholics.

Q: So you are catholic?

A: That's how I became a catholic; to get education. Then I did my subA right until standard six. The school was o.k in the sense that I studied. But when you actually look back on the whole tuition you find that even that R10 was not worth it because in a class room, We were actually sharing a class room for instance the sub As were sharing with the sub Bs and one class actually we were not less than sixty in a class and adding with the other standards it was around hundred and something in one class and with two teachers no partitioning, the other one is teaching Afrikaans the other one is doing English at the same time. So we were just struggling, we learned somehow we were just studying. So that was my subA, it was two A's and B's in one class , three and four's in one class and five, well five and six were separated but...

Q: What was the name of the school?

A: St. Peter Claver. When I did my standard six; just to show how bad the tuition was , I did my Standard six in 1974 and the whole class failed it was almost hundred percent fail. It was the first external exams, it was just a total fail the whole class, about sixty, seventy students. The following year the standard fives passed and we had to share that class. In a class it was just so crowded in a desk where it's two kids, we were actually three in

that desk for the whole year we had to just live in that class and study somehow we were told that we were studying but that I am not sure. The teachers were so unqualified. The teacher who was taking us for standard six was not normal. He was n't normal at all because he once went to a mental hospital. So in some days he is off his head and then we were just told we must study. Then the extras in that school I think compared to other government school we actually thought that we were much better because we had the youth club, called Chiro; a christian youth club but I think I am mentioning it because I think this is one other aspect that really changed my whole outlook of what was happening in South Africa. In this club we were expected to pay a certain amount of money which was , the way they explained to us , was to go towards buying recreational facilities so that we should something to do when we attended this classes. But then one time they tried to create some relation with the other white school; the catholic schools, through this clubs, the christian clubs. So they tried that from time to time we must have visits, visits otherwise. Then one time we went to visit these schools , and when we got there to our , we found that the was absolutely nothing they don't have we come to recreational facilities; they had almost everything and the first question we asked was "why they have these facilities and we don't have them?" and we have been paying a certain amount of money that we were told that it was supposed to go towards buying these things. The answer we got was that it is because they are white.

Q: Who responded to your question?

A: The sisters , the nuns whom we asked this question that "why aren't we having this facilities because they are having them and why can't we have them?" and the answer was that it 's because they are white and their families are rich and they are contributing more. But that to me in my little even in my little understanding it didn't make sense because this was a christian institution and we expected that they are governed by christianity we would have expected that even if those that have them the facilities they must share. That thing I actually went back and asked my mother and I think the other aspect was that my mother also contributed to that enlightening. We actually came and asked her that this is actually what is happening and we couldn't understand, this was the explanation that we got the sister when we asked for an explanation and my mother also gave us a very lengthy talk about the fact that we are blacks that's why we cannot get some of this facilities the reason that she can't afford to buy us clothes is because she is black she is not earning enough and the whites who are also working more or less the same job that she does would actually earn more. From that time I think my mother realised that we keep coming with some of these political questions which we experienced at school then she also developed an interest in explaining to us most of the things and I think that's when I started being political. When I passed; the following year fortunately I managed to pass; the following year standard six at the catholic school then I went to a government school to do Form 1. Doing my Form 1, I think '75 I was doing my Form I and then at school there was now SRC and I was now more clear and I was understanding what was happening....

Q: Which school was this?

A: Mosi High, Pimville then at that time I was clear of what was happening and now we were actually discussing quite a lot with

my mother. For instance my mother had got into the habit of every evening when she reads the newspaper she would read collectively in the house; this is what is happening....

Q: Oh! she was literate ?

A: She was literate. I think what is happening , my mother is not learned but she knows English very well . I think she just did , what does she call it? Royal Read. She would tell I did my Standard Four but I speak better English than some of the Form V in a Bantu education schools.

Q: How old is she now?

A: She is 71.

Q: Ok , this time when you started raising political question, how old were you?

A: I was 14 . And this christian club is actually what made me to start really questioning. Infact the catholics actually really, I have never seen actually "iracism" that goes on in a catholic community. If you go to a catholic community you are sure to be political. Every year we used to attend this cathedral; the church services that used to go on. One of the things that would really put you off, is when you see the white nuns removing the old women; blacks and they told them that they must stand they allowed the kids , the white kids that they must sit down on chairs. So, "iracism" in catholic school is terrible, you actually get enlightened with what is happening . Ja, in 1975 I went to Mosi High School to do my Form 1. There I think I started being active in student politics because at school at school we had the SRC, and I think we started being more active from 1976 when there was afrikaans, err... protest of the afrikaans being the medium of instruction.

Q: What happened before 1976. Any specific political action?

A: Oh no, just a question being to discuss what is happening around and then we were able to discuss. So when actual activity started in 76, it came at a time when I was already having a lot of questions that I really felt that they need to be corrected and I was now beginning to even question why did I have to really have to undergo this hard upbringing, because it was now a question of seeing that it wasn't because my mother was failing to bring me up, because , ja or lazy, because at some stage when I was small I used to, you know , it used to be so bad that you start question whether is this really my mother, you see, I was having such question that why am I not having shoes when other kids are having shoes and when it was cold and my mother would some times actually would actually insist that you go to school. And with your little understanding you would actually started questioning whether this is my mother. From '75, I was beginning to think that this is actually not my mother's fault she actually loves, ja. I think I must also indicate that even the hatred of my father , started around '76. I started having serious questions about my father why he had to leave my mother with us so small so small. To this day I don't think I want my father. I know that there could have been some other reasons that could have made him to just abandon, maybe things were tough for him and he couldn't cope with the situation but to me it just doesn't give him an excuse. I know that condition were hard ; being black but I think I don't excuse him for abandoning us with my mother who was unemployed at the time when he left us. Ja, when he left I was eight months and I was the last one and my mother was not employed at all.

Q: Did you in one way or another classify your father with what now you'd call political problems?

A: I think if ever I have to look at it in a political way I would actually be lying because I don't think he has an excuse. My mother was just a victim of being black and she also suffered the same that he also was suffering. But, she never said that alright, I am going to abandon these kids because things are tough I am black and I am just going and then these kids will see to finish. She just felt that she needs to suffer with us, she brought us up into this world and she has to see to it that we are brought up despite the hardships.

Q: The point why I raise this question is because you say that by 1975; when you were starting to understand the hardships that you had to go through, you kind of began to understand why your mother had to go through this, and at the same time you say that that's where the hatred of your father developed?

A: Ja, what I am trying to explain that even there when I started to understand the political situation, even with my father was not at all linked with my political. It was just only then when I started question that, why am I not having a father, why did he leave me, you see. I started having those questions. All along I never even really realise that I don't have a father, but when I grew up and started thinking things out. I just failed to understand why he abandoned us. With my mother I could associate her with the political situation that was within the black community.

Q: In other words in 1975 you were beginning to raise questions of responsibility, you were entering maturity?

A: Ja. Then in '76, it was the students uprising and classes were disrupted, Bantu education protest and all that, and at that time also I felt that something really needs to be done with Bantu Education.

Q: In 1976, did it come to as a surprise; when June 16 came where you surprised or were you part of that action?

A: Err..., I wouldn't say that I knew that something has to be done. For instance, my small understanding of the political of the political situation never really went to as far as knowing that we can change South Africa. I knew that there was something wrong but I never actually thought that we can do something to bring about this change. It was just blind political activity not knowing whether it will bring about change or not. But it is only later in political involvement that I actually started analysing the political situation that actually mass action can bring about the government to its knees, it can make the government to understand that we..., but at that time I was just was doing it.

Q: Just to share that experience; what happened in 1976?

A: Our school never started exactly on the 16 but we joined later. Infact on the day of the 16, we were writing an afrikaans exam. We only learned later that something was being done and we joined. Then schools were disrupted and then I had to leave the country. No, I didn't leave '76. '76 then schools were disrupted and it was just one funeral after the other. Then '77 I went back to school; we wrote 1976 and then '77 I did my Form 1 the whole year, there wasn't much disruption except meeting from time to time. We used to attend those meetings. During this time I think I was in the same class with my sister, infact I didn't even mention the part with my sister. From Sub- A one of the tricks that my mother used of actually ensuring that we got to school

at the same year; that she had to say that we were twins because she didn't have somebody to look after me on the year that my sister was supposed to start schooling. She was working and she didn't have somebody to look after me on the year that my sister was supposed to start schooling she didn't have a person to look after me and she took me to school and at the school they said I am still under age. Then she had to say I am a twin. We were twins. So from Sub-A right up to Standard Six we were twins at school, so we were doing the same class right through uptill.

Q: Where you of the same height or....?

A: Err..., I am taller I think it was convincing because the age gap is one year really. So it was easy to say we were twins because the age gap is one so we were classified as twins, even in our the baptism certificate because " angithi when my mother agreed that we were going to be catholic we had to be baptised, so we were baptised as twins. She conveniently said that my birth certificate was lost so she produced one and we were baptised as twins, so we did the same class right through uptill Form I even with err.. our political development I think we developed more or less on the same level. I happened to have been very close; we were more or less friends and we were discussing some of the political things, even when we were upset about something at home we would discuss it. So even at school during the uprising it was the same with my sister and '77 we went to do Form II together, Mosi High also. '78 I left the country.

Q: Why?

A: Err..., '78 I think I managed, I think I had friends, some of the friends, we decided that we now wanted to leave the country because after '76, the whole of '77; the school was there but there was so much disruption such that even when they said we had passed we thought that this was just not on. I think I was now becoming militant with the shootings that were going on, and I thought that I mean I can also be a victim, I can be killed anytime and I want to leave the country, and we left the country.

Q: With whom?

A: With my friend.

Q: Now this time, was it a real friend or was this your sister?

A: No, not my sister but a friend. So I didn't leave with my sister, so some people were wondering how did I leave my sister behind?

Q: But how?

A: Ja, we had our own different interest so...

Q: She didn't support the idea of leaving the country?

A: No, not so much supporting but I think at that time she was madly in love with somebody else. She wanted to leave but she was torn inbetween that she didn't want to leave this other one and she also wants to leave, and then I just decided no, I am leaving, I had no tale behind me, I just wanted to leave at that time. I didn't want to miss a chance. So I left.

Q: How?

A: Illegally. I didn't tell my mother. I told my mother through the phone that I have decided to go to school, so I left the country. So I phoned my mother when I was already in Swaziland. I told that I have left the country and I told her that I have already joined the ANC; that I am now going to study and that I am going to be with the ANC.

Q: I am interested in her reaction?

A: She was very upset but at the same time she said anyhow

because there is no schooling I am not going to object. And besides, I don't think it could have been very easy for her to just say you took a wrong decision. I mean she contributed in politicising me. Most of the things, I mean we were discussing with her. Sometimes she would say that if ever this boers could give blacks power and things maybe would be much easier.

Q: Are saying that if she knew the possibilities of you joining the ANC she could have suggested that before you?

A: Ja I am sure she could have said ah! you can go, but she didn't know much also about the ANC so she only learned much later about the ANC. Then I joined the ANC then my exile life started.

Q: You are talking about ...?

A: 1978, the beginning, March. In '78 then I took a decision, I think I was already in Maputo. We were actually given two choices that you either go to school or you go to the army or whatever thing you want. But I think I was very militant to even think of going to school at that time. It was just the question of saying, if you go to school it might be a bit difficult for you to come back and bring about change. I wanted that change now and within the army there was "amascholarships" for the army but they were not as free as in the ; with the students. You see for instance within the army there was the situation where you would take what you are offered. It is under the discipline of the army. You were told that you were good at this you have to go and do this, even if you wanted nursing, if ever they choose you to go and do politics you'd have to go and do politics. So, I decided that I want to know how to use a gun. That's one main thing that I wanted and when they told me that if you want to take the student line, you are not likely to learn the a gun then I said no, I am going this side.

Q: You and your friend?

A: Ja, we were making the same decision but I was not influenced by him.

Q: Oh! your friend was a him?

A: Ja, but not a boyfriend, just a friend. You know I am actually pointing out that it wasn't a friend; there is this whole notion that women left the country not because they wanted change, they actually were following boyfriends. And I was not following a boyfriend, please. I was myself and I went there to actually go and get what I want. So, I did my training for six months and then after my training then I was also selected for politics to go and study politics.

Q: What does that mean?

A: What it means is that after the military training, or within the training itself, you have a number of subjects such as engineering; dealing with explosives, there is fire arms, there is politics. In politics what is involved is actually discussing the politics of South Africa; the whole history of South Africa and a bit of international politics, international revolutionary movements and struggles of other countries, so it's also included in the training; military training.

Q: So that is not an option?

A: No, with the first six months you do all the subject. When you complete the course and they have exams for these various subjects that we were doing. So, depending I think from the results then they decide that we want to you to specialise in artillery, we want you to go and do more on politics. So, I was elected after

the six months course to go and do politics course. So I went for a politics course and..., ja for a year, at the soviet union; 1979. I think it was a year and a few months. I did six months '78 then I left towards the end of '78, that was December. Then we went the whole of '79 and I came back in 1980.

Q: So you went alone?

A: No, we were a group, actually they select a group. Then I came back in 1980 in Luanda. I did my training in Luanda.

Q: Coming back from the political school, were you qualified?

A: Ja, well I did the course that I had gone to do.

Q: What did you get; a diploma?

A: Mmmm! I think it's a diploma because it's a one year's course; a diploma in political science.

Q: The reason why I ask is whether you were able to continue with the course?

A: No, I didn't but I could, because you can actually go and specialise. What we did is the national liberation movements, what are they, and we did a bit of philosophy and introduction I think of philosophy not much, then we did eh...I think there four main courses that we did. Then we came back. So you can actually take that course further, then you go and specialise and get a degree.

Q: Before you came back, how were you treated in the Soviet Union?

A: You see in the Soviet Union they have this school which I think the government actually is assisting in the training of, whatever students coming from different countries. So in that school there were quite a number of students from Nigeria, students from Uganda, students from Chile, students from Afghanistan, Palestine, so it was a big school but for foreigners.

Q: For an example could you find a student who came there sent by the South African Government?

A: No, no, there was no student.

Q: How would they safeguard that?

A: There wasn't any student, what I think they do is; they negotiate with the countries. So, when you go there you go when the government of the Soviet Union has negotiated with that particular country; that we can train your student on this field, you can bring so many students, we can train them. So with us they discuss with the leadership; ANC that we can sponsor for so many students if you want for this particular course.

Q: How was it like when you were identified as a South African, did it make any difference?

A: It was interesting because most of the times we were sharing experiences like for instance we as a group we were arranged to have meetings with other groups from other countries to tell us what their country is like, their experiences and we also tell them our experiences in South Africa. For instance some of the students didn't even know what apartheid is, so we had this interaction meetings with other groups telling them what is apartheid, why are we there, why have we been sent by the ANC, what we are trying to do in South Africa to bring about change.

Q: So, you could openly state that you were sent by; you were members of the ANC?

A: Ja we did actually state that. Infact it was interesting to even know that some of the students didn't even know where South Africa was. They would actually ask where about in the map is

South Africa. So, there are some people who were that ignorant when it comes to that.

Q: Did you get a kind of a moral support, where people who were with you at that course, were they kind of imply the attitude that if they had the power they would be there to give you a hand in your struggle, did you get that general feeling?

A: A lot, particularly the students from Palestine, they kept saying, no if you are really fighting you can call us, we can come and fight with you and, the other militant ones was Lybia, they said: "if you really want us we can go and fight the boers we are not scared of them. So, we were getting a lot of sympathy from other students.

Q: How did that kind of sympathy affect you as an individual?

A: You actually it makes you seriously think of how serious our situation is and you even feel proud that I am actually doing something. If ever you can actually involve other people from other countries who are even prepared to bring about change you actually feel more determined that I have to do something; if so many people feel that we must do something it means we were right. Even if sometimes you were doubting whether is it correct, are we likely to win over; because sometimes you get those questions particularly when the boers attack us and then you'd say: "God I wonder if we are really going to bring about change." But we you get so many people around you saying you must, we will support you, the world is behind you, you really have to try hard.

Q: So following the six months training, the one year was to strengthen you in addition to the physical training?

A: Ja. But I think the other thing that even made me strong; I think I should mention it, I think is the exile life itself. It was n't easy, it was very very tough. I mean when I left I was seventien and I found myself on my own having to stand by myself and having to stand by what I said I'll be leaving to fight for this, and when things got tough; there was malaria, I thought got why should I go through all this it means I must really get what I am looking for.

Q: So you came to a point where you came to ask questions like those, what that means is self criticism of some sort?

A: Ja. I think I must just confess, it used to get that tough that I started asking: "God, was this the right decision that I took."

Q: Do you have specific moments where such thoughts or question would come?

A: You see in Swaziland, ja well I was beginning to feel nostalgic but well..., the very first week I must be honest, I started saying: "Jesus no now I am missing home there was no mother, I was just by myself, nothing more. And then I went to Maputo but well it wasn't bad because all of you are just at that time you're still fresh and everyone is saying ey! no I am missing my mother, I am missing my sisters but well forward ever. But when we got to Luanda, God, Aey! Aey! ja! the training, now you start saying this looks like male's job, Jesus this bussiness nonono it's tough. I mean being a woman and you have to deal with err... running with men and mountains and shooting with them and all that, it was tough.

Q: Did you have a kind of a sexist environment...?

A: Ja, a lot. Infact we discouraged it but it looks like men were saying, because you want to run with us for what ever, and they