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**“RECORDING THE ANTI-APARTHEID STRUGGLE IN  
KWAZULU-NATAL”**

**ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF THE ALAN PATON CENTRE,  
UNIVERSITY OF NATAL, PIETERMARITZBURG.**

**99APB6**

**SECOND INTERVIEW WITH FATIMA MEER (M)  
CONDUCTED BY RUTH LUNDIE (L), JABULANI SITHOLE (S)  
AND JEWEL KOOPMAN (K) ON 26 NOVEMBER 1999  
AT PROF. MEER'S HOME IN DURBAN**

Same tape as 1<sup>st</sup> interview. The tape is switched off again - and then resumes as detailed below)

L: This is a recording of the second session with Professor Fatima Meer in Sydenham Road, Durban, on Friday, the 26<sup>th</sup> of November, 1999.

S: Professor Meer, I understand that there were bus boycotts in the 1950s; now what has always puzzled us is that this seems to have been very successful organisation in the Transvaal and the Eastern Cape, but not so much in Natal, can you perhaps enlighten us?

M: The buses were boycotted by the African commuters - well you know the Transvaal, that was the position. If the transport in Natal, particularly in Durban - until - the Durban Corporation didn't handle it - it didn't handle transport for the Black people - for the Indians or Africans or Coloureds and this was provided by the Indian bus owners and the Indian bus owners, even when the Corporation did provide buses on any route - there were no buses that went to the townships - that was provided by the Corporation. And when there were buses on any route provided by the Corporation, they were about three or four times more expensive than the Indian buses. So Indian buses were very cheap, they were convenient and in one way they were the only people who were providing the buses. Now in Natal I don't think there was - there was a bus boycott - then it would be against the Indian buses and there was a period when the Africans felt that they wanted to run their own buses to the townships so that was the only tension - but it didn't last long

1 because the Africans were not particularly - were not up to the stage where they could  
2 have provided their own buses. (The telephone rings and the tape is switched off before  
3 resuming). They were charging tickety a trip.

4 S: Ja, because ? had mentioned this. Now the moment you mentioned - I'm saying to  
5 myself 'Wait a minute - why didn't someone mention this, or write somewhere about it?'  
6 Because it has always struck us as a sort of deeper thing - ? useful remark?

7  
8 M: I think they did even, you know my recollection vaguely is that they did even try and put  
9 together some company and they failed and in any case it would have been very difficult  
10 to match the Indian price.

11 S: But then of course, ja, because quite a number of companies in Durban - you needed - it  
12 makes a lot of sense to go to town, even today. Durban has buses.

13  
14 M: Ja, you have the Corporation buses. You still find that the Indian buses are much cheaper  
15 - this is still the position. Here for instance they charge one rand to town on an Indian  
16 bus - now can you get anything cheaper than that - one rand per trip - you see - that is still  
17 the position here - anything else it costs very much more. And the other thing about the  
18 Indians - Indian bus drivers - they would stop anywhere - you know - to drop you - or  
19 pick you up - you know. Unlike the Corporation buses that have their particular bus  
20 stops and that was the only place where you could take a bus or get off from the bus.

21  
22 L: No, no I was going to - you and Leo Kuper seems to have enjoyed some sort of a  
23 discussion about the bus workout in the Transvaal as a political force or otherwise.

24  
25 M: We had discussed?

26  
27 L: Yes..

28  
29 M: Where did you pick that one?

30  
31 L: Tom Lodge.

32  
33 M: What does he say, I'm trying to remember..

34  
35 L: He says you and Leo Kuper had a dialectical approach, you were saying that these things  
36 were being discontented about a particular issue need not be necessarily a strong political  
37 force towards liberation - it could only be a ? grumble - do you see? And if their case  
38 was met then there it would rest.

39  
40 M: Ja.

41

- 1 L: Which I thought was an interesting thought on the ? ASEKOWA? Situation, yes.  
2  
3 M: Yes, ja well if you met the grievance, it's over now and you've got to think about  
4 something else.  
5  
6 L: Exactly, this was the point you made there. But we needed to go on from there I thought,  
7 into the nineteen sixties - we were heading up to Verwoerd and the takeover of power and  
8 we all protested - were stifled, it - it seemed to ...  
9  
10 M: By the government?  
11  
12 L: Yes, when you consider what we called Pondoland in those days..  
13  
14 M: A tremendous lot of protest..  
15  
16 L: What can you tell us about that aspect - did you learn anything?  
17  
18 M: 1960 was also a sort of a landmark year in the whole liberation struggle because you're  
19 looking at Sharpeville, you're looking at heightened Government activity in terms of  
20 banning orders, in terms of banishment and all that so there is very heightened activity on  
21 the one hand and following immediately on Sharpeville there were wholesale detentions  
22 in Durban, my husband and you know a whole lot of people were detained in Durban  
23 following on Sharpeville. We had a one-day strike and I was very active in organising  
24 that, we also tried to get a major one-week protest going at Phoenix. You see two things  
25 happened - they rounded up the ANC and MIC and ANC Womens' League people and  
26 imprisoned them. There were those who managed to escape imprisonment - knew that  
27 they were going to be picked up and they went into hiding. Among them was Dr Martie  
28 ? Naicker who was the President of the Indian Congress and there was J.M. Singh - who  
29 was the Secretary and then from the Congress of Democrats there was Roley Arenstein.  
30 They were all underground. Now they then got hold of me and I was their sort of  
31 overground contact and my function was to carry out certain plans of action during this  
32 period. We are looking at the period of emergency - 1960 was a period of emergency.  
33 The one thing I was asked for them to do was to raise money. So I, together with a group  
34 of women, went around raising money - the other thing that they wanted done was - and  
35 this was really Roley Arenstein's brainwave, that he wanted us to organise a week-long  
36 demonstration at Phoenix which was historically linked with Gandhi - where Mrs Soshile  
37 Gandhi - his daughter-in-law was still running the printing press and the paper. So I had

1 to go and speak to her and ask her to spearhead the whole thing by going into a one week  
2 fast. So they started that campaign, with a one-week fast - to which she committed  
3 herself and a lot of others fasted with her - not for one week. But we fasted during that  
4 period for a whole day. But we also organised for ANC women and the NIC Women to  
5 go and stay there at the Gandhi settlement and of course the ANC Women are great -  
6 great prayers, they prayed to God like nobody can pray to God. Not particularly ANC  
7 women. African women in general, they are great prayers. And I got involved in this  
8 prayer session and the whole night they used to fight with God you know - 'Why are you  
9 not giving us freedom?' 'Why are you treating us so badly?' 'Why are we starving?' 'Why  
10 haven't we got schooling?' 'Why are you favouring the White people?' 'Why are you  
11 punishing the Black people, what have we done to you?' And you know they would say  
12 to God 'You've got to stop all this - we're not going to tolerate it any more.' But in great  
13 anger and in great passion - so that is one thing I remember during that period. We - Mrs  
14 Gandhi then broke her fast and I can't remember what happened after that.

15  
16 L: But it's interesting that they did.

17  
18 M: Yes, and people all there - Roley Arenstein - before the event, was totally running away  
19 with his imagination - he was telling me 'There will be thousands of people who will  
20 come to Phoenix, you will need to put on hundreds of toilets you know - there were all  
21 these kinds of plans going on - of course we didn't have the thousands, but it was  
22 nonetheless, it was a good unifying situation that we put together. Then of course in  
23 1960 I was very busy organising for the prisoners. We had a whole lot of prisoners in the  
24 Durban Central Jail and my function was to see they allowed food to come in from  
25 outside if it was canned or if it came from a restaurant, but not private houses. Well we  
26 organised very successfully - we cooked all the foods at home - the families of the  
27 prisoners - they cooked the food at home and then we went and made arrangements with  
28 a local restaurant to go and deliver it so it looked like it was restaurant food - so we felt  
29 happy then. The other thing we did was we organised prayers outside the prison. There  
30 was an open piece of ground, so we used to organise these prayers every Saturday. That  
31 disturbed particularly the prisoners - they were very, very upset by that and we felt very  
32 vulnerable to this kind of protest.

- 1 S: No I can imagine because they were - they were claiming that apartheid was based on  
2 Christianity and then suddenly they're using that very ? ..  
3
- 4 M: Ja, very very weird thing, ja. They felt very attacked, they felt very much under siege  
5 you know. I remember one day we - the Superintendent came up and he was so tense and  
6 his eyes were sort of wide and glaring and you could see all the tension and the fear in his  
7 face. And he said 'I'm going to call the police if you people don't move straight away  
8 and we just said 'Well you want us to move, you release our husbands and whatever ?  
9 they had locked up.
- 10 S: Now is this time when Luthuli was amongst the people who were detained?  
11
- 12 M: Yes, Luthuli was.
- 13 S: I understand there was a march which moved from this part of town - this ? on this side  
14 down to where there was ...  
15
- 16 M: To the prison, there was a march, it was led by...  
17
- 18 L: Bugwandin.  
19
- 20 M: Bugwandin - Robby Bugwandin, he led that march to the prison and that was at that time.  
21 We also marched, the women. The wives and children. There should be some nice  
22 pictures of that in the Daily News archives of the time - we marched. And our role, our  
23 plan was to march and see the Mayor - there was nothing else you could do in those days.  
24 Here on a local level and we had blackouts so we were arrested all of us and we put a  
25 tape into the cells in - near the courthouse - in Smith Street. And then they released us  
26 that night - but we were out on bail and then the next day the case was on. And this was a  
27 rather sensitive time because among the prisoners there were two White prisoners - it was  
28 Dr Haythorne - his wife was also a doctor - COD people - so perhaps you don't  
29 remember them and there was one other. I don't remember who the other White person  
30 was and we had big discussions about what to do because if we were given fines would  
31 we pay fines or would we resist and we would say - you know- we'd rather be  
32 imprisoned than pay fines. So we had a very big discussion, it was very heated and very  
33 tense. I, of course held a view that we would not pay the fines - we would rather take  
34 imprisonment. Vera Kunan ? was the other White person..  
35
- 36 L: Oh, she was on the 'Maritzburg Women's' ?..  
37

- 1 M: But Vera Kunan's ? husband wasn't - you know she came as a sympathiser and the two  
2 White women whose husbands were inside, they were adamant that it would create a very  
3 bad impression in the White mind if we women, who already had husbands in prison,  
4 now said we wouldn't pay fines and we preferred to go into prison. Because we would  
5 then be abandoning our family duties and you know..  
6  
7 L: Was that their rationale?  
8  
9 M: That was their rationale. So they thought - they argued very strongly that it would lose us  
10 public support - they were only thinking about White support which wasn't there anyway.  
11 And I was as adamant that no, and eventually of course, the women - most of them being  
12 Black and used to going to prison in any case, you know. This imprisonment meant no  
13 great hardship, but for the White women it did - it was a totally new experience for the  
14 Indian women too. But the Indian women and the African women - they voted together  
15 and they said no they wouldn't pay the fines. But after two hours of heated argument we  
16 went into court and they cautioned and discharged us!  
17  
18 L: But it was a great time for matters of principle, wasn't it.  
19  
20 M: Yes, it was a great time for matters of principle, wasn't it?.  
21  
22 L: And it was a good thing to sort out matters of principle too.  
23  
24 M: Yes, yes. Judge Shearer was our..  
25  
26 L: Ludness?  
27  
28 M: Yes, he was then an advocate and he represented us.  
29  
30 L: Oh, did he indeed?  
31  
32 M: Yes, he represented us and later when I met him somewhere at a party he said 'When I  
33 put down the important events of my life, the most important is going to be defending  
34 you women during that time.'  
35  
36 L: Good for him.  
37  
38 M: Ja. The other thing about the prisoners - there were the prisoners. My father had an  
39 enormous library of particularly detective novels so we put them into two crates,  
40 managed to get the prison to accept these so the prisoners could be happy whiling their  
41 time reading nice detective novels (they all chuckle).  
42  
43 S: ? I mean I'm still on this subject of the 1960s ? I understand that there were Cato Manor

1 riots - I am not sure whether riots is an appropriate term.

2  
3 M: That was when the women became very angry with the police who raided them for their  
4 brewing - this was a constant thing you know - the housewives. There were at that time  
5 the beer brewing became a very important political and economic issue. Because the  
6 City Councils, the local authorities, all over, monopolised the brewing and the sale of  
7 beer. And in fact it was on the beer revenue that they provided any housing for the  
8 Africans. Housing, African housing depended on the amount of beer the African  
9 consumed. The more beer he consumed the more housing he would get. Is that for us.  
10 Thanks. You want it?

11 S: Don't you want ?

12 M: Yes I do - it's disappeared.

13  
14 ?: She'll bring it back again (they seem to be eating and the conversation may be about  
15 coffee.)

16  
17 M: And African women, they brewed beer and there was also a kind of a ritual aspect to this  
18 whole brewed beer - brewing of home beer. I mean it's a very ritual experience for the  
19 African women, because she takes control of the brewing of the beer. And the men  
20 gather, true they consume the beer - but when they gather it is she who offers the beer -  
21 it's her beer and it is something that happened in the house - it is involved in the beer - it  
22 is the feeling that there is the energy and the sacred of family bonding - all this is  
23 involved, beer is not simply beer - it is more than beer. Now the women themselves, they  
24 wanted in the urban area - they wanted to carry out this tradition - not only it was a ritual  
25 experiences that they wanted to resurrect in the urban environment but there was also this  
26 question of earning money - because you sold the beer you see. The people around - and  
27 the men preferred going to a woman - so called shebeen. Shebeen is not a word invented  
28 by Africans. I don't think so - I don't know who invented the word shebeen. For them if  
29 a woman was brewing beer, people around would come there and in the urban  
30 environment they would pay for it but I don't even think there was a set sort of fee. It  
31 was a kind of a reciprocation that was made - you see that was the whole attitude in  
32 which this beer-consuming experience took place in the urban areas - it was also the  
33 women's attempt to continue their link with the rural area. In a way you would have a

1 party and then everybody would come to your house and you would slaughter a sheep  
2 also and you would drink the beer you know. It was a social experience and they were  
3 trying now to accommodate, modify the urban experience to reflect something of that  
4 rural spirituality. So here the law said they couldn't brew beer at home and worse they  
5 were subjected to beer raids. Whether the beer was brewed partly or wholly for  
6 commercial purpose or whether the beer was brewed for family ritual purpose - no  
7 distinction was made - it was the same. These - the raids would just occur and I  
8 witnessed them as a child - you know - I had a - we had a maid who worked for my  
9 mother and we were very fond of her and I can never forget that experience you know.  
10 One day when the police raided her - we respected her. we loved her. They raided her  
11 khaya as we used to call the rooms in which African maids - servants - stayed. And then  
12 they took out this four gallon paraffin tin of beer and they spilt it all and then they began  
13 slapping her and kicking her and you know - for a child - who saw this woman as an  
14 adult and somebody to be respected and somebody who looked out for you and cared for  
15 you - it was a very traumatic experience. But that is the way they used to go about doing  
16 things in those days. Not that in the ANC was still operating that kind of situation - they  
17 would be very different people - because I've had experiences of horrific behaviour on  
18 their part in Chatsworth where they evicted a poverty-stricken, unemployed, more often  
19 than not heads of family women - they go and evict them because they have not paid their  
20 rent - or are not up to date and they go with the police, they go with teargas, they go with  
21 sten guns and they go with dogs - the whole lot and we have had cases where women  
22 have actually aborted - where women have had to be moved into a mental place because  
23 of the trauma of it all - today - under the ANC dominated Metro Council, this is how they  
24 behave. And now, because I've raised the issue with them and I said that this is  
25 behaviour that is intolerable and I went and I said to their face that you behave like - you  
26 send your wolves, You don't even have the courtesy to send your own security people  
27 and this is what happens. You know what their reaction is? They will not to talk to my  
28 organisation anymore - that's all and we were to take them to court - we have taken them  
29 to court three times now and on the third occasion we have won with cost. Now after that  
30 I wrote to them again and I said 'Why go to court over this issue?' We presented them



1 with a whole document. We did a survey of these communities. we found that 70% were  
2 living below the poverty datum line - abject poverty and the housing is one room for the  
3 whole family with just a little cut-off for a toilet and a sort of a passage for a kitchen -  
4 one room, they are so poor they can't even afford to send their children to school because  
5 you've got to pay school fees, there is no free and compulsory education in this country  
6 although we say that's what the constitution says - that's where it stands. So I then  
7 wrote a very nice letter and said 'Look instead of going to court each time why don't we  
8 sit down and discuss our report?' So they took a resolution to say they will not  
9 communicate with the CCG. That's their attitude. Okay that's enough digression. But  
10 I'm so angry about it you know.

11  
12 L: But I was going to ask you about that because I have a friend called Nalini Naidoo who is  
13 a journalist and she told me that you were interested in this Chatsworth community and  
14 I've got it at the bottom of the list because I wanted to ...

15  
16 M: You see we went there during the elections because I felt very embarrassed that the  
17 Indian ward - the first election went to the Nationalist Party. And we distributed leaflets -  
18 about forty or fifty thousand leaflets, calling on the Indian people not to vote for the  
19 former oppressors. When we got to Chatsworth, the people were very very hostile and  
20 angry. We were holding meetings simultaneously and they said 'Who are our  
21 oppressors?' Our oppressors are not the DP and not the NNP that you say we wouldn't -  
22 we shouldn't vote for - our oppressors are the ANC.' So I was very shocked I was also  
23 shocked when I saw the conditions in which they were living - they were dumped there  
24 since the Group Areas Act and for thirty years they've been living under these horrific  
25 conditions so I then said to them 'Look, after the elections we will come back and we will  
26 see to your problems.' And so I'm still seeing to the problems.

27  
28 L: It seems like it.

29  
30 M: It's not easy - it's very difficult - I went there - I had to go to two communities, two  
31 meetings, the one - in each one we had organised them to set up their own committees ....

32  
33 End of this side.

34

1 This side also starts halfway through..

2  
3

4 M: ...an opinion which was actually founded by his secretary, Anglia, who got into political  
5 conflict with him and he went off with the Natal Indian Congress that Gandhi had  
6 founded and Gandhi then had to go off and found another political organisation which he  
7 called the Natal Indian Association. The two papers were rather alike in that they were  
8 printed in two languages - English and Gujarathi and probably had the same kind of  
9 political stance, but the one began to be identified as a Hindu paper - that's Gandhi's  
10 paper. And this paper was identified as a Muslim paper. My father bought it and began  
11 editing it from about 1926. I was born - well, two years later.

12 K: And, so you had a very political childhood?

13

14 M: Yes, very political because my father was very a very political commentator. And he was  
15 involved in South African politics as well as politics in India and in India, of course, that  
16 was a period where the whole anti-colonial agitation was developing. So and in South  
17 Africa there was the politics against the government as the discrimination against Indians  
18 was different from that against Africans or Coloureds and in some respects it was harsher  
19 in that the Indian was viewed by the White person as an economic competitor, whereas  
20 the Coloured and the African still have to rise and enter into competition within the  
21 Indian was already established and say mercantile community - as well as the Europeans.  
22 So they came into competition with each other and many laws were passed segregating  
23 them residentially depriving or restricting their opportunities to obtain licences for  
24 trading purposes and so on. And my father was fully involved in agitating and writing  
25 against these discriminations. He was also very much aware of discrimination against  
26 Africans and Coloureds and wrote quite vociferously on that as well. His brother, my  
27 uncle, was also very political and he went to the United Nations actually to represent the  
28 Indian people - following that Dr Kuma, of the ANC also joined him at the United  
29 Nations. So all in all it was a political family. Ja.

30 K: And your mother was she also very politically aware?

31

32 M: No, I had two mothers - my father had two wives - one was his own first cousin and my  
33 mother was actually a White woman, part Jewish I think, part Portuguese, you know - we

1 never knew anything about that part of the family so I can't really tell you the origins of  
2 that family but she lived in Kimberley and that is where my father met her and married  
3 her - both my mothers saw themselves as just housewives and nothing more than that.  
4 My father was the dominant person in the family.

5 K: So they took the traditional role - men. Okay - and your schooling?

6  
7 M: Schooling - we started off by going to the Madressa. Muslims - brought up very much in  
8 the Muslim cultural tradition. And so we went to the Madressa and you were to read the  
9 Koran, not understand it - you learnt to read and write Gujarathi and Urdu - two Indian  
10 languages, and after you completed your Madressa, which was from about five to about  
11 seven, or it may have been eight, then you went to school. In those days our parents had  
12 strong feelings about not losing their children to the European tradition and the European  
13 education systems - so they wanted to make sure that they had a grounding in the Muslim  
14 particularly the Indians. I started off with a Coloured school, which was Albert Street.  
15 We lived in a semi-detached house in Convent Lane - which is just behind West Street -  
16 all the smart shops - they faced West Street and you went shopping in West Street, but all  
17 the warehouses of those shops were in Convent Lane - so there was quite a lot of fun  
18 because you could pick up all kinds of things in those warehouses you know that the  
19 shopkeepers were throwing away. We grew up playing in huge boxes, you know, that  
20 were sort of turfed out of the warehouses, but - how did I get to Convent - oh yes, school,  
21 we lived in this semi-detached cottage in Convent Lane and our immediate neighbours -  
22 the second house of the house was a Malay family. Malays were regarded as Coloureds.  
23 So they went to the Coloured school in David? Street which was walking distance - so  
24 that family enrolled me in the Coloured school. In a sense I was in the right place because  
25 I was Coloured.

26  
27 L: You must deal with this very logically (they all chuckle).

28  
29 M: Then of course we saw ourselves as Indians and as Muslims so my primary education  
30 was in this Coloured school, but the most important influence was my teacher in Standard  
31 One, Miss Norman. Who - the first piece of literature that I was introduced to was by  
32 Miss Norman who used to read us every morning passages from 'Little Women'.

33 K: Oh really?  
34

- 1 M: And then of course she made us act Little Women out and things like that and she was  
 2 also a keen gardener so she gave all of us pupils little pieces of land - literally that size to  
 3 do gardening in - in that school which was also in the heart of the city - Albert Street,  
 4 Queens Street - it's you know right in the heart of the city - so that was where my early  
 5 education was. I was there up to Standard Four. The first song I learnt to sing was  
 6 'Onward Christian Soldiers.' And 'The Babe in the Manger.' Because it was all very  
 7 Christian, you know but it was very nice and we enjoyed it all very thoroughly. Then we  
 8 moved house - when you move house, you also move school. So my parents bought their  
 9 first house - which was in Ritson Road - which is near the Botanic Gardens and so I  
 10 started going to a school - which later became the Durban - it was then called Dartnell  
 11 Crescent Girls' School. It was the first school for Indian girls founded in the country and  
 12 it was founded by Lady Kumwa Maharaj Singh, who was the wife of the Indian ..  
 13  
 14 L: High Commission?  
 15  
 16 M: ...High Commissioner at the time - he used to be called Aid-in General. And she became  
 17 very active - Indian girls didn't go to school at all so she became very active in promoting  
 18 the schooling and education of Indian girls and this school was founded - it later became  
 19 the Durban Girls High School. So I started off at Dartnell Crescent in Standard Four and  
 20 then I just transferred to the Indian Girls High School later on.  
 21  
 22 L: Okay, I would like to - I see on my notes that you protested in 1946, as a schoolgirl in the  
 23 Passive Resistance Campaign. Now this Passive Resistance honourably ? from India - I  
 24 mean this is where it was born - wasn't it? And this..  
 25  
 26 M: No, it was actually born in South Africa.  
 27  
 28 L: Was it - I thought..  
 29  
 30 M: Yes, the first Passive resistance ever - the Gandhian one - because Gandhi himself learnt  
 31 his passive resistance from the suffrage, the movement in London. He went there on  
 32 deputations and he became very involved - with all the leaders of the suffragette  
 33 movement in London. But of course he developed it very differently because he gave it  
 34 the philosophical grounding in religion, in - well basically in religion. He was universal  
 35 on his approach to religion. But the word Satyagraha, which means striving for truth is, I  
 36 would think, a Sanskrit word. So the first Passive Resistance Campaign was in 1909,

1 1908/1909 about that period and it was enacted in Transvaal. It was after the Anglo-Boer  
2 War, so we can date it you know exactly. What happened was that during the War, a lot  
3 of the Indian traders in the Transvaal, and Indian families that had settled there - they left  
4 the Transvaal and came into Natal. After the War they returned and when they returned  
5 the new British Government which strangely enough had given one of the reasons for  
6 waging that Anglo-Boer War on Kruger, was his bad treatment of Indians, now they  
7 treated Indians even worse and they wouldn't allow them to return to their house, to their  
8 homes, and businesses in the Transvaal. And said they had no record and therefore they  
9 were illegal and therefore they had to now re-register and they imposed the pass on the  
10 Indians - where they had to - they could sign, they could sign, but Indians were not  
11 literate in English in those days so they had to give their handprints and this of course  
12 applied to children from the age of about eight; included women and the Indian men.  
13 This is a male chauvinistic society which protects its women so it was the Indian men  
14 who were absolutely outraged at this frontation of the women. The women should be  
15 required to give these fingerprints you know - they took great umbrage at that and  
16 therefore they waged passive resistance and they started going to prison - none of them  
17 actually - almost the entire population, Indian population of the Transvaal resisted, did  
18 not carry a register and take out these passes and they would be imprisoned - arrested and  
19 imprisoned all the time. The whole idea was, you came from Natal and when you  
20 crossed the barrier at Volksrust, you already had breached a law and so you were -  
21 because you didn't have your pass and so you were then imprisoned.

22  
23 L: But you were very advanced at the age of fourteen, joining a passive resistance campaign.

24  
25 M: Ja, that one was later in 1946..

26  
27 L: That was just post war.

28  
29 M: Hey?

30  
31 L: It was just after the War.

32  
33 M: The Second World War? Ja, the Second World War. Sorry, First World War.

34  
35 L: No, second.

36  
37 M: Ja, ja. Second World War. That was just after the Second World War. In 1946 you see -  
38 from the time of Gandhi onwards, the South African Government had to tried to deal with

1 Indians who intruded into what they called White areas, residentially, business purposes,  
2 whatever, and eventually with the coming in of the government of General Smuts, after  
3 Botha and company, after the Afrikaners, it's always the English who seem to be most  
4 upset with the Indians. The Smuts Government, after the War passed this Act - it was the  
5 First Indian Land Act - first Act against the Indian. It prohibited them - well, it confined  
6 them to certain restricted areas and there was expropriation of property and so on - so that  
7 happened. Now the house that my father had bought, in - the first house that my father -  
8 our first family house - that also was threatened and at that point we moved to Pinetown  
9 and we began living in Pinetown for a while.

10  
11 L: But it was a direct threat to your way of life, or could have been if you hadn't made the  
12 move - so you would have been in the middle of it as a schoolgirl.

13  
14 L: Ja, we were in the middle of it as a schoolgirl, we were very much aware of what was  
15 going on. In India, the Indian National Congress and Gandhi, who now was in India and  
16 Nuru and figures like Soroydi Naidoo were fighting the British Government and Passive  
17 Resistance was going on there now from South Africa, passive resistance to India. So  
18 this passive resistance was going on in India and as a schoolgirl I was very supportive  
19 and I was inspired by the Indian Passive Resistance Movement. Then when this Act was  
20 passed against Indians in South Africa, the Indian, the Natal Indian Congress organised  
21 the 1946 Passive Resistance Campaign and my mothers and everybody became involved  
22 in it so at school I formed a Committee and we had a school student group that became  
23 involved in it - raising funds - going to prisons, speaking at mass meetings. My first  
24 mass meeting was at what we then called Red Square, but now it is - I think it is called  
25 the Nichols, Nichol Square Garage. Near the square, Nichol's Square, is it called  
26 Nichol's Square. At the garage, we spoke there. But those were hectic, very sort of  
27 exciting days.

28  
29 L: And the men were coming back from the War, having been racially mixed and lived  
30 overseas,...about..

31  
32 M: Oh, not very many Indians went to War.

33  
34 L: Did they not?

35  
36 M: No, really.  
37

- 1 L: Because there was a journal produced called *Fighting Talk*.  
2  
3 M: That was in Johannesburg, that was produced by the ... well. Fighting Talk was actually  
4 produced by the Congress of Democrats which was a White organisation, rooted in the  
5 Communist Party which was very much White-headed at the time - though the vast body  
6 of the membership was African, the leadership was very much White. Now the  
7 Communist Party was banned and the Communist Party then formed the Congress of  
8 Democrats and *Fighting Talk* was a journal which was edited by Ruth First, and that  
9 came out of that political journal. And it - the White - the White returned soldiers of War  
10 - from there they emerged this very liberal group.  
11  
12 L: Yes, and a mixed group - it sounded - I've read all the issues I could get at the Library,  
13 and it sounded a very - full of camaraderie and group, group of young men.  
14  
15 M: Yes, and women too, I think (they speak at once) women too would be there. They  
16 would be involved - but that was not basically returned soldiers of War.  
17  
18 L: I thought it was..  
19  
20 M: No, it wasn't - it reflected the emergent anti-apartheid movement - at that point it was not  
21 an anti-apartheid movement - but it was certainly an anti-racist movement. You had a  
22 formation called the Non-European United Front and basically made up of - there was not  
23 much White representation, but there was African, Coloured and Indian representation.  
24  
25 L: Kader Hassim?  
26  
27 M: Kader Hassim. No, that's Kader Hassim - that's different again.  
28  
29 L: Oh, is it?  
30  
31 M: That's the Non-European Unity Movement.  
32  
33 L: Oh yes, yes.  
34  
35 M: Which is a Trotskyite - which is Trotskyite centred as against the other radical movement  
36 in the country which was Lenin in orientation. That Communist Party is very, very  
37 interesting - it goes back - it's the Communist Party, the Leninist Communist Party is the  
38 first non-racial political movement in the country. The African National Congress was an  
39 Africanist movement - you had to be an African to belong to it. The Natal Indian  
40 Congress was essentially an Indian organisation. The Natal Indian Congress pre-dates  
41 the ANC. So that was essentially an Indian organisation. But the Communist Party at

1 that point had non-racial, or inter-racial membership and Whites, and Blacks were  
2 involved in that. And you remember Clement Kadalie?

3  
4 L: Yes.

5  
6 M: Well, that whole ICU movement of Clement Kadalie was heavily supported by the  
7 Communist Party and later on of course there were - this often happens - ?slit chance that  
8 were - there's too much communist influence, there's too much White influence, you  
9 know and there was a tension. But the ICU, owes its strength, very much, to the  
10 Communist party - so it's that stream and even Kadalie himself comes from the Cape but  
11 here in Natal, it's A.W.D. Champion who becomes the Chief sort of leader - the most  
12 popular leader and the following of the ICU came from the Transvaal and from Natal  
13 whereas Kader Hassim's Non-European Unity Movement was very much Cape centred  
14 and it remained very much Cape centred, and highly intellectualized.

15  
16 L: A very particular body, I might say.

17  
18 M: Yes. It was very - highly intellectualized. And not really going into the masses. Very  
19 academic. But this other movement, the Non-European Unity Movement - that you could  
20 say that movement progressed into later on, the ANC. And so on - the broader, the  
21 broader sort of front against apartheid is rooted in that Non-European Unity Movement.  
22 It was also intellectual, students - very much students, and reaching out to understand the  
23 political philosophies of the time and you found - they formed a group called the Liberal  
24 Study Group and from that Liberal Study Group they developed a group of young men  
25 who then took over the leadership of the Natal Indian Congress and then it was the Natal  
26 Indian Congress worked very closely with the African National Congress. So that's the  
27 movement that happens there.

28  
29 L: Yes, yes, yes.

30 S: And this will be a wonderful relationship in the 1950s, I guess?

31  
32 L: Earlier.

33 S: Earlier than that.

34  
35 M: Well, yes 19, no you're right, 19 - it really matures in the 1950s.

36  
37 L: It is quite close to the 1950s anyhow, '46 to '50 is not long.

38  
39 M: Ja, but the Liberal Study Group is about the 1930s - it starts as - in the 1930s. The Unity



- 1 Movement or ? Non-European United Front..  
2  
3 K: Yes.  
4  
5 M: You know Cissy Boulle? From the Cape?  
6  
7 L: Yes.  
8  
9 M: She was very prominent in - you see - now that would be late 1930s, 1940s you will have  
10 that formation. Ja.  
11 K: May I go back to your university days and ask - after school you went to Natal  
12 University, did you?  
13  
14 M: After school I went to Wits - for one year. At Wits I actually joined the Non-European  
15 Unity Movement, that was my first sort of ...  
16  
17 L: No, you joined the - you joined the NEUM?  
18  
19 M: That's right, and that's..  
20  
21 L: Oh you did?  
22  
23 M: Ja.  
24  
25 L: Now, when you talk about the Non-European United Front..  
26  
27 M: No, I never do in my memory..?  
28  
29 L: No, you've never joined that? No.  
30  
31 M: The first political movement I joined was the Non-European Unity Movement. At Wits  
32 and there was a very brilliant young lecturer who was a statistician, his name will occur  
33 to me but I can't just think of it straight away. He was a great influence, the other great  
34 influence was Harold Wolpe.  
35  
36 L: Oh, yes, yes..  
37  
38 M: He was, and Harold Wolpe was not in the Non-European Unity Movement, he was ANC,  
39 but he was also an influence. This NEUM influence was quite strong in the first political  
40 action that I took, which was organising for the Non-European Unity Movement, in the  
41 Cape. They had begun now segregating Coloureds on the buses and there was a great  
42 deal of protest on that issue and the Non-European Unity Movement took the leading role  
43 in this. So my first political act was to be organised by the higher ups of the Non-  
44 European Unity Movement at the University, at Witwatersrand..  
45  
46 L: At the age of?  
47

- 1 M: This must have been about 16. And then we were - you know - great - not 16. 17. We  
2 were then putting up posters all over, but of course before then In had participated in the  
3 1946 Passive Resistance Campaign. ja. I went to University in 1949, so it's three years  
4 later, ja. University is at Witwatersrand.
- 5 K: Right and did you meet your husband while you were at University?  
6
- 7 M: My husband was my father's first cousin - so he was the person who influenced the  
8 family to send me to Wits and when I got to Wits, he sort of took charge of me and then  
9 handed me over to Ruth First and she was the one who sort of enrolled me in the various  
10 subjects and advised me and so on and so forth.
- 11
- 12 L: Would it be a digression to ask you to tell us a little bit about Ruth First?  
13
- 14 M: Ruth First?  
15
- 16 L: Yes.  
17
- 18 M: Ruth First - she was my husband's girlfriend - so they were going out together and I  
19 know very little about Ruth First - apart from the fact that she sort of helped me through.  
20
- 21 L: Well she was helpful and beautiful.  
22
- 23 M: Yes, she was..yes. She would come - she had a little car. And she - since my husband  
24 was my father's first cousin, he was in our way of working out relationships, he was my  
25 uncle, I think the African way would be the same too. He would come as uncle. We  
26 don't have first and second cousins, we have brothers, fathers - brother's children would  
27 be your brother's and sisters but your father's cousins would be on the same - you know..  
28
- 29 L: ...as your father..  
30
- 31 M: ....father. and therefore he would be your uncle. So he was my uncle and he was - it was  
32 very right and proper for him to chaperone me - but Ruth had a little car and he and Ruth  
33 would come on Sundays and then take me out and then we would go to the homes of  
34 some White radical or other members of the Communist Party and it was my first sort of  
35 entry into White society, and radical societies simultaneously - so it was very educational  
36 and very enrichening.  
37
- 38 L: Yes.  
39
- 40 M: Hilda Watts, you know her?  
41
- 42 L: Yes, by name.  
43

- 1 M: Bernsteins, the Bernsteins were very hospitable on Sundays, the left, you know  
2 intellectuals, met at their house - they had a nice big garden and so on - you know -  
3 nobody else - no Indians have gardens or anything like that you know.  
4  
5 L: Was Helen Joseph in Johannesburg by then?  
6  
7 M: She must have been, but Helen Joseph wasn't ..  
8  
9 L: She wasn't in with that crowd either ...?  
10  
11 M: She was at that time very much in the Indian High Commission. She worked - didn't  
12 she? in the Indian High Commission. So she was at that time very much in the Liberal  
13 tradition. So her entry into left politics comes later.  
14  
15 L: Yes.  
16  
17 M: Okay.  
18  
19 L: During all this time - '46 to '50, the Afro-Indian Riots were happening in Durban.  
20  
21 M: Durban..  
22  
23 L: Yes.  
24  
25 M: My first year, two events of great significance took place, during my first year at Wits.  
26 That first year at Wits, Smuts lost his elections and the Nationalist Party came into  
27 power..  
28  
29 L: '48..  
30  
31 M: '48 - that was my first year you see. Towards the end of '48 - towards the end of '48 it  
32 happened and then I went home and in January '49, the so-called Indian riots..  
33  
34 L: What riots - I don't know which riots they were?  
35  
36 M: Durban Riots - they called them - broke out and I found myself at the centre of it.  
37 Because I was living - my parents were living in Pinetown - we had a large house - with a  
38 lot of land and then there were outbuildings as well and a lot of the refugees, Indian  
39 refugees, came and actually stayed with us. And we had to take responsibility for them.  
40 The local school became - was mobilising - was also opened up as a refugee camp and  
41 then I joined in with that school, on a lorry, coming into Durban and then canvassing,  
42 collecting foodstuffs and clothing and whatever we could for the refugees - so that  
43 situation was ? well and I became involved in that activity. And then of course at home  
44 we had our own refugee camp in my father's ..

1 L: ...garden..

2  
3 M: Yes...(they chuckle)

4 S: What would you say caused this, I mean surely we have been given so many stories, but  
5 as a person living through this what were the sort of explanations that were coming  
6 through about all this conflict?

7  
8 M: You've got to look at all the events and you've got to look at the attitudes and the  
9 feelings that were being discharged against the Indians - the event that provoked the  
10 White community the most was the 1946 Passive Resistance Campaign, because of that  
11 resistance campaign and because, historically, at the same time, India gained her  
12 independence, India was at the UN, Neru's sister with Alekshma Gandhi, represented the  
13 Indian delegation at the UN, and a delegation with my uncle heading it, left from South  
14 Africa and worked closely with the Indian delegation and then the Indian delegation, I'm  
15 talking about the India, Indian delegation, for the first time, moved a resolution against  
16 the South African government and its racism. And very soon, General Smuts, who was  
17 really the darling of the Commonwealth - the biggest statue is in London will find -  
18 within yards of the Houses of Parliament are of General Smuts. He was also the  
19 signatory to the first - what was the declaration - after the First World War...?

20  
21 L: Yes...

22  
23 M: The Charter that was drawn out - he was actually an author - a co-author of it. He had an  
24 enormous reputation in international liberalism and now suddenly he was being called up  
25 there as a fascist. South Africa, for the first time, the White Government, began to feel  
26 what it was to be called racist and the whole racist saga was now presented to UN and the  
27 very fact that the Indians were on passive resistance, projected them, helped them to have  
28 a voice in that arena there. So this was this discharge of a great deal of hostility and as a  
29 matter of fact when the riot commissioned report was put out one of the sentences that In  
30 will never forget is 'that Indians were hoist to their own petard.' Which meant that they  
31 had created a situation and they had taught the Africans resistance and made Africans  
32 into - from the passive and docile people that they were - particularly here in Natal -  
33 provoked them into this state of militancy - so they were hoist to their own petard - they  
34 were responsible for this new ferment and they saw the 1949 riots as an expression of this

1 new African ferment that had been instigated by the Indians and mobilised by the Indians  
2 - you see - that's how they saw it officially in the Riot Commission Report. There were  
3 many things during the war years - there were all kinds of shortages. There was a great  
4 deal of black marketing all over and certainly the small Indian shopkeeper was no  
5 exception and in places like Mkumbaan - there was no KwaMashu or Umlazi or anything  
6 like that in those days - you had a lot - after the World War I, II, sorry, Second World  
7 War, you had a great exodus of Africans from the rural areas into the cities - both in the  
8 Transvaal and in Natal. Now in Natal where would they go and squat - put up their  
9 shacks - it would be on land which they leased or rented or just occupied that would  
10 belong to Indians - they were not going to get any piece of land where Africans were  
11 living- so they all congregated on this Indian land and a terrible shack settlement -  
12 because the City Council gave no attention to this group whatsoever - you know - they let  
13 the situation ride - so. I mean I used to go - I used to go and work in those shack  
14 settlements in Mkumbaan as it was called - Cato Manor. And you know you walk  
15 through gulleys of water that smelt and people were living in terrible conditions. but  
16 because they were squatting on Indian land, you see, regardless of whether the Indians  
17 got rental, or didn't get rental, the economic aspect of it was not gone into at all. But  
18 because they were living there - somehow the Indians were made responsible for  
19 everything. The Indians were responsible for these terrible conditions in which Africans  
20 were - you see. Then of course the shops - you could go along and buy from Indian  
21 shops and there must have been - more than in White shops - but you were living together  
22 - Indians and Africans. So I would think that this was it - you know - a socio-economic  
23 position. But the immediate thing was - but of course there was a great deal of instigation  
24 by the Whites - there are pictures of it you know when the actual riot began, as you know,  
25 in the Indian Market - when a young African youth - was - his ears were boxed - no more  
26 than that had happened. I think he was an employee of an Indian storekeeper and he  
27 probably didn't carry out his functions to the storekeeper's pace - so he boxed his ears  
28 and immediately - no more than that happened - I mean there was no blood or anything  
29 like that - but immediately it was rife throughout the city and right to the docks that  
30 Indians were murdering Africans. they were taking heads of Africans and they were

1 dancing with them on poles and hoisting them on their temples and terrible propaganda.  
2 so then of course, you had the dock workers were the people who really started the riots  
3 because they came and they were instigated and if you work through the 1949 report,  
4 after the enquiry, the evidence makes all this quite clear that it was that that was part of it.  
5 But a good thing came out of it - what happened was that by then the Natal Indian  
6 Congress and the African National Congress were working very closely, the Natal and  
7 Transvaal Indian Congress had got money together and had - well that was part of the  
8 hoist to their petard. They had organised the President of the ANC, Dr Nkuma to go to  
9 United Nations and also give evidence to those who were representing the human rights  
10 causes in that forum you see? So there was a close relationship on the organisational  
11 level - they were working together and when the commission sat, the Enquiry  
12 Commission sat, both the Natal - and it wouldn't allow cross-examination of witnesses,  
13 both the Indian and the African Congresses decided to boycott and they walked out of the  
14 hearings and soon after that they organised the Defiance of Unjust Laws Campaign,  
15 together, jointly and there were only the two - only these two organisations were involved  
16 in organising that particular campaign which was the only offensive campaign that the  
17 ANC ever launched against the South African government prior to its banning.

18  
19 L: This is 1952, was it?

20  
21 M: It was 1952, yes.

22  
23 L: Yes, 1952, I'm very interested in this because there were responses in the Eastern Cape.  
24 heavy responses..

25  
26 M: This response came in these cases. Most of your - I think almost 72% of your resistance.  
27 African resistance came from the Eastern Cape.

28  
29 L: I can understand why - at least I would assume - the fact that Fort Hare - and education  
30 having been established so long in the Eastern Cape that people were more politically  
31 alert..

32  
33 M: Yes, also they - they had the vote there you know, and they had their representatives -  
34 although they were Whites. Not always they had their representatives. Shall we get  
35 some more water?

36 (There is chatter in the background)  
37

- 1 L: Well, I found this very fascinating because you were banned then..  
2  
3 M: When was In banned? 19?  
4  
5 L: You were banned 1952 to '54..  
6  
7 M: Oh yes..that was ..  
8  
9 L: That was in the Defiance Campaign, so tell us about that because you came out fighting  
10 and producing FEDSAW - which was a very good way of cocking the snook at the  
11 government..  
12  
13 M: I was, you see the Group Areas Act was passed in 1950 and we begun agitating against  
14 that and we were holding meetings all over and I was one of the speakers at practically  
15 every meeting so obviously I had caught the eye of the government and I was at the time  
16 also working as a researcher with Dr Hilda Kuper...  
17  
18 L: Oh yes...  
19  
20 L: And he...  
21  
22 L: But Leo Kuper was in the MP?  
23  
24 M: That's right, ja. Now, Hilda Kuper had got a grant from the HSRC, so it was obviously a  
25 government grant and I was employed in terms of that grant - so I was a government  
26 employee and I was banned - no I wasn't banned yet - I was working very nicely. One  
27 day when I brought..  
28  
29 L: Let me enjoy that remark..  
30  
31 M: Then I had my - I was pregnant with my second baby - We'd had the first child .. In was  
32 at home - just out of my bath and my hair all wet and we also lived in a semi-detached  
33 cottage in - just two rooms in Umgeni Road, so In go to the door and here are these two  
34 men, or more and they said they had come to see me, so In - you know - said 'There's a  
35 lot of attention being paid to me.' Then they issued me with this banning order - so In  
36 was absolutely flabbergasted. My husband wasn't banned at the time - the President of  
37 the Natal Indian Congress wasn't banned at the time - the Secretary of the Natal Indian  
38 Congress wasn't banned....  
39  
40 End of this side of the tape.  
41