

1 **“RECORDING THE ANTI-APARTHEID STRUGGLE IN**
2 **KWAZULU-NATAL”**
3 **ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF THE ALAN PATON CENTRE,**
4 **UNIVERSITY OF NATAL, PIETERMARITZBURG.**

5 **99APB6**

6 **INTERVIEW WITH FATIMA MEER**
7 **CONDUCTED BY RUTH LUNDIE, JABULANI SITHOLE**
8 **AND JEWEL KOOPMAN ON 25 NOVEMBER 1999 IN DURBAN**

9
10 **(‘M’ shall signify the interviewee and ‘L’ the first interviewer,**
11 **‘S’ the second interviewer and ‘K’ the third interviewer.)**

12
13 M: ...famous quote of the ...Nelson was a significant influence on Ismail because at that point
14 in his life he was very much an Africanist. Well organised, they had refused to
15 participate in the anti-pass campaign. They criticized it, they said it was not organised by
16 Africans and therefore they could not participate in it. They were not Africanist at that
17 point, so Ismail influenced him in that - his orientation towards non-Africans and towards
18 a more holistic political approach of South Africans. You know, developed as a result of
19 this friendship. Now I remember that in 1950 I won't be definite about the dates but I
20 think it was in 1950, that the ANC called for a national one-day strike and Ismail and
21 Nelson - now we were living in Pinetown - even during the 1946 Passive Resistance
22 Campaign, our house being large and my family being very hospitable, had become a
23 kind of halfway house for resisters who had come from the Transvaal and they would
24 come and they would refresh themselves there - put up for the night and then go into
25 town. Now during that organisation, Nelson came with his wife, to organise the - that - ?
26 as we would call it in the Kerkundia? Idiom. The one-day strike. They came to Pinetown
27 and that's when I met Nelson for the first time. After that, you know there was a quite a ?
28 Yes..

- 1
2 L: When you came out of this first banning, you've started FEDSAW? Now what else.
3
4 M: FEDSAW, but before it started, FEDSAW, before FEDSAW, we started a womens
5 organisations. You see I had very good friends in the ANC Womens League and the one
6 woman who was outstanding was Bertha Mkhize. I don't know whether you know her?
7 You know of her?
8
9 S: Yes, I know her.
10
11 M: Bertha Mkhize was a tailor and she used to run a little tailor shop in the Mateng - you
12 know the mateng?
13
14 S: Mateng, yes. (Both interviewers together).
15
16 L: Yes..
17
18 M: But Mateng? Was a ...
19
20 L: You mean Retief Street 'Maritzburg'?
21
22 M: No, no, Durban.
23
24 S: No in Durban (this said by the second interviewer).
25
26 M: Durban. Matene, you know. We used to - as a child, I used to take a short cut through the
27 Mateng - and that matene was a totally strange land. (There is a chatter in the
28 background, the tape is switched off). Matene used to be an exciting, a bit strange you
29 know, and to some extent, frightening, because you entered a totally new culture when
30 you entered that matene and the end of it, where all the men who sat and drank their beer
31 - but before you got to the men who drank their beer, you passed through strings and
32 medicines and you know - that whole herbal culture - African herbal culture. Anyway,
33 she had a tailor shop in this matene - later on I used to go and meet her there quite often.
34 After the Durban Riots we decided that we had to work to bring Indians and Africans
35 together. So we formed what we called the Durban and District Womens League, and she
36 was a President, I was the Secretary, and we worked in Nkomkobaan? Because that was
37 the worst hit area and there was a lot of poverty and shacks and so on and so forth. And
38 we got canvassed money from the Indian bus owners and whoever and we used to milk,
39 gathered the children together. we ran a creche - a sort of a creche. Kindergarten School,
40 and they came because of the milk, then we used to distribute, give them milk in the
41 morning. I think this is one of the reasons why I was banned, apart from the fact that I

- 1 was so active on the NP Group Areas Platform..
2
3 L: Yes, but it was this close association with the Africans, ja.
4
5 M: With the Africans you see.
6
7 L: But you see that's highly dangerous.
8
9 M: Very dangerous. So this was the thing and I was banned for that reason. So you know
10 FEDSOC came after that, and we formed FEDSOC.. Helen Joseph was a very moving..
11
12 L: She was around that time? I'm sure.
13
14 M: She was a very moving figure, she actually came to canvass Natal to be represented at the
15 first FEDSAW meeting. And we went in one taxi - in those days, you know - transport
16 was a big thing and my word there was Bertha Mkhize, who was heavy weight, there was
17 Ruth Shabalala? - another heavyweight, there was Ellen Kuzwayo, another heavyweight
18 and there were three Indian women - I was quite small and slim in those days and two
19 other women - we were not heavyweights - there were the six of us going in a group to
20 Natal.
21
22 L: Of course Helen was in Durban - I mean she was liv- married and living in Durban was
23 she - or was sbe still in Johannesburg?
24
25 M: No. she was in Johannesburg.
26
27 L: I think the split up was around??
28
29 M: She came from Natal to organise, yes. It was a very exciting founding meeting that we
30 had at that first FEDSAW meeting.
31
32 L: She said to me - the 50s - they were good protesting years.
33
34 M: Yes that's true.
35
36 S: And then FEDSAW was then responsible for that march in August - was it in '56 or '57 -
37 the first march to Pretoria.
38
39 M: FEDSAW never had a membership, FEDSAW was a federation, FEDSAW had no
40 capacity to reach out to any woman down there on the ground, it relied on the ANC
41 Women's League basically. So although in history it goes down as a FEDSAW march, it
42 was an ANC Women's League march in reality. Without that ANC Women's League
43 organisation of women and by that time the ANC had very strong women - strong women
44 leadership was there within the ANC.

- 1 S: But that's useful, because I remember ? saying he would like to know which of the two
2 organisations were really responsible for these things.
- 3
4 M: No, the ANC Womens League. There were all the ANC Women's League Branches that
5 came from all over, you know. FEDSAW had no branch, FEDSAW had no membership
6 whatsoever.
- 7 S: Do you happen to know of some figures - did your cell participate in that march at all?
- 8
9 M: No, I was banned by then. So did ? women from here - the other Mkhize women -
10 Florence Mkhize - she went on that march.
- 11 S: She was the only woman from Natal?
- 12
13 M: No, no no there was a busload of women - but they were intercepted. But I think they
14 reached the march eventually.
- 15
16 L: But they had - you see they'd cancelled the coaches - they had to go by train.
- 17
18 M: From Natal?
- 19
20 L: ?
- 21
22 M: I think they went by buses from Natal.
- 23
24 L: The buses, but ...
- 25
26 M: No wait, the Indian buses were a very ..
- 27
28 L: Useful?
- 29
30 M: Very important institutions - you know the Indians provided an infrastructure for the
31 liberating movement, because having been in the mercantile community, the only Black
32 community, the only disadvantaged community can be in there ? they had halls. The only
33 hall apart from an Indian hall would be the Baala centre - what do you call it? The Bantu
34 Social Centre. So we would have all our Defiance Campaign meetings in the Bantu
35 Social Centre - we would have them in the Gandhi Hall, which is in Lorne Street you see.
36 Then there were - there was a sort of an open square, a plot of land that Gandhi had
37 bought which had originally belonged to the NIC, we would have meetings there. Then
38 there was another Indian hall in Victoria Street, so you know - you had to have venues.
39 And then there was only mike service - and that was ? so you had the Indian mike service,
40 you see. And then when you went out, you had the Indian bus service - so you could get -
41 you could negotiate a cheap price - bus - to take your people across and so on. So shall

1 we call it? Is it time now...

2
3 L: We are most grateful. It's a pleasure to meet you, a real pleasure, and may you..

4
5 M: You from what department?

6 S: We didn't introduce ourselves...Yes, I'm

7

8 The tape is switched off and then starts again some time later....

9

10
11 M: Alan Paton used to be one of our speakers at practically every one of our anti-Group
12 Areas meetings and at every one he would be put last - last speaker. Because he would
13 keep the peace and resistance for the last and he objected and he said 'every time I'm put
14 last on the roster.'

15 S: That's interesting - he didn't take that as an honour?

16
17 M: No, no he didn't - he said 'Oh..'

18 S: If ? a very good speaker has been put last - you don't need another to come and spoil the
19 day. (They chuckle)

20 K: And how did the Liberal Party and Alan Paton fit into the whole resistance movement?

21
22 M: Well, the Liberal Party - there were two White Parties - that fitted into the Resistance
23 Movement - which was really a Black Resistance Movement - meaning the
24 disenfranchised - participating in it. The one was the Liberal Party and the other one was
25 the Congress of Democrats, you know rooted in left politics. And they sort of competed
26 with each other in a sense and didn't like each other very much - we got that impression.

27
28 L: In the Liberal Party, the word 'communist' was treated with absolute dread.

29
30 M: Yes, yes. Now in the beginning of course, the Liberal Party was very much related to Mrs
31 Ballinger. She was the politician - she understood politics. The other Liberals, who were
32 academics, who came along, were good-hearted souls - they didn't understand politics.
33 At the first meeting in Durban, Leo Kuper was presiding if I remember correctly and
34 somebody asked, from the audience, what was the attitude of the Liberal Party to the
35 franchise. Now the Liberal Party had to stick to the franchise laws - you know - that for
36 Blacks, qualified franchise, ...

37
38 L: To begin with, yes...

- 1
2 M: Yes...
3
4 L: They had a long struggle about that.
5
6 M: Yes, for what ? Now, Mrs Ballinger was the one who put the position qualified franchise
7 for Blacks - that was her position, but the Liberal Party had not crystallised any formal
8 position, so when this question was put from the audience, Leo Kuper said - 'well of
9 course, universal franchise for everybody ..' because he believed in that! That was his
10 viewpoint. After that path - after that meeting, Mrs Ballinger took him to task and you
11 said 'You know - you - that's not the position of the Liberal Party and you cannot go
12 along and create confusion by - from the chair - making that announcement.'
13
14 L: (They speak at once)... wasn't ? adopted the universal approach.
15
16 M: Yes, it wasn't long before you adopted universal franchise, but then of course, the, within
17 the Liberal Party divisions took place because there were those who wanted to go in and
18 use what do they call themselves - uh? Some organisation - hut they wanted to use - they
19 wanted to sabotage and to use..
20
21 L: ARM?
22
23 M: ARM!
24
25 L: Yes, but you see that nearly split the party up ...That's when I went to the meeting in
26 Jo'burg - it was the young people ...and half of the older members of the Party wanted to
27 kick them out and the rest of us didn't want that at all - we wanted the opposite.
28
29 M: Yes, so that is where the division came within the Party.
30
31 L: Yes it did, a very strong and passionate one.
32
33 M: But you see the Liberal Party - I'm not talking about the more left-wing ones - left-wing
34 part of it - they played a very important role in supporting, in bringing in Christian
35 support for the Treason trial later on. But for the Resistance Campaign and they brought
36 in finances - they brought in money.
37
38 L: But we never went to Kliptown because the communists would be there and I've always
39 regretted that vision...
40
41 M: There was a lot of discussion on that one and you should really get my husband, you
42 know he's far better on this because he was more into it - even on Alan Paton - he will be
43 able to tell you a great deal more here - and all those politics, the Non-European Unity

- 1 Movement politics and all - because I was then a schoolgirl - I wasn't involved. He was.
2 So you'll get a great deal more from him and you should talk to him.
- 3 S: Ja, in fact we had intended to do that but then we were told by Narend Singh that he had
4 conducted so many interviews and he didn't...
5
- 6 M: Narend Singh has conducted a lot of interviews, but then your interest may be different.
7 How much he has said about Alan Paton there I don't know. I know that Alan Paton was
8 dubious about the ANC and he came - he came to our house in Umgeni Road to speak to
9 my husband, to clear his mind whether this was something that he could support, or
10 couldn't support, you know. And then he left and he wrote an article in which he started
11 talking about the Liberal Capital L and Liberal with small L. But he wrote an article after
12 that and he think he mentions my husband in that article...and he said 'Well he recognises
13 him as a Liberal.' So you know he became very reconciled and then of course his
14 relationship with Chief Luthuli - began at about that same time.
- 15 K: And do you know Chief Luthuli quite well as well?
16
- 17 M: Ja. So it's really very much the perspectives, you know..
- 18 K: How is your husband's health - is he up to having an interview?
19
- 20 M: Ja, mends very much nicely - but you have to ask him. He mainly does interviews, which
21 haven't yet ended, it's audio-visual, you know. They still have to edit and ..
- 22 K: Is it for a TV programme, or what are the interviews for?
23
- 24 L: Or for sale? I mean you can sell to ..
25
- 26 M: No, it's just to record, it's for exactly the same purpose that you are doing. It's just for
27 the purpose
28
- 29 L: Well, I think this is a vital purpose, really.
- 30 K: And who is going to hold those records and ??
31
- 32 M: Narend Singh will.
- 33 K: He hold them personally - do you think he will have them available to organisations that -
34 such as ours - to buy them?
35
- 36 M: Yes, I'm sure. I will talk to him in any case. I mean it's not his property, after all it is
37 record purposes, to benefit everybody.
- 38 S: I'm sure the department would really appreciate that - then it can be used in the

1 department - the centres or what...

2

3 M: But he'll edit it and do a good job I'm sure. (They all agree). Okay.

4