



Activist, author, lawyer and pensioner Phyllis Naidoo is releasing her 15th book, *Footsteps: Swansong*.

PHYLLIS still lighting fires

Despite her age, Durban's own daughter of the soil is still going strong and gives credit to unsung heroes in her new book, writes Agiza Hlongwane

THE superlatives roll easily off pundits' tongues when speaking of Phyllis Naidoo. Doyenne of the Struggle, freedom fighter, intrepid and indefatigable traveller into our past, teacher, lawyer and author.

But, sitting at her humble street-level flat in Durban's Umbilo Road, she laughed it all off.

"I'm a pensioner," she declared, bursting into laughter.

At 84, Naidoo no longer wakes at 4am to toil until midnight, but she still works harder than many people half her age.

A chain-smoker who refuses to be bothered about the consequences, her pen still drips with venom as she churns out important books. Her latest and 15th book, *Footprints: Swansong*, which chronicles both giants and lesser-known contributors to the fight against apartheid, is being launched next Saturday.

It is a collection of profiles and poems paying tribute to people rang-

ing from former education minister Kader Asmal and Ilse Naudé, wife of anti-apartheid figure Beyers Naudé, to musician Syd Kitchen and a host of others whom Naidoo described as unsung heroes.

"Every one of them has made a contribution," Naidoo said.

"You see, we know Mandela to be the only one who made a contribution. But he himself says don't do that. It was a much wider organisation. So, what I do is take a particular contribution.

"I've written this book so we don't get stuck with only one person. People must not think it was only Joe Slovo who fought in the Struggle, for example."

Compiling the book – the fifth and last in the *Footprints* series, all with a historical or political orientation – meant many long hours of research, which included going through newspaper articles and speaking to relatives of those featured in the book.

It took its toll, but Naidoo describes it as a labour of love.

"These people have given their lives, and I'm still alive. I can tell their stories. And while there's life in me, and while I can, I will tell the stories, because I want people to think. A lot of people don't read the books. They just want to keep them on their shelves. I don't want that. That's why I write as simply as possible. I write so they can read. Otherwise, what's the point? A lot of writers are very bumptious. That's to confuse, but I want people to understand, to educate themselves."

The passage of time might have slowed down Naidoo's walk (she walks with the aid of a wheeled walker), and she is prone to falling (she fell and hurt her head five weeks ago – her third fall in recent times), but her grey eyes still sparkle with life each time she draws on her reservoir of experiences, or throws a barb directly at the establishment.

Despite devoting many years to the Struggle, liberation came at great personal cost for Naidoo.

While in exile in Lesotho in 1979, a parcel bomb was sent to a Reverend Osmer and when he opened it, his hand was blown off. Naidoo and four others were seriously injured.

Her son, Sahdhan, was murdered in 1989 on an ANC farm in Lusaka. She lost her second son, Shah, after a long illness. Her daughter, Sukhti, and grandsons Buck and Louis and their father live in Cape Town.

A member of the Order of Luthuli, she spent more than 20 years in exile.

Recently, she famously refused a one-off reparation of R30 000 from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission for the murder of her son. She wanted the money given to needy Umkhonto we Sizwe families or a charity organisation, instead.

She told the Tribune, "My children are priceless. One cannot put a price on them."

If she could have 10 minutes with Zuma, what would she tell him?

"I'd tell him we've got to go back to basics. We've had more protests than the Arab Spring in our country.

But we've been lucky here. Those people don't talk. They bring out the cannons, they're shooting. They're not doing it by the book. But here it's also getting dangerous and we're going to burn.

"So I'd tell Zuma to consider poor people's rights, which they have fought for. The Struggle was not won by the rich, but the poor. That's what the books say. So people should be given houses, water, lights. My domestic worker, Dudu, is cooking on paraffin. Every time the price goes up, she says, 'Ma, I can't manage'.

"She's lucky she's got a job. What about people who walk the streets? And the youth that are unemployed? They're going to put a match to tinder, and it's going to burn.

"This (South Africa) is not what we fought for. There is still just too much corruption, too much suffering," she said.

The underlying themes of personal sacrifice and death in Naidoo's book make it inescapable to ponder Naidoo's own eventual swansong – something many undoubtedly hope will not be soon.

She is candid about it all, not least her refusal to stop smoking.

"When I fell recently and went to King Edward, they X-rayed me. The fellow who did my heart looked at my aorta and said it had shrunk, through smoking.

"He said, 'We can do an operation for R22 000, but we can't guarantee you anything'.

"I said, 'no, 84 is 84... I don't want

to go on living. No operation, no knife on my body.'

"They were going to subject me to that knife! I said no. I've had a good innings. Whose body holds shrapnel from being bombed? Mine. Which parent has given two sons to the fight against apartheid? Me. So I've done my job."

When that day comes, how would she like to be remembered?

"When you're gone, you're gone. Your deeds will make your memories. I read the obituaries every day and I see how people are remembered. Not because I want to be remembered in any particular way. People say, 'you will not be remembered forever'. Forever is just until they die, and that could just be tomorrow."

She was asked to call a boy. 'He is my husband,' said a regal Zulu woman

HOW IT STARTED

PHYLLIS Naidoo was born in Estcourt in 1928. When she was 10 years old, her father took her to an Institute of Race Relations conference in Pietermaritzburg, where she was to serve tea. An article on www.sahistory.co.za records that at the meeting someone asked her to go and call "the boy".

She went outside and when she asked for the boy a dignified, traditional Zulu woman confronted her.

"The boy you want is my husband." The woman's regal presence made Phyllis realise that she had given tremendous offence. She was so upset that she sobbed hysterically for a long while afterwards. This incident awakened her, more than any event or speech at the meeting, to the evils of racism.

She would go on to join the ANC and work underground, assisting comrades to flee to asylum and providing support for their families.

Naidoo qualified as a lawyer in 1973 but could not practise as she

was not allowed in court until her banning order was lifted in 1976.

At one stage, she had five ex-Robben Island detainees as messengers at her law firm. Among them was Jacob Zuma. In 1977, she escaped to Lesotho as her underground comrades were detained, the article states.

Naidoo was forced to leave Lesotho in 1983, when South African air strikes against Lesotho began and all its 12 border posts were closed. The South African government wanted her out of Lesotho and

warned the Lesotho government she would be killed. She fled to Zimbabwe.

Naidoo was in Harare for seven years, continued her political activities for MK and was involved in campaigning against the abuse of power by the apartheid government. She was particularly concerned with the prisoners, both political and criminal, on death row.

In 1990, she returned to SA and immediately went to visit prisoners on death row and on Robben Island.

– www.sahistory.org