

Stanley Mabizela
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Interview by Danny Massey

SM:.....I joined the liberation struggle very early. I think I must have been about 12 years of age when I first joined the ANC Youth League....

DM: I know that your father was a farm laborer. Can you talk a bit about what your parents did and whether or not they influenced you politically?

SM: My father was not a member of the ANC. In actual fact, whenever members of the ANC would come to our home, my father would drive us out of the house. But we would take positions where we'd check what he was doing and he used to give them money. He used to give ANC people money. He was a supporter of the ANC, but not a member of the ANC, my father.

DM: So how did you get involved in politics?

SM: There was a lot of activity, particularly in Port Elizabeth. Because I had to go to PE for my education. Yeah, I think when I went to PE I was doing Standard 4, primary school. PE is a very strong ANC place, in fact, truly speaking, I think even today, there is no place which is so pro ANC as PE in the whole of South Africa. And so that Eastern Cape was really the strong vote of the ANC. And that's where I got to join the ANC Youth League and later when I left Fort Hare, I joined the ANC. But of course by that time, the ANC had been banned.... And so I was with the ANC underground from 1960.... [But] in 1960 I was the president of the ANC Youth League at Fort Hare.

SM: [Before university], after passing my Standard 6 [eighth grade] I was sent by my father to Mariazel, that is in the Transkei, near the border of Lesotho. I did form one and form two in one year, but by the end of that year, the priests of that school, and those priests were German, had come to realize that I was a very active ANC person, and I was expelled when I had completed my form two. I came back, but I was too late to get into form three day school. So I did my form three at night at Newell High School [in Port Elizabeth] and passed my JC [junior certificate] that year. The following year I went into form four at Newell High School. The principal was Reverend Molefe at that time. In two years I passed my matric... in 1955. But I couldn't go to Fort Hare, to university, because my father had 3 children elder than I, the eldest was in a technical college doing building. My eldest sister was doing matric at a high school in Uitenhage. My elder brother Boke was doing a teacher's course at Mariazel. So he couldn't educate me. I had to work for two years before going to university at Fort Hare.

DM: Did you continue your political activity during those two years.

SM: Oh, yes, I was very much involved.

DM: These were the years of the treason trial, right after Bantu education was passed.

SM: That's right. That's right. People like Mandela were in trouble. Of course, you see, I must say that the ANC was very much led by people who had been to Fort Hare. People like Mandela, people like Oliver Tambo, people like Professor Matthews and so on. Fort Hare played a big role in the liberation of the black people in South Africa.

DM: In terms of yourself, it's one thing to get involved politically, it's another to really understand what you're doing and have a clear idea of the actual strategies and politics. When do you think, who do you think helped you obtain that knowledge?

SM: At that time I don't think I was thinking very much along those lines. We were more interested in fighting physically. And that is why when I was arrested and released, I ran into exile. I went into training.

I was trained. I am a soldier. I was trained in the Soviet Union and later came back. But because of the education I had I was used more in political work than military work....

DM: When you got to Fort Hare, it was in a complete state of turmoil. The government had from 1955 announced its intention to create these bush or ethnic colleges and Fort Hare was going to be handed over to the government.

SM: And it was ultimately handed over to the department of Bantu education. And that's one of the reasons I left. At one time I had hoped to do an honor's degree in history or public administration. I was not very sure which one I should do. But once Bantu education was introduced in Fort Hare in 1960, I gave up. In fact even the diploma I did was under UNISA, in Pretoria, in 1961. But my degree, at that time, Fort Hare was still affiliated to Rhodes.

DM: [Ambrose Makiwane] was telling me about a protest march he led into Alice in 1958. Do you remember some of the activity amongst the students against this proposed [Fort Hare Transfer] Act?

SM: It was a difficult time for us, really difficult time. At that time the National Party really treated blacks, SA blacks, the indigenous people, as sub-humans. It was a very difficult time. Sometimes you'd be walking on a pavement and whites would come in the opposite direction and if you don't get off the pavement, you could be kicked to pieces. You could be boxed. I remember at one time I was boxed in Port Elizabeth. My eardrum was blown up and people had to take me to hospital for treatment. And so many of us at that time were angry. We didn't care if we died as long as we could get these people to recognize us as full human beings. Unfortunately these people were very powerful, the NP, very powerful. And so powerful that some of our own people supported them. That's how you had these bantustans in SA. Black people accepted the division of our country. You had the likes of people like Matanzima, Mangope, people like Sebe and so on.

DM: While you were at Fort Hare, in terms of this act which sought to extend Bantu education to the universities, the students did try to fight it vociferously.

SM: Yes, the students did try. But at the same time they needed to complete their education. Many of our people were expelled from Fort Hare and lost their chances of getting education. But you had some blacks who supported the policies of the NP. It's amazing how those things happened. And so that's why you'll find when I completed my teacher's course, I didn't teach. I wasn't going to put into the heads of my people what is meant to kill them. My conscience wouldn't allow it....

DM: I found a lot of documentation pertaining to [your expulsion from] Fort Hare. [Kaiser Matanzima] had written a letter to the administration asking for your expulsion.

SM: And I was expelled. You know what happened. It was a very unfortunate thing. I was seeing Matanzima for the first time in my life when he arrived by a car [at the university], driven of course by a driver and surrounded by his security. I was very near him, very near him, because I wanted to see the man, wanted to see his face. And he had a son with us at Fort Hare at that time.... And then somebody from behind us, there were many of us, but I was in the front, somebody behind us says, "*Nanzi le nja nyaghi uMatanzima.*" Here is this dog, this sell-out, Kaiser Matanzima.

Well, when the man was speaking behind me I could tell who it is. Because it is somebody I had known for a long time at Fort Hare. Not only at Fort Hare, the person who made that statement was a chap called Mxenge, Griffiths Mxenge. And I was together with Griffiths at Newell High School. That's where he did his matric. Of course when this remark was made by Griffiths Mxenge, many people laughed and agreed with him. But strange enough, and I don't know who it was, it was said that it was me who said Matanzima is a sell-out and I was expelled from Fort Hare by the principal. His name was Ross.

But the moment he did that every student stopped school. Not only the students went on strike, but even the domestic workers stopped cooking for the people there. Everything came to a standstill. I was preparing to leave, but I was stopped. Because Ross could have lost his job as well. So he called me, but before he

called me, the students called me to say I must comment on what is going on. So I told them what happened. Somebody behind us said *Nantsi le nja*, here is this dog Matanzima, sell-out. So I said, I want to tell you all here as you are looking at me that I know who said those words, but I will never tell any one of you who it is, who he is. I will never give you his name. I will never give his name to anybody. I am not a sell-out. Gee Whiz, they just stood up and applauded [he claps his hands].

In the end, Ross, the vice-chancellor called me. So I said to him you are saying I must tell you who is it that said Matanzima is a sell-out. How did you come to the conclusion that it was me when I never said that about him? Somebody from behind us shouted. We all heard it. And I said, Professor Ross, I want you to know that I know who it is who made that statement. But you will never get that name from me. I am not a sell-out. And I said, I'm going, I don't want to waste too much time with you. You have disappointed me. You have behaved very badly. And I stood up and I left him. I even, when I opened the door I left the door open, walked out [laughs]. And then I was reinstated.

The person who had done that was Mxenge. He had so much respect for that I hadn't sold him out. But we were all members of the ANC Youth League. And that is how Matanzima expelled me, without even knowing me. In fact, his son came to me to say how sorry he was for what his father had done. Because he knew that I'm not the one who said that Matanzima's a sell-out. That chap was crying. Tears were running down his cheeks. You know I was not going to sell him out. In fact I do not know who it is who went to Matanzima or Ross to say it was me....

Mrs Tixie Mabizela: I actually came visiting to East London from PE. I came to visit him. We were engaged. I came on that weekend for him to tell me that he had been expelled. And he was going to leave. So I said why are you still here then. It was now Saturday and this had happened on a Friday. He said well, the students are agitating against my leaving. So I said, did you do it? And he said, no I did not do it, and I'm not going to tell you who did it [Stanley laughs]. So I said, why are you not going to tell? He said, because the other student is a lightweight. Nobody will do this for him. But for me they will do it and it will work. And this is exactly how it happened....

DM: I spoke with Ntombi Dwane and she said she wasn't very politically active during her student days. She came to Fort Hare in '61, and one of her first memories of Fort Hare is marching into Professor Ross's office to protest your expulsion....

SM: In fact in 1960 I was the president [of the ANC Youth League at Fort Hare], but when the ANC was banned, we had to say, the ANC's no longer in existence, when in fact it was underground.

DM: Once the Separate Universities Act was passed, the students voted no more SRC [Student Representatives Council]. So post 1960, there was no SRC?

SM: That's right, there was no SRC. The students rejected it because it would carry out this thing of Bantu education.

DM: I know you didn't stay much after 1960, but was there a discernible difference between Fort Hare before 1960 and after 1960?

SM: I think the students were together, students were very much together. In fact some lecturers like, for instance, Professor Matthews, he couldn't continue teaching Bantu Education. He resigned.

DM: It was three months before his pension.

SM: He gave it up. So many of them left. That thing was very much hated by Africans, and we were traveling all over South Africa telling people. It also helped because a lot of people who were supposed to teach Bantu education were teaching it differently, teaching it very differently, and that's why our people were not destroyed. We were traveling all over South Africa, telling the teachers that they must now think as to how best educate our people, not this Bantu education, not this syllabus that has been described.

DM: Before the takeover, what are your memories of Professor Matthews?

SM: Well Professor Matthews was a leader of the ANC, we treated him as a leader. Now and again he would call us to his house and tell us how we must handle things. He was a good guide to us who were in the leadership of the ANC Youth League. He was a very good guide. But after the introduction of Bantu education and his resignation he then left for Botswana...and [later] he was made a representative of Botswana for the United Nations. By that time he was already a very old man. He died [in 1968].

.... You know this Fort Hare really has a history. Before there were universities in the whole of Southern Africa, from Central to Southern Africa, there was only Fort Hare. I mean you went to places like Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Lusaka, Mozambique, there were no universities in all these places. Places like Zimbabwe, Botswana, there was nothing. There was only one university from the central part of Africa, from Uganda, Kenya, down to SA, there was only one university: it was Fort Hare. I've been to these countries like Kenya and I've met people who were schooled here. I've been to places like Uganda. I've met people who were schooled here and they were so proud of Fort Hare. So Fort Hare is one of the oldest universities of black people in Africa. And indeed ... the people who were students at Fort Hare played a very important role in the liberation of South Africa. If you take people like Nelson Mandela, the late Oliver Tambo.

DM: One of the things you see in memoirs is that people attribute their political awakenings to time spent at Fort Hare. It wasn't the actual university, but more the environment. For yourself, I was wondering what role Fort Hare played in your development.

SM: By the time I went to Fort Hare I was already a member of the ANC Youth League. But Fort Hare strengthened me because I was able to meet with educated people and they enlightened me about the problems facing the black people. And of course this was good for me because I was already a member of the ANC. By going to Fort Hare I grew intellectually and I gained a lot politically....

DM: You say you grew at Fort Hare and were very involved. Do you remember any of the people who influenced you at the time?...

SM: Makiwane.

DM: Ambrose Makiwane.

SM: Very correct. And that chap educated us a lot and influenced us as to what we should be involved in. And I tell you over weekends we were traveling a lot.... We had people from Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi and all of them were in the ANC Youth League. And so indeed we benefited by going there and meeting these chaps who were completing their studies already when we were starting our studies. And so by the time they left we had grown. And in fact in 1960,...that is the year I was almost expelled.

DM: That was also the year of the takeover.

SM: That was the year of the takeover by the apartheid regime, transferring our university to the apartheid system of education, Bantu education. It was meant to destroy us mentally...

DM: You spoke of the international nature of Fort Hare. And that's something that the government was attempting to stamp out as well.

SM: Exactly. In actual fact by that time, a lot of people were running out of the country. The ANC had been banned and we were underground....

DM: Dr. Mabindisa mentioned that when Professor Ross came along with the registrar they were greeted by a barrage of eggs and tomatoes from the students. Do you remember this?

SM: When they came, they did come, and of course we were all very unhappy, because a lot of our own former lecturers and professor like Professor Matthews, they had decided to leave.... [Curnick] Ndamse had also left. They couldn't take it. And so it was bad. We knew that Professor Ross must be a member of the National Party and not an academician. That's why he has accepted to introduce us to Bantu Education. And so Fort Hare was rather thin now intellectually, and so of course we were also not nice to Professor Ross. We were not going to play nicey-nicey with him because we knew that he is a member of the National Party, which was a very oppressive party at that time...

DM: You were one of the known leaders at the time, right?

SM: I was known to be the leader of the ANC Youth League, so he didn't like me. But strangely enough, his wife was very friendly with me. Whenever she would come to the university, she would look for me and talk to me, so friendly. In fact, one time, she even invited me and some friends to come to her house in town for tea. And we went there. But as we were approaching, Professor Ross drove out in his car [laughs]. So that was the kind of place we had. And it was the only university which accepted blacks. Of course there was a university in Natal which also accepted blacks and trained them in medicine. But of course after that, as you know, they started building these ethnic universities....

DM: [Some people's memories of Fort Hare] are so much of an inter-racial [community]. Of Indians and coloureds, and eating each others' foods.

SM: Yes, everybody was there. Exactly. We were very much together. The only people who were not there were the whites of South Africa. All the other ethnic groups were there. As a result today sometimes when I go to Natal, I don't go to a hotel. I've got friends and I go to their homes and that's where I sleep. Because of the friendship that we built when all of us were at Fort Hare.... It was a mixed society. And we used to enjoy it and play together. Soccer, rugby, tennis. It was very good, a very friendly university. Even in the ANC Youth League it was a similar mixture. Of course, there was another party by that time, the PAC. Of course, it was purely black....

DM: Is there anything we haven't touched in these two sessions about Fort Hare that you want to add?

SM: Fort Hare is one of the old universities and I wish it could be built into a famous institution where every South African could go and get good education. It's a small place, but I wish the new government in collaboration with other governments could build Fort Hare into a famous and big university. It has played a very big part in the ultimate freedom of the people of SA...I think Fort Hare is an important place. I still want to go back because I'm told it is very different from the Fort Hare I knew. I want to go and see it. I haven't seen Fort Hare since my return from exile in 1990.