Ivy Matsepe-Casaburri, February 25, 1999, Bloemfontein, interviewed by Danny Massey

DM: When you got to Fort Hare, it was right before the authorities were about to take over the university. Were you aware of this before you got to Fort Hare or was it something that you became aware of once you got there?

IM: Well, I'm not so sure whether I became aware of it only after, it may have been something that one was aware of before. But certainly from the first year of Fort Hare, it was a period of great activity around the issue of this [Fort Hare Transfer] Act. I was then in the SRC [Student Representatives Council]. I was the only woman I think at the time and this was a very burning issue.

DM: Was your first year '58 or was it '59?

IM: I think it was 58, I'm not so sure….

DM: Can you remember the first time that you became aware that South Africa as a country was a peculiar situation, that things weren't all right here?

IM: You know one was aware of that very early. Although my parents were not people who were politically active, there was a social consciousness around the place. For example, I remember old [Z. R.] Mahabane, who was once the ANC president, used to be a minister in Kroonstad and active in politics there.

Although Kroonstad as a town may not have been that active, but I mean the discrepancies — how your own principal was marched off by police for having not carried his pass on him. And this was a respectable citizen, the most educated person in the community. And that made a real mark on many children, that something is wrong with a system that would denigrate someone who has such a high standing in the community.

But also the fact that people were being moved. My parents had moved once, from closer to the river [where?] the town is now located. Just about [the time of] my going to Fort Hare, we were again forcibly removed to another area. One was already conscious of the discrepancies.

DM: I was watching a video where you said, if you weren't active when you came to Fort Hare, then you became politically active. What was the atmosphere like when you got to Fort Hare?

IM: Well, Fort Hare was really politically active. You had really very impressive people in terms of political understanding, the reading that they did, knowledge that they had. And of course some of them were older. And the debates that they entered into. So it was a real hive of political activity and debate. Marxist within Marxist and the left and the right. It was very, very active. I think one was in a sense immediately catapulted to take one's social experiences and begin to look at them in a slightly different context. And I think that is where one's political formation [began], in not only asking questions, but seeking answers.

DM: Was this through lectures or mostly through student involvement?

IM: Student involvement, really, in the main. The lectures really were not very political. But student activity was really very, very active….

DM: You speak about debates and meetings. Do you remember any of these debates and meetings in particular?

IM: Oh yeah. I mean, the student union, called the CU, was an active area where there were meetings of students and debates taking place. But also in forums outside the university there was all this activity.

Because you had, for example, students who belonged to the Unity Movement, to the PAC, to the ANC. In fact, it's only then that I got to really understand what the Unity Movement was all about. I mean I just used to hear about it and really not understand. That's when one began to pick up the differences between the different strands of politics and got a better understanding of that. And there was a great deal of passion about it.

But then you also had a number of students who were coming from other African countries, from Zimbabwe, Malawi, Zambia, Namibia, and Botswana; and some of them were very, very sharp politically and also made their mark in their own countries. I think one of the people I remember became the attorney general for Botswana. Another one became the head of the agriculture department in Zambia,… people of standing in their own communities and very active politically.

But I also came at a time when some of what you call the older generation of Fort Hare was about to leave. The Makiwanes, who were very, very active. [Jutundire] Kozonguizi, who is a Namibian. I was sort of the new student when they were leaving.

DM: [Someone] I spoke with was talking about an intense rivalry between SOYA [Society of Young Africans, the youth brigade of the Unity Movement] and the ANC Youth League…. So how did one become a member of one group as opposed to the other?

IM: Well, I don't remember that there was a contestation for membership. For me it was like a contestation of ideas which you then would say [after some] time would win over. But maybe I say this in retrospect, I'm not so sure. But it was a university where those different strands articulated themselves very, very well. But there was also a sense that some were very group-oriented already and stuck to the groupings that were existing. And the others were recruited…. And the ANC was very good, because then it was a strategy and a lot of young people who came into the university [got] recruited. But with others it was simply debates and maybe people aligned themselves then according to the debates.

DM: [Someone] was telling me that the ANC people used to call [the Unity Movement] “beans” and the SOYA people used to come back with this or that. And there used to be a lot of flinging around of words.

IM: Well that's certainly true. Name-calling was not just between parties. It was also between the different houses in which the male students lived in particular. Between Beda and Iona and Wesley. And depending also on where you were in terms of that, your politics sometimes also got shaped by that. Because people who were at Beda were Anglicans, many of them Youth Leaguers, very much in the [Oliver] Tambo tradition. And there I think the ANC was quite strong. So too was the ANC Youth League at Wesley because a lot of the Africans, especially the ones from certain parts of the Cape, meaning the Eastern Cape, would be people who come from that Methodist tradition. And therefore you tended to find certain strands stronger. So the naming, you know of one another, of calling names of one another was also part of that tradition.

DM: Where did Eluk [the women’s residence] fit into all of this?

IM: Eluk was in a strange category…. I'm not so sure whether you could say a large number of [women] were active in politics. But there were some that were. Others were simply in support of particular positions rather than being actively in the fray. There was also across the river with the nurses...a small core that were quite active. Others whose influence probably could have been an influence also by whom they had relationships with, and so on.

DM: I recently spoke to Ntombi Dwane, who was at Fort Hare starting in ‘61, so just after you left. She said that there were only a couple of women who would speak out at these political meetings. Was this something you had to deal with as asn SRC member? Were your views listened to?

IM: As an SRC member, one is actually almost not schizophrenic, but ambivalent. One, you had the responsibility that your parents had sent you there. They were paying for that. They didn't really understand if at all you got involved and had to be expelled. Because those are the things that you had to deal with. How would you cope with that? You're young and you have this enormous sense of responsibility that you owe it to others. And there were some who were very adamant about that, who were very strong in their convictions and I think it was because it arose out of their, not so much out of their social conviction, but a lot out of their political conviction.

I can remember people like Seretse Choabi who was sitting with me on the council, Stanley Mabizela, who is now our ambassador to Namibia, Thami Mhlambiso, who was also on the SRC. Those came with the political conviction about what it is that you do. With us, it was the correctness of any action that had to be taken and whether it was the best possible solution. So in a way you were caught in between being this responsible citizen, is it the responsible thing that you let every student now suffer expulsion? So it was always kind of these two opposing forces within one.

I remember I was with C.K., we used to call him C.K., from Durban, a young Indian guy who came from a working class Indian family. And under the circumstances felt that he would have to resign from the SRC because he didn't think he could take those kinds of political decisions that the time required. Indeed, as I say, some people were very much in a dilemma.

For others, it was quite clear cut, there was no either here or there for them. They were quite clear and I think it came out of those political convictions. So some students who were in this quandary, it was not for lack of, maybe I would say, political conviction, but it's people who were caught between both the social responsibility and political responsibility.

DM: So did you get actively involved in the politics at Fort Hare?

IM: Well, not for example in the day-to-day politics of, for example, the Youth League and all those things. As I said, friends were very much involved in that. I think with me, I arrived at politics a bit later than many people….

DM: You spoke a little bit before about the Makiwanes. There was a protest march in '58. I don't know if you were there. Ambrose Makiwane was the SRC president and he organised a march against the Fort Hare Transfer Act, into Alice, with the support of the staff. Do you remember such an event?

IM: Yes, I seem to remember that in '58. I was new, [and] was not involved....

[DM: Were some of the faculty involved in student politics?]

IM: You had some lecturers that were very active in the politics of students. You had a professor like Zachariah Matthews who was there…. I mean he was much older and not into the day-to-day politics, but lots of people had known about his contribution and his involvement. But I think it is those [students] that were also actively involved in the ANC politics that would have had access to people like him.

Then you had people who were, in their relationships with students, people like [Andrew] Masondo who was lecturing in mathematics. The economics professor [Ethan Mayisela]. And maybe one or two of the younger ones who had come in and maybe themselves been Fort Harians.

But the majority really were not into those kinds of politics. They were much more straight-laced, just academics. Some were in a situation where actually they were not really keen to be involved in politics given the times. I suppose in retrospect if you say Fort Hare was conservative, you have to place it in historical context. Fort Hare was actually politically active if you look at what were the politics of South Africa at the time. You could never come out with a statement that Fort Hare was conservative…. You could say it was relatively conservative in that sense [of] rooted in religion. The very fact that you had your [denominational] dormitories, people went to church in large numbers, and so on. It had a religious base.

But you also did have a few, I guess for the time, progressive lecturers, both white and black. There was a husband and wife team, I think it was in biology. One of the registrars who was very liberal in the old English tradition. Then you had your English professor who was very British in origin, very sort of straight-laced. The registrar was Agnew. Ms. Darrell was the English teacher.

DM: She was spoken of very highly by some other students, especially after the government takeover. They said she was one who was still going to teach her students, and was still very involved in student life.

IM: As I say she was sort of very upright, not very active politically. But there were certain principled positions that she would feel that she's going to take and then stuck by those positions….

DM: Was Z.K. out of the limelight by the time you arrived, or was he still actively involved?

IM: Well Z.K., I can't say he was out of the limelight. I mean he was a nationally known figure already in that sense and I guess from the police's side, he was probably a focus. And therefore if he stood in the background, he always loomed somewhere without you seeing where Z.K. is, but he was there. And it's probably now when you look back, you say he probably was meeting with student leadership without meeting with you, the masses. And being able to have engaged those who were the leaders and then they came and discussed with you. For some reason, besides just being physically big, he also looms large in one's memory about Fort Hare. But the position he then took when things were demanded of people, were the principled ANC positions. They had to be sustained and maintained and that's when you knew this one is taking a political stand. He'd rather go [when the government took over].

DM: You said that Fort Hare was a political hotbed. In terms of the Transfer Act and the Extension of University Education, do you think that the government looked towards Fort Hare? A lot of their justification for these acts was: we want to quell this political agitation. A lot of their justification for the Act seemed to be pointed directly at Fort Hare.

IM: I think that is actually a correct perception. Fort Hare was a hotbed because yes, you had that. But you also had a core of, a cross-section, of the population. If I look back at universities like Natal University, Fort Hare had Indians, Africans, Coloureds, even one or two Chinese from Johannesburg, who were all part of this pot. And it was Coloureds from various parts of South Africa. And you all had to live together, eat together, dance together, play together, drink together. And what I have dreaded most about the loss of Fort Hare was that microcosm of South Africa that was not allowed to bloom and be able to reproduce itself into a totally new [society]…. Everyone who was regarded as not white could come to Fort Hare. And it was a wonderful sense that one has of how people lived together.

I remember people exchanging stories about some people who had never seen Indians and then having to experience Indians. It's quite a cultural shock. How do they eat? What do they do? The myths that you have to then get over. And Fort Hare was able to do that. And you didn't hear about fights between Indians and Coloureds and Africans. It wasn't there. And for me it was a good thing that, as a person who eventually ended up studying sociology, to say that these things are possible if the atmosphere is created for people to live.

Because I remember that our rag [carnival] days, the days when we had what we called the court of injustice, who was being charged for what, people collaborated together to make the best of the charges whether you were Indian or Coloured. And sometimes you had something to do with that, with what you were charged with. And so I think it was a wonderful sense of bringing people together. But because you then became so active politically across racial barriers was I think also very good for Fort Hare. And no other institution in the country had that. And therefore really, I do have a feeling that [the Act aimed] to break that kind of thing down. [Because of that] this coalescence was not allowed to reproduce itself over time and therefore create a core intellectual elite of people who could then go out into the world and lead in this manner....

DM: In terms of student reaction, from 1955 they knew that this bill was a possibility. You were there right up to when it actually happened, that the school was taken over by the government. Obviously, the students didn't let it go easily. Can you remember some of the sentiments and some of the actions that the students took in the years and months leading up to the takeover?

IM: Well, in particular I think what stands out is a number of things that were happening. And I'm not so sure which year it is that it happened, when the whole university found itself waking up in the morning with flags up and flagpoles cut, things written on top of Stewart, the library, etc. I still have pictures of that, very good memories about this. And posters and lampoons all over the place, very methodically done, with precision. And there was not a single student around you who knew how that happened. I think that was very, very striking. It was quite clear that there had been those who had been organised to do this, did it well, and nobody talked. Now and then, you hear a few of them who were knowledgeable about that being able to say how this happened.

It stands out in one's memory that the skull and crossbones that was right in the center, on the flagpole that used to be between three buildings, the library, Stewart, and then the science lab, Henderson. They had also oiled the pole, so nobody could go up this pole at all. And the frustration of the rector was just--- I guess it set it in one's mind that you can outwit them. You don't have to succumb, there is another way that you can do things and make [the authorities] uncomfortable.

There was, as you say, the constant talk, sometimes hot air, but sometimes really quite adamant, intimidating talk and so on. But I suppose one also has to judge some of those things in the context of what was possible at the time. If you look back you say surely you could have done more. Just after I had left, that is when the armed struggle started and the pylons down [in December 1961], which some of the Fort Hare lecturers were involved in. But I think it was those other years that had sort of become the formative years....

DM: Once the takeover took place, three out of four staff members were either forced to resign or quit or were fired... So with all these lecturers and professors being forced out, how did that affect the students? How did that affect the quality of education?

IM: Well my sense was that one's trust in the people who would then stay was a bit shaken, the perception that [these] people were not about to resist the system and so on. And some of your very good quality blacks were removed. But also some of your whites. I think you should just check the name Izzelstrom. Izzelstrom or Israelstrom or something like that. It was a husband and wife team.

DM: The biology…?

IM: I think they were in the biology or chemistry [department], but certainly in the sciences…. I think I left at the time when Ross came. Yes, I left, that was my last year under Ross…. There was a feeling that this was a weeding of the [best] African minds from an institution and therefore you're going to be made to be second class citizens, a second class education, and that [feeling] was very, very, very strong.

But I suppose if one looks back at it and sees what kinds of things students did under even worse situations, what they were able to achieve, you begin to also now become humble about that which you achieved, in that the later generations of students were able to take on much more against apartheid than we had actually done. Probably our own formative years were rooted in this liberalism. Whereas I think that apartheid created a different student. We had been trained in the old tradition of scholars, of missionary work, etc. These ones were produced under very different circumstances and therefore when you look at that student, my sense is that they were more radical than the Fort Hare student [of my time],

and yet the memory of Fort Hare stands so strong. I think it's just that it is two different times with two different circumstances.

DM: Do you have any memories of Chris Hani as a classmate?

IM: No, it's funny, we sort of caught up with one another strangely in Maputo…. He had much clearer memories of me than I had of him. But it's not surprising because I think I was a year ahead of him or something like that, but also we were fewer women and therefore you stood out in a crowd compared to men. But as we talked, we then remembered. I remembered him in a big heavy coat that he used to wear. It probably was winter because I never could understand why I remember him in this coat. He was almost very priestly, [laughs], and he always smiled when I said that. I said, well I remember you, this serious person, how did you get where you are?

And it was good to reminisce about that because we used to talk about how each one of us has really arrived at politics and our commitments through very different paths. And little things that catapulted us in directions at different times, and convinced me that not everybody gets there by the same route. That's an important lesson, I've always said to my students. We don't all get there by the same route, but you always have to understand what is that route and what shaped that route.

And so when I saw him so active, it was almost like there was a contradiction in my mind. Because he had not been one of those that when I left I knew these ones were leaving the country, this is what they are going to do. Because I had seen them sort of active already. And when I met them in exile, I thought they had actually died. Because I hadn't seen them. And people would spread all this news about so and so had died. And when in the ‘70s, I met some of them in Zambia, I just broke down crying because it was like they appeared from nowhere. People had said well, so and so died in the snow of the Soviet Union. And I guess you sort of almost accepted that until you saw them, and said, you mean you're alive?!

(This is excerpted from a longer interview, and has been lightly edited for clarity.)