

SIBONGILE MTHEMBU MKHABELA
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[This interview was conducted by a third year class in African Politics, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. The interviewee, nee Sibongile Susan Mthembu, was a leader in the Soweto Students Representative Council at the time of the 1976 Soweto uprising. She subsequently was a defendant in the trial of the "Soweto 11" and was jailed for two years. Answers have been transcribed verbatim, but questions were partially inaudible on the tape, and thus are not verbatim.]

Can you tell us whether your family played any role in shaping your political interest or involvement?

Yes, family played a role, I'd say a very significant role in developing me as a person, and the person I became, and my critical consciousness as well. But with no defined political affiliation. I personally, and some members of my family, have a black consciousness orientation. But that's the sibling kind of system. But in the parental system you wouldn't find that. But you would find a political consciousness and an awareness about their immediate setting. I guess that's where the consciousness comes from. The bedtime stories we listened to were about Sophiatown, for instance, not

Can you give us an example?

When I say Sophiatown -- When I went to see the play "Sophiatown" [at the Market Theatre] I could remember my aunt telling me about how they were removed from Sophiatown, how they got into Meadowlands. These were the type of stories we listened to late at night. We didn't have a radio, we didn't have a TV, which the present generation enjoys. So those were the kind of stories we'd listen to after dinner, and talk about.

Can you tell us a bit about your parents?

Yes, my parents were ordinary working people, very ordinary. My mother was actually totally illiterate. She had never been to school; we actually taught her literacy. When we came back from school she'd ask us to teach her how to sign her name, and her writing is as basic as that. My father could at least read a newspaper -- and of course spent most of his time reading a newspaper! But my mother had a helluva lot of humour and whilst the two of them were just so contrasted; you had this introverted father and this very extroverted mother who was not literate, but very strong. I'd say I developed my feminist ideas from her, much more than from all the literature I've read. The manner in which she brought us up -- there were never any boys and girls in the house, just kids in the house. And chores were shared among us as kids -- no boys' chores and girls' chores. Those were my parents. They worked as labourers. And when my mother died, my father brought us up. On a salary of 20 rands a week. And there were six of us.

Where did you go to school?

In Soweto. I started and I finished my schooling in Soweto. I finished in the sense that I was forced to finish in 1976. I couldn't go anywhere else, because the townships were demarcated according to language and ethnic groups and so on, and also because of no money to travel anywhere. It was easier for me to school just nearby, where I could drop in for lunch and run back home to cook dinner.

How did you develop an interest in student activism?

One could say through the schooling; one could also say through other systems outside the school system, family and so on. I'm very close to my brothers. I'm actually much more close to my brothers than to my sisters. I've always developed good relationships with men rather than women; I just relate better with men. I grew up very close to my brothers, and men being what they are, they talk about things -- politics, who's right, and those kinds of debates. These intrigued me, even as a child.

And then in 1976, even before 1976 -- around 1974 when there were all these Frelimo rallies and so on -- I was part of SASM [the South African Students Movement], and I held an office in SASM. But I could say I developed in three different platforms. I was part of a student organisation, which was SASM. I was part of the Students' Christian Movement, SCM. And I was also part of what we called Teen Outreach Programme, which looked at Christianity differently, looking at what scriptures say to me as an oppressed person at the time.

As a small girl, I knew Ellen Kuzwayo, and I used to go to her house and she'd teach us to bake, and to do one-two-three. Of course, it didn't make sense, but I just loved being in that kind of company. And these were the kind of areas I was involved and interested in. I guess that's where my politicisation as a process came out. And also the fact that you'd go home and you'd face that real poverty. And to live in an area -- I mean, I grew up and schooled in Zola, which is said to be the worst of the worst. It used to be called "Wild West". And this was home.

Can you tell us what you thought about the developments in Mozambique and Angola in the mid-'70s ?

We thought this was great. At that time SASM was a high school student movement, but it was nurtured by SASO [South African Students Organisation], which was a university student movement. That nurturing [was] seminars and workshops that SASO would bring at SASM's level, to say politically: this is what is happening in the country, this is what is happening in Mozambique. I also think that a part of what helped the consciousness of students at the time was that relationship with much more advanced people, older people -- as well as the relationship that SASO enjoyed with BPC and BCP [Black Peoples' Convention and Black Community Programmes]. BCP, being community oriented in its programmes, engaged SASM in community projects. So that you developed as a person within a community, with a highly developed sense of being a part of the whole. This comes out of the seminars we would have with SASO, with BPC and with BCP.

It also helped that whatever was happening elsewhere in Africa, they'd bring down to us, they'd make us know. Of course, half the time it didn't make much sense -- when you were still trying to grapple with basic things, and now you'd hear about Uganda. But whatever it did, it began to build you up. We'd enter into debates and were forced to go and read up on certain areas. That began to open your eyes on your wider environment, that as a South African you were also very much influenced by what was happening in other parts of Africa.

Did you know much about political movements that were in exile?

Yes, we knew a lot about ANC, PAC and its history. For some reason, I had sympathies for the PAC much more than the ANC. I couldn't reconcile the whole thing of nonracialism when my whole plight was based on race. It just didn't make sense when you said "among the snakes you'd better pick the better snakes." I just said give me a break; I don't have the time [to differentiate between 'good' and 'bad' whites.] I am the victim, and now you are giving me an additional task, to find out something else about the people who are perpetrating this kind of torture on me.

Remember that you grow up with a father who is -- My father was a painter, working for a white man who really exploited him. I don't care what his political affiliation was, all I knew was that we were subjected to this because of him. One may not have had an in depth understanding at that level, especially when you were doing your standard 7 or standard 8. But you had the kind of understanding of who you are and why you were where you were.

Fortunately for me, there was the mediating kind of movement, the Black Consciousness Movement. It appealed to me because it said you are black and you are on your own. You need to be proud of who you are, and this is your history. It did not seem to apologize for me and for being who I am. At the same time, it had the element of being reconciliatory without giving up everything else.

So you didn't sympathise with the ANC? What about at the time of the Rivonia trial ?

You need to understand that having no sympathies didn't mean enmity. I guess for this generation it's hard to understand. You've grown up in a situation where you are either/or [ANC or PAC]; but we didn't have that. Within SASM there were people who had sympathies for ANC, sympathies for PAC, and all sorts of other sympathies. We'd debate and fight over this, but there would be some consensus. We agreed on certain basic principles.

With the Rivonia trial, naturally the sympathies were with it, and you'd be fully behind it. You'd see Mandela not as an ANC leader. I still find it difficult to see him as an ANC leader; I just see him as a leader of black people. That he affiliates to the ANC is another issue for me that one needs to go through. But he stood up not for the ANC, he stood up for black people in Africa, South Africa in particular. You have a situation where in the 1980s you begin to see political affiliation being so over-emphasised. Almost like it's something that's not natural.

For me it was a strength that within SASM-- If you look at Murphy Morobe, he's always been an ANC kind of person. I've always been a BC kind of person. We'd debate and argue and I'd say "well, you take your whites elsewhere. I really don't care for them. But let's talk about where we are taking this particular situation, where we are taking black people." I'd say, "maybe once we cross that river, we can talk reconciliation. I cannot understand what you are reconciling at this point." For me, it did not make sense, but it also did not create enemies as it created enemies later on when we said somebody is PAC, somebody is BC, and got into all these fights. I always said to people that in my budget for political struggle and liberation, I never budgetted to fight another black person. I still don't have the energy. It was never in my scheme of things, and it refuses to enter my scheme of things.

Was the cause of the uprising purely the Afrikaans issue ?

The Afrikaans issue was the last straw. I'd say it wasn't even the education issue. If you look at what was happening in the schools at that time, there was a lot of organising going on, like for SASO, BPC. Frelimo rallies and so on, that was all the base. So I guess school masters or bureaucrats, by their very nature, refused to see the social dynamics or a movement that's taking place that's going to be right. If there was anyone who was taking a temperature at the time, even in 1975, they would have predicted a major uprising. It could have been sparked off by anything. It happened to be sparked off by the Afrikaans issue.

It was at the time when you had the lull of the 1960s, but at that time the Black Consciousness Movement had succeeded in building such a consciousness that people were becoming impatient with their lot. And the students, being young people, have more energy than anybody else. As young people you actually think you can get the world right. That is the group that is much more likely to take action. I hate saying it's really the Afrikaans issue that sparked things off. I'd rather say the Afrikaans issue was the last straw. But the fact is that whilst the government was ruling, it had no sense of how you rule people. Because it wasn't taking temperatures of people. It was simply saying it's okay; we've got them in little bags. But as to what's happening inside the bags, nobody was looking at it.

So the Afrikaans issue was a big issue because it said to us as black children that we were now condemned to no education at all. Education at some point was the little hope you had, that at least if you got educated, you might have a chance. Now it simply said that that chance no longer existed. We were aware of the fact that Afrikaans was a language that couldn't be used beyond

the borders of South Africa. If we were to come out qualified as people who spoke Afrikaans and nothing else, we had little chance of operating outside South Africa.

The fact that we had gone through school in English, and all of a sudden-- We had to change from the mother tongue, actually, which was used up to standard 6, then change into English. Now there was this disruptive change into Afrikaans, which really said your chances are very limited. Even the little that was there was being taken away. The anger does not really come out of Afrikaans as a language. It comes out of saying "what are you saying to me as a person, as a black person, as a black child? What are you saying about my future?" This links up with a number of other areas, a number of political areas.

So you're saying at the time of the uprising, there was just the BC movement ?

You should understand that within the BCM, we had the PAC and the ANC. But the BC movement was the only thing that existed and operated openly.

Can you tell us more about what you personally were doing in 1975-76?

In '76 I was in standard 10 at Naledi High School. I was in an interesting class, because at the beginning of the year I was the only girl in the class, for some reason which is not surprising. I made it an effort to recruit more girls, and at least by mid-year we were about eight in the class. But it was predominantly a boys' class. I felt comfortable in it, as I said that I relate well with men. I did not feel threatened by them. When 1976 started, I was a member of SASM and was in a senior position within SASM. When all the situation was being reported to us, what the situation in Orlando West was, where Seth [Mazibuko] was, and in other schools it was deteriorating, we were becoming very concerned about it.

I had been affected by Afrikaans directly when I tried to do my standard 8. I was at a school called B W Vilakazi, which was in Emndeneni Extension. I walked for an hour to that school every day. Afrikaans was introduced at that time in that school. My own personal experience was having to do-- We didn't do functional maths at that time; we were doing what's called arithmetic. There would be arithmetic, and there would be a teacher who really didn't understand Afrikaans himself. He taught in English and examined in Afrikaans. You wouldn't get what was happening. As a result, I failed that class. For me, these are the kind of personal circumstances that came up. At home, my father was a single parent. My mother died in 1971. He had to deal with me and everybody else. I am the last but one in a family of six.

At the time when the march was organised on June 16, did you think your demands would be met, or were you just registering a point?

You wouldn't believe it, but we had such faith in the system we actually thought they'd meet our demands. Not with guns. I mean we got a bit shocked ! We really believed that something would happen. At that time maybe all the illusions we may have had about the type of system we had were put aside. We set off very positive. We had strategised well, and we really thought that despite the fact that we had some experiences--

I mean, in Naledi we had the experience of Enos Ngutshane on the 8th of June with a police car. My granny (?) still asks me, "What happened to the police car on the 8th of June, Bongi? Can you tell me now?" I say, "well, it was too hot and it caught fire. I'm not going to change that, that the police car caught fire." This was outside our school. And Enos, who was going to be picked up by that police car, managed to run and escape. At that time, there was tear-gas, rubber shots-- We scattered and ran. The point I'm trying to make is that it wasn't that we had not had a taste of how high-handed the state could be.

When we planned, we tried to accommodate that element. And we tried to say, of all things, let us try to be as peaceful and demonstrate our peacefulness as much as possible. We were

convinced that if the sun didn't get too hot to burn cars, we would be relatively safe [laughter]. We prayed hard that God wouldn't make the sun too hot. It was June, and pretty cold !

Was the SASM leadership just people from standard 10 [12th grade], or did the organisation go right down to junior level ?

It went right down to standard 8, I think. It was difficult to organise the standard 7. I remember my own standard 7; you've just entered into high school, and are kind of confused by this whole setting. So you really didn't have leadership or membership at that level, but from the standard 8 upwards.

Can you tell us about Tsietsi Mashinini as an individual ? Why was he the top leader of the unrest ?

I knew Tsietsi as a friend, and it's difficult to talk about him. Maybe we all happened to be idealistic, and he was just as idealistic as all of us. He had that charisma of leadership, of talking to people, and he believed and put himself inside his beliefs. Whatever he believed and held onto very strongly, he was prepared to put himself into. That is why he was a very strong, a very powerful leader. At the same time, he could be very down to earth, and he relayed on day to day jokes, and [could] just play and be a kid.

Can you tell us what particular input you made to the strategizing, once the revolt was in progress?

I guess that what you do, what I did, is to bring in reality, to bring in the elements that say "what do we do if . . . ?" If you look at the strategists of '76 and the strategists later, with the latter ones, you don't find the element that says "how do we ensure that we have as few casualties as possible?" For me, that is the element that I'd bring in. I'd say, "guys, I hear you, but how many people do we lose at the end of the day ?" I remain people-oriented in whatever I do. I really would love that it does not sacrifice life. If there is going to be a sacrifice of life, then it should be because it's beyond your control. I guess one brings those things, even though one has to reflect upon it now and think about it. Whereas at the time, you acted as part of a group, and your own leadership styles, your leadership skills, integrated with the other leadership skills in the team. At the end of the day, if one is not doing an analysis of who is bringing what, it's actually difficult to say who brought what . . .

Probably Dan Montsitsi brought the calmness. He is extremely, irritatingly calm. There was a meeting one day, I remember he was chairing. And for some reason, there was no energy in this meeting. Somebody stood up and said, "But chairperson, it's your attitude; it's the way you stand, the way you're talking, that's taking the energy from me." He was irritatingly calm. But if you look at that calm, whilst it irritated us at the time, when we felt that we needed a helluva lot of energy, we needed to do things that were almost impossible to do. Dan would bring that whole thing of coming in and speaking very slowly, very deliberately, but bring issues back into focus. So different people brought in different skills.

Can you say more about the Afrikaans issue ?

Some schools resisted it. The school I was in when I moved to Naledi did not resist. It also depended on the leadership of the school. Schools earlier on had resisted because when it was first introduced it was a matter of choice. The administration would chose to take it or not to take it. What the administrators of schools did not anticipate was that that was a kind of testing period. After a year it became enforced.

The principals of a few schools resisted; like Naledi, Sekano Ntoane, Musi and Orlando West [Junior Secondary] resisted. The principals, together with the students, resisted. They wrote a number of memos to the education authorities -- it wasn't DET at the time. They were not heard; they were not listened to. For some reason, they'd come back to us. Maybe that's all part of what

made us feel angry. Because we had our principals whom we looked up to, and they were not being listened to. We felt we had to make an effort. There was a lot of effort. People like Mathabathe, who was [headmaster] at Morris [Isaacson] at the time, resigned. And the principal at Naledi High School also resigned after this whole thing. They also felt frustrated. For the first time, they tried to deal with their employers; they tried to say this wasn't going to work. And they were forced to implement the system they didn't believe in. On principle they resigned from the school system.

Were the inspectors white?

The inspectors were white and black. By black I mean the Uncle Tom kind, the kind of black who is approved by whites and whites feel comfortable with, and they feel he'd help them administer. It's very rare where you found administrators who really were sympathetic to black people, let alone to students. The criteria for promotion were very arbitrary. [It depended on] whether you brought in the correct kind of reports that the inspectors up there really liked. And at the end of the day, you got a promotion. But if you look at the leaders, the principals of all the high schools that were so significant in '76, where the principals themselves were very revolutionary, they themselves were highly skilled, but were never promoted to any significant position.

Can you tell us about the SSRC ?

The SSRC was formed by the students. It was after the students had met in Orlando the 13th of June, before June 16. The first committee was set up. The SSRC was born thereafter, but the SSRC had taken into account what the students said was bothering them. If one was to look back at the list which we no longer have, it did not only reflect education issues, it also reflected social issues. The SSRC stood up for the student as a student, but also the student as a black child in a black community with a unique set of circumstances that made his life go in a particular direction. And the SSRC was therefore looked up to by students themselves as an organisation that would give direction to their efforts. It was born after the arrest and detention of a number of students.

Would you say that it had a revolutionary outlook, the leadership of the SSRC ?

Ja, one would say that. We didn't see ourselves as just looking at the issue of Bantu Education. What was irritating was that after June 16, there was the introduction of Education and Training, which wasn't very different from Bantu Education. So we said we didn't fight so hard for terminology, for you to change the names. We want significant change in the system! It was revolutionary in the sense of revolutionizing the education system and the circumstances of the black child, and giving the black child as much opportunity as any other child.

But there was no talk within the SSRC of going forward until the government actually fell, or stepped down ?

Not quite. I think the SSRC would be much more focus -- SASM would probably go beyond that, beyond the mandate of the SSRC. Because the SSRC did not replace SASM. You still had SASM and SASO existing separately.

Would you say the uprising was or was not actually revolutionary in intent ?

I'm not sure if I'd say a revolution, but I would say change. I'm reluctant to use revolution; it's too strong a term for that kind of small-scale attempt. It still looked at significant change, still looked at using this issue to raise other issues, but not to say overnight we'll have revolutionary change. We didn't think that way.

What did you think when the march of June 16 led to bloodshed ?

The first shot that killed Hector Pieterse was shocking, and I still feel shocked and shaken; it was totally unexpected. But the subsequent shootings were now anticipated, and they were planned for. If you look at when people went to march in town, they changed the strategy. The first strategy was to march with workers, which was in August [August 4]. It was workers and everybody else doing the marching. We had a strategy where we said it seems like if we are in the streets in the townships, it doesn't work. We would be shot because it was apparent that the government does not value the lives of black people.

The alternative thing was to stage a demonstration in town. If it were going to be staged in town, the best thing would be to go in town without being seen. That is why students used trains; they used all sorts of things. They were not in their school uniforms. Before the state knew what was happening, students were at John Vorster Square in their uniforms. They all sat down, because we said let's demonstrate that we are not fighting. We really would not like to lose a life. The advantage was that John Vorster Square is in town, and they ran the risk of shooting white people, and they wouldn't do that. Which they wouldn't dare do. They simply arrested people in that march. It was significantly different from a march in the township.

Did you inform parents ?

Yes, in an interesting way. We involved parents, and we also involved small ones, kids. We'd go around to primary schools and talk to the little ones about their situation as black children, and what has happened, the detentions. That was their reality. They had to understand and know what is happening around them. And also to canvas their support, for instance in the stayaway in August. All we did was to run around the primary schools and talk to the little ones to say this is the situation: we want to stay away because we want to target the economy of the country; maybe we'll have some impact. The little ones, we believed, would go and talk to their parents not to go to work because of these and those reasons.

It did have an impact. Most parents did not go to work. And at that time we were also connected to the Black Parents Association. There was a parents' association set up and led by Dr. Motlana. And within that parent association they knew what was happening, and they called parent meetings and talked to parents. We really were trying to say this is not our issue, this is a community issue and will remain a community issue. And if we are going to get cooperation, it can never be enforced. We have to negotiate and talk, and use whatever other mechanisms are available to us.

What about the hostel dwellers ?

It was very difficult. Historically there has always been a divide between communities and hostels. Even as early as that time you had this divide. The hostel dwellers were not part of community structures. They were not really in the communities. They were in the community, but not in the community, which was a recipe for disaster. You also had people who were the most vulnerable in terms of work. They were on contract, they had to serve twelve month contracts. If they were forced at work, they would be sent back home immediately.

And remember at that time you still had "section 10". Under section 10, you were allowed to remain in a prescribed area for so many hours. If you look at their situation, their circumstances and the circumstances of a township resident, there is a fundamental and significant difference. Most of the time, they'd go to work despite-- It did not say anything about them resisting to be part of the revolution. It said something about their personal circumstances, and why they were in fact in a trap. They were in an area for as long as they held that contract. If anything happened to that contract, there'd be starvation of their families.

Why was there a campaign against alcohol and shebeens ?

The issue of the use of alcohol was for us within SASM a problem, even before June 16, which is why you had mainly bottle stores targetted on June 16 and 17. In our own analysis, it was quite

strange that within black communities we did not have a lot of facilities, recreation or whatever, facilities. The one facility you inevitably have is a bottle store, and it's strategically positioned at the train station. Ninety percent of black people used trains at that time. At every train station used by black people you'd find a bottle store, and beyond the bottle store, you'd find a lounge [pub/bar]. In our own sense it said-- If you look at the rules of the English, before the Afrikaner, they actually said black people should never drink what they called "white liquor" -- brandy, beer, and so on. They were only allowed to drink *umqombothi* etc. Whoever was caught with a beer bottle would go to jail.

But it's interesting that when the Boers took over, they realised that in as much as it was an abuse of people's rights, this whole thing ensured that people in townships remained with money, remained sober, and with some dignity. It wasn't an accident that beer was put on every station, and it destabilised families. Our worry was that families were gradually getting destabilised. And when people came from work with the stresses they'd gone through, the natural thing was to stop at the bottle store and go home without a penny. It maintained that we remain poor communities, and every cent would be drained right up to the last station when a person is about to go home. Liquor was seen, I still see it, as a serious problem among black people. If you look at services around alcohol abuse, you don't find any. It's almost like they were saying, "kill yourselves. That's fine. We'll go on governing you."

Did you know Onkgopotse Tiro ?

Not as a person, but he was known to me as someone who fired us, inspired us. Whose writings, history, and death affected us. The main thing that struck and shocked us was his death, and how Onkgopotse [Tiro] died. He was a hero, but he wasn't visible, he wasn't there. He was like Mandela. You knew of him, you looked up to him, but you never really touched or talked to him. Onkgopotse was a figure like that. You'd talk about the death of Onkgopotse Tiro, and really feel that he died for our cause. We looked up to him as a hero of the struggle, as a person who died for our cause. His writings helped shape our own thinking, as the writings of Steve Biko also helped shape our thinking. You must also remember that some of his writings were hard to find. If found with something written by Steve, you'd be arrested.

Did the shootings strengthen or dampen the spirits of the students?

I'll tell you about me. It strengthened me. The minute they shot Hector, I knew I'd be in the struggle for the rest of my life. It's almost like I had to pay back for Hector's life. That's how it affected me personally. Even today, I still remain in some kind of development, asking how we can push black people forward. Generally, in terms of students, we had apathy at some points. We had people saying there's nothing we can do.

But the beauty is that we also had a number of students who said we have to fight back. That is what held us together. You lost a lot of people, and gained a better consolidated group of people, more dedicated, more committed, knowing that they are putting their lives on the line and consciously so. In every protest, in every meeting, we knew that there was a possibility that we may be shot. I'd go home and my father would say, "Bongi, can't you stop? Let other kids do it." I'd say, "Give me a suggestion, whose child?" He'd say he didn't know, and I'd tell him that they all had parents like him, and that I felt committed to this, and he would just have to pardon me.

When the shooting intensified, did you expect any help from the liberation movements ?

Yes, a number of students left the country. I'll tell you something that's significant about the '70s that's missing [later?] It's the community! In '76 the struggle did not belong to the students, it belonged to the community. What sustained us was not ourselves as a group, it was the collective consciousness of the community. In '76 you relied on the parents, you relied on every person in the area. So that in as much as you'd look up to liberation movements, what they were doing, people went into exile and trained. Some said, "look, we can't do it by ourselves. Let's go and get trained, and come back and fight." But what really kept it going inside here, what made sure that

communities did not collapse, was the commitment of ordinary men and women who have never been recognized. It was really a vote of confidence [in the students] .

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