Joyce Sikhakhane-Rankin

Joyce Sikhakhane-Rankin[1] recalls the activities of her grandfather, the chaplain of the ANC in Natal, her own activities in the African Students Association in the early 1960s, her work as a journalist, joining an underground network initiated by Winnie Mandela, her arrest, imprisonment and trials. She also recalls working with the leading figures in the South African Students Organisation, including Steve Biko, after her release in late 1970.

My name is Joyce Sikhakhane-Rankin. My Zulu name is Nomafa. I was born at the Bridgeman Memorial Maternity Hospital in Johannesburg after my parents moved into 7703 Orlando West in Johannesburg. Now, my parents' home was in the Mandela, Sisulu and Tutu area known in Soweto as the Triangle. So I actually grew up in front of the leadership of the African National Congress, with the children of this leadership. As a child I played with Aunt Evelyn's children, Mandela's first wife, and the Sisulu children.

I started school at Holy Cross, the school that was run by Father Trevor Huddleston, just past the Sisulu house, which was right at the corner. Then in 1955 or 1956 there was this boycott that was launched by the African National Congress against Bantu Education, which meant that the local schools closed down and other schools started – for instance, at the Sisulu home, where I then attended school. I got caught in the boycott, which was my initiation into the political question.

My father, who was generally apolitical, was a lecturer in African languages at Wits. It was really very strange because my grandfather was very active in politics. But my father concentrated on writing; he was involved in writing the Zulu-English dictionary and he was a writer of books. That was his real passion. He would comment on politics, but he wasn't active in politics. When, unfortunately, the relationship between my parents soured, my father took us, the children, to go and stay with his father at Clermont in Durban. It so happened that my grandfather was the chaplain of the ANC in Natal. Whenever they had provincial meetings, he would be the one who prayed. He was also the chairperson of the Clermont branch of the ANC. So there were regular ANC meetings at my grandfather's home, who used to send me to take messages to his ANC comrades. I would say that's where my taste for underground activity started. In Clermont, we organised the Pioneer Group of the ANC. I used to wear the scarf of the ANC.

Then I went to boarding school at Inanda Seminary, where I got straight into student resistance politics. Barbara Masekela was the head girl and Mrs Edith Yengwa taught us isiZulu. This was in the early 1960s, during the first State of Emergency. My grandfather was arrested under the ninety-day detention law and so was Mrs Yengwa. She was very political. Instead of teaching us isiZulu in class, she would teach us about the ANC. And we got to organising students into the African Students Association. We used to skip school over the weekends to attend meetings in Durban. As the head girl, Barbara used to give us cover. It was quite fascinating, this sort of secret political activity.

[1] Edited by Mbulelo Vizikhungo Mzamane from an interview conducted by Gregory Houston, 16 May 2001, Pretoria, SADET Oral History Project.

My parents ultimately divorced and my mother won custody of us, which meant we had to go back to Johannesburg. My father came to us and said we had to make a choice to live with him or with my mother. So we chose to live with my mother. We had been missing her all those years. She was a very warm person. Then he said to me: "You will not go back to boarding school." I think this was in 1961. So I enrolled at Orlando High School, where for the first time I actually met the politics of the PAC. The student population was very much involved in PAC politics. Thami Mazwai and Joe Tlholoe, who were PAC, were my classmates, as was Eddie Funde, although Eddie was ANC.

Orlando was very rough. I used to walk quite a long distance from Orlando West to Orlando East. You had to walk in groups. There were *tsotsi* elements. I was so fit at the time and I could jump fences. We also kept knives in our school bags. You kept stones. I wasn't enjoying it at all. My mother said: "Go and talk to the social workers. Maybe they will talk to your dad so that he sends you back to Inanda." I went to the social work office in Fox Street. I was interviewed and then referred to Mrs Mandela, little knowing it was Winnie. Nelson Mandela and his first wife, Evelyn, had divorced. So I met this new Mrs Mandela, who was a very striking personality. She interviewed me, then visited my family, visited my dad and actually managed to convince him that I should be sent back to boarding school. I stopped going to Orlando High mid-term because I really didn't like the school. The following year I enrolled back at Inanda.

I finished my matric in 1963. But I was political all along at boarding school, where I went back to the student movement. In 1962 one of the meetings that we went to in Durban, organised secretly, was a meeting addressed by Ernest Gallo, one of the leaders of the African Student Association, and Thabo Mbeki. ASA was more or less like SASO (the South African Students Organisation)[1] that was formed in the late 1960s; the aim was to mobilise the student population in South Africa to resist apartheid education. As a consequence of that, a lot of us who were active in this refused to enrol at the Bantu colleges that were being created at the time. For instance, Barbara didn't go there. I also didn't go there.

In my final year at school, I won a national essay competition and my English teacher said this was one indication that I could be a good journalist. She gave me that idea. And true enough, because I didn't want to go to these apartheid tribal colleges, I wrote to the *World* newspaper and they said: "Okay, we will take you for six months as a cub reporter. If you prove yourself, you can be put on full-time."

I started working at the *World* newspaper in December 1963 during the Rivonia Trial, which they didn't cover very much. I did a lot of articles on the social effects of apartheid. Although the *World* had a black editor, M. T. Moerane, the place was suffused with the politics of Moral Rearmament, a Christian movement from the States that was rabidly anti-communist.

[1] SASO was formed in 1968 following the rejection of white leadership in the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS). With its leader, Steve Biko, SASO played a leading role in the Black Consciousness Movement in the late 1960s and most of the 1970s.

It had really gripped South Africa at that time and Moerane, in particular. They really didn't want politics; they didn't want anything attacking apartheid to be published in the newspaper. But journalists like me, good journalists even before me, simply ignored that. Joe Tlholoe and Thami Mazwai, my former classmates at Orlando High School, were now working as journalists at the newspaper. Joe Tlholoe and another guy called Moffat Zungu were detained and the leadership was detained.

At the end of the Rivonia Trial when the leadership was sent to Robben Island, in Soweto it was like there had been a funeral. Soweto had been really hard hit. Then this expanded to the whole of South Africa because the leadership came from all over South Africa. People were licking their wounds. But the youth was very militant at heart. That's how I found it. There was this eerie silence that showed something was simmering. That's why when I wrote *Window on Soweto,* I could predict June 1976, because people were very angry. It was painful to have Mandela, Sisulu, Mbeki, etc. sent to Robben Island. The police were running rough-shod in the townships, gun-toting and all that. The population seemed cowered somewhat, and there was a dearth of overt political activity. On the surface it appeared as if they had wiped out the ANC. But really they hadn't.

Being a journalist and free to move about without attracting too much suspicion, however, I was sought out by political activists, people who knew me. I then became active, passing messages from one banned person to another, such as Albertina Sisulu and Helen Joseph, and setting up meetings. There were these toilets in Westgate Station, Faraday Station, where Shanti Naidoo and others would meet. I also got involved in collecting money from the Anglican Church. At the time there was [Gonvile] ffrench-Beytagh, Dean of St Mary's Cathedral in Johannesburg, who received monies to be passed on to families of political prisoners. I would also write articles highlighting injustice. I remember I wrote an article about Mrs Mpofu, who had lots of children and whose husband was on Robben Island. When he came out, he was deported to Rhodesia. I did all these articles.

On the political front, I remember meeting Winnie Mandela again through Rita Ndzanga. They had a secret cell structure. Winnie said political things which attracted me because I was political. She spoke of the need to resist. She said people shouldn't sit and do nothing because the leadership was in jail. Then I was given a task to organise young people. I established cells of young people, who were then addressed by people like Rita, *Tata* Elliot Shabangu, *Tata* Mvemve and *Tata* Samson Ndou. I organised these small cells and in one of them there was Snuki Zikalala. You never knew who would pitch up at meetings. *Sis* Winnie was introduced to a man called Skosana, who had a car, as the person who would ferry me around if I needed transport. He collected people around. I remember one time Winnie came home and picked me up. There was Rita in the car. This Skosana chap was driving. We drove to Joburg to the United States Information Service, where we found Mahanyele. Leaflets were being printed. I was given a batch for distribution. It turned out later that Skosana was a police informer and every one of us he met got detained, like Snuki and Wally Serote.

At the *World* I got so pissed off by the pacifist Moral Rearmament philosophy that I applied for a job at the *Rand Daily Mail*. They took me on. They didn't even put me on probation and actually gave me a full-time job. I worked with people like Benjamin Pogrund, who was very much pro-PAC and virulently anti-communist, Allister Sparks, and Anthony Holiday. It was generally a lovely set up, although we worked from a separate office, which was called the township office, because the newsroom wasn't mixed. Being the only black woman journalist, I was given a whole floor of toilets that I shared with another woman, Jill Chisholm.

In 1968, when I was working at the *Rand Daily Mail*, I was interested in doing articles which highlighted the effects of apartheid on the general African population. The issue of forced removals was a thorny one. African people were being removed from their ancestral homes and dumped in outlandish places like Limehill. I used to cover the removals of people from their ancestral lands to these barren areas like Limehill, which I visited and where I saw a woman giving birth in the open veld. That was a really painful situation. I went to a friend of mine called Ian Thompson, who was a Presbyterian priest, Cosmas Desmond, Beyers Naude[1] and others, related what I saw and urged them to organise doctors who could offer medical services to these people. We formed the Justice and Peace Commission that was a nucleus of priests whose conscience was saying they were against apartheid. They did organise a kombi and they did find doctors. That also led to Cosmas writing *The Discarded People*. My husband wrote the medical report in that book. He was not credited for it, on purpose, because at that time I was planning to go and join him outside. From Justice and Peace came the South African Council of Churches. At that time I was engaged to an African doctor. When I spoke to him about this he wasn't interested and I threw the engagement ring in his face. Over weekends I would join these other doctors, recruited from Baragwanath and other hospitals who all happened to be white, to go and work there. That's how I met my current husband, Ken, who had come from Scotland to train in surgery. He was appalled by apartheid. We fell in love, which complicated matters. He left South Africa and I hoped I would join him. Two weeks thereafter I got arrested and was kept in

for seventeen months!

I think Skosana led to our detention. He must have been controlled and he would have reported our activities to the authorities. The question is: Why didn't we work out who he really was? On my side, the explanation is simple: I trusted older comrades like Winnie; Rita; her husband, Lawrence; *Tata* Shabangu; Douglas Mvemve and others. I thought these were experienced people and that I had no cause to be afraid. But now, after the experience I have had and my training in the ANC, I would have questioned it. But this is after the detention happened.

I was arrested in the early hours of the morning. I think it was 2.00am. And they told me they were arresting me under the Terrorism Act. It was shocking. They drove away with me.

[1] The Rev. Beyers Naude was regarded not only as a renegade, but also as a heretic by the ruling Afrikaner Nationalists. A dominee of the Dutch Reformed Church, who for 23 years was an inner councillor of the secret Broederbond, he gradually became convinced that apartheid was unchristian. From such a beginning, he made a profound philosophical journey until he founded the multiracial ecumenical Christian Institute.

It was mainly boers and one African guy, whom they dropped I-don't-know-where in Soweto, because it was dark. This guy said when he left: "My bosses, I wish you all the best with this terrorist."

It was really shocking. I was detained at Pretoria Central. When we arrived I had to strip naked to be searched. Then they took me to the condemned cell, where women prisoners who were going to the gallows were held. The next day I was taken to a different cell. The cells in Pretoria Central are in a row separated by a wall. We banged walls and shouted to learn who was around. Then I got to hear that Shanti Naidoo was around because she used to chant Indian prayers. I also got to know that Winnie Mandela was also in detention. We were twenty-two in all.

I was taken after three days for interrogation by these huge boere guys and grilled for three days. There was Johan Coetzee, Van Wyk, and Swanepoel with the *rooi* nose who took you to the cleaners. By that time Winnie and Rita had already been interrogated. That much was clear to me. It was equally clear that the police knew everything, so there would have been little point in denying what they already knew. When I was interrogated, for instance, the police had already done my psychological profile. They knew everything – my boyfriends, my lifestyle and all that. These were methods which they would use in breaking you down. It's no use being beaten up for what they already know. They are interested in information. They are not interested in your death, although they did kill people. But you kept back what you felt they didn't know. They offered to release me if I turned state witness. They would change my identification. They could take me outside South Africa to work elsewhere and be protected. They then transferred me from Pretoria Central to Nylstroom Prison. I don't have to harp on the conditions. I would protest and demand to know when I was going to be set free, when I would go home. They came one day and took us to Pretoria to be tried.

I must say every one of us was angry at Winnie and also, to a certain extent, at one another because of this question of having confirmed, because maybe you shouldn't have confirmed, you should rather have been dead. Afterwards we should really have gone through a sort of healing period and forgiven one another. But that was very difficult now in jail and we had been refused bail. Winnie had been given a bed, she was more or less accorded special status. We were put in the cell which Winnie occupied. This was a bigger cell and she had a bed with starched sheets, white sheets, and a cabinet with books piled up, a series called the Angelique series. Now, these novels are about a French sorcerer who is condemned to death. His wife called Angelique wants to save him from the gallows. I picked up one of these books to read and thought it was a brainwash. I read almost all of them. And then I asked Winnie where she got these. She said: "Oh, they were given to me by the Special Branch when I demanded something to read." I thought this series was definitely intended to indoctrinate Winnie. I remembered that at Nylstroom they had given me a book called *The Flying Eagles*. You know what happened? After reading that book, I planned to escape. At some stage I even wanted to kill myself. And when I look back now, I think that book was given to me deliberately because at Nylstroom there was no way in which I could have escaped. I would have been shot dead. We let Winnie know that they were trying to persuade her to negotiate the release of Mandela and company.

They came one day and took us to Pretoria to be tried. The first freedom fighter I met was at our trial, Benjamin Ramose, whom the state wanted to impose on us. People like Mahanyele actually came and gave evidence. But others refused. We were discharged and then re-detained. Our lawyers fought and we got free at last. We had a very good team of lawyers – George Bizos, [Sydney] Kentridge, and [Joel] Carlson.

Our detention did something in raising consciousness against apartheid. My mother told me that the African Independent Churches, the Zionists, used to come and pray at home. Journalists and international organisations protested, as did students at Wits, calling for our release. They were beaten up. It created a crisis for the apartheid regime because for the first time they beat up white students. Actually, I used to organise cells among white people. These were both students – Jeanette Curtis[1] and Neville Curtis – and people who were Marxist intellectuals like Ben Couzens and his wife, Paula. We used to have political discussions. At that time, Herbert Marcuse was the Marxist theoretician students really read. So, we would read that, and we'd do the critique of that. They didn't understand the issue of national liberation, however, and they were highly critical of African activists who seemed to them to harbour bourgeois sentiments. They didn't really like the ANC, saying the ANC would replace the boers if it came to power. They knew I was ANC and I took ANC people to speak at their meetings. They knew all that.

The apartheid regime claimed that it had killed the ANC. It hadn't. Things were not working the way the boers wanted. In the black campuses and in the white campuses there was uproar. There was convergence of politics at that time. And the ANC's profile was coming up, even in this case of ours. So what happened was that they withdrew the case, and then we were put in detention again. Now, I remember this tension when they withdrew the case. You know, we were confused. I was very confused, but at the same time I knew that they were not going to let us go. I think it was Van Wyk, one of the Special Branch Police, who said: "I'm detaining you again." I hit him with my fists.

When we were eventually released in 1970, I was banned and restricted. But we were sought out by SASO, the South African Students Organisation, formed in 1969. I met Steve Biko[2], Barney Pityana, Harry Nengwekhulu and others, and we discussed how to take things forward.

[1] Jeanette Curtis, who, together with her husband Marius Schoon, worked with the ANC underground from Botswana in the late 1970s. She was killed by the apartheid security forces in the early 1980s.

[2] Steve Biko, widely regarded as the father of Black Consciousness in South Africa, was born in December 1946 in King William's Town. After being expelled from his first school, Lovedale, he was transferred to a Roman Catholic boarding school in Natal. From there he enrolled as a student at the University of Natal Medical School (Black Section). Whilst at medical school, Biko became involved with the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS). But the union was dominated by white liberals and failed to represent the needs of black students, so Biko resigned in 1968 and founded the South African Students' Organisation (SASO).

I went to Durban, you know, underground, and we met and had discussions mainly on the strategy of SASO in relation to NUSAS. You remember that NUSAS operated in the so-called white universities and SASO in the black campuses. But the question was: How could they work together, you know, to advance the student cause? But also there was the question of the politics, because the student body was not a political organisation, which is what ultimately the Black People's Convention (BPC)[1], formed in 1972, became. As everybody knew, Steve Biko really sought out ANC activists, plus the leadership. For instance, I met Rick Turner[2] and Griffiths Mxenge when I was with Steve Biko. Because they were also feeling people out, Steve Biko really favoured talking to the ANC. Let me give an example. One time during a meeting, Barney Pityana objected to my presence. Steve over-ruled him and said: "No, I don't see any problem in having Joyce here. We have to have as wide a consultation as possible." But, you see, although Barney recognised the ANC, he really never felt as comfortable with the ANC as Steve did. I think that's why Steve Biko was such a skilful player. As I said, Steve was working closely with Mxenge and Richard Turner. Remember that both were assassinated. They were the key advisers to Steve Biko. And Steve Biko listened to them. He was walking a tight rope in that he had to be seen to be purely SASO, because as soon as you were identified as ANC it became problematic. Maybe actually the boers knew better. That's why they killed him.

The students were vocal. But on their own they were not an answer to the political question of this country. So there was need for a mature organisation to move this forward. Mxenge was in the ANC underground. I was an ANC person. So the students were linking up with the ANC. They had this Black Consciousness Movement (BCM)[3], which was similar to what the ANC had when Madiba and Walter Sisulu built up the Youth League of that time.

We were saying to them that, really, it's nothing new what you are doing. Maybe the name is different. The tactics also, you know, were a little different. The students didn't need to be labelled ANC, because as soon as you were, the enemy clamped down on you. I mean I didn't find it problematic to talk to Steve Biko, Barney Pityana, and Harry Nengwekhulu. What they wanted was to mobilise people; it was necessary that it should happen.

1 The Black People's Convention was formed in 1972. The BPC effectively brought together roughly 70 different black consciousness groups and associations, such as the South African Student's Movement (SASM), which played a significant role in the 1976 uprisings, the National Association of Youth Organisations (NAYO), and the Black Workers Project (BWP) which supported black workers whose unions were not recognised under the apartheid regime. Biko was elected as the first president of the BPC.

2 Rick Turner was a senior lecturer at the University of Natal in the 1970s when he met Steve Biko.

3 The BCM emerged in the late-1960s out of the political vacuum created by the decimation of the ANC and PAC leadership, by jailing and banning, after the Sharpeville Massacre in 1960. From its onset, the BCM aggressively launched an attack on traditional white values, especially the "condescending" values of whites of liberal opinion. Black Consciousness philosopy placed emphasis on the liberation of the black man by themselves, first from psychological oppression from the inferiority complex engendered by racial oppression and, secondly, from the physical one arising from living in a racist society. They refused to engage white liberal opinion on the pros and cons of Black Consciousness, and emphasised the rejection of white monopoly on truth as a central tenet of their movement.

I had also formed women cells in Soweto. Nkosazana Dlamini (who married Jacob Zuma); Mamphela Ramphele, Bridgette (who married Lindelwa Mabandla), and Thapelo Kubheka (who married Mosibudi Mangena) belonged to that group. The ANC didn't want SASO or the BCM to disband. That was our brief from the leadership. They just wanted a working relationship because the ANC felt BCM had a role to play.

So it wasn't necessary for those organisations to disband and join the ANC *en masse*. But individuals could do that. And of course, individuals did that. I must say, I was one of those passionately wanting everyone to disband and join the ANC. I didn't see why they shouldn't. But, then the brief of the ANC was that it was individuals and not organisations.

Not everyone was enamoured of SASO. I remember that, during the debates on the formation of SASO, Winnie was against SASO. She never accepted SASO because she felt SASO was an apartheid institution and that the students were products of apartheid and there was nothing good they would come out with. And yet, if you sat critically and thought of it, the students wanted to break away from apartheid. The issue now was the relationship with NUSAS. And the students of NUSAS themselves couldn't say they were not products of apartheid racism. They also came from a wealthy community. They had their arrogance. They had better "knowledge" than students from black campuses. And there used to be this thing about white students: they would protest while they were students, but once they had graduated and their fathers had found them jobs as executives, they went quiet. That was the truth. The students were also grappling with power relations between black and white. We should also understand that in South Africa – we used to debate this thing – if you were black, if you were an African, you always had to learn all the time. You were always a pupil. You never passed; you never got a certificate with our white compatriots – with some of them, not all of them. We should understand where they came from. They came from privileged backgrounds where there was knowledge. Knowledge is power and some of them found it very difficult to relinquish that. That was the reality. When Orlando started, African people were mixed in Orlando. But as housing developed from the mid-1950s, people from Venda were put in Chiawelo; in Mofolo they wanted to put Tswana and Sotho-speaking people. You found that this divide by the apartheid regime did have an effect on people. It really did. The debate in SASO was how to counter the divide-and-rule tactics of the apartheid regime.

I also found at the time I was working with SASO that people were grappling with their own identities as human beings. I've never had a problem with my identity as an African person. I'll give you an example. I never used these skin lightening creams, the Ambies and all that. I honestly had a problem with changing my skin colour. I would never even think of it. I plaited my hair, alright. But plaiting your hair is an old African tradition. You see it in Ethiopia. And also I used make-up, which is also part of African tradition. Thabo Mbeki was one of those ANC cadres who never had a problem with being African, doing things with confidence and just moving on. Steve Biko also didn't have that problem. Although he wrote about and espoused black beauty and all that, he didn't have a problem when he met people like Rick Turner, Griffiths Mxenge, or ANC people. He knew what they stood for. But he had to carry his constituency, the student population, along, which had limitations. And we understood why people had those limitations.

Following my arrest, the ANC thought I was courting further arrest by staying on in South Africa, and that I would be more useful if I went out of the country, so they sent an order that I should leave. I obeyed the order and I left the country. You must remember I started working for the ANC at a very early age. I just got so exhausted that I really appreciated it when I was given a break. Also, I think I am better when I am not too much in the public eye. And there are lots of people like me, I think, in the ANC. When we were banned and restricted, and the ANC said I should leave, I just did that. This was now 1972. The ANC had also wanted Steve Biko to leave because they had heard that there was going to be a clamp down. We talked with Steve Biko. Unfortunately he refused to leave. Then, true, the clampdown happened.

I left behind a seven-month old baby girl; my other son was six. I travelled in the compartment of a truck to Swaziland. Somewhere near the border I was put into this compartment. I met the ANC in Swaziland to brief them. The next day I was taken to a place where they took photographs. A very fat Portuguese-speaking man with a big, big tummy was taking the photographs. So a girl who was going to process the passport says to me: “Don't be stupid. We want your photos. We must make a passport for you now. Just brush that guy's big tummy. He'll take your photos.” And true enough he took them. I had to be disguised, given my alibi. Now at that time, remember, there was war in Mozambique. So, it was by road, overnight, hidden, into Maputo! The next day into a plane to Germany! The story was that I was married to a German guy and I was coming to meet my in-laws; blah, blah, blah! I didn't speak German but they didn't mind because I came from Swaziland. I had my alibi. My in-laws were phoned. “Oh yes, we are expecting our daughter-in-law!”

Frankfurt, overnight, to West Berlin; the next day, East Berlin! By the time I reached East Berlin, I remember asking for a sedative because my mind was really numb.