

Ruth Mompoti

Ruth Mompoti¹ recalls her youth and work as a teacher before she joined the ANC in 1952. Mompoti then worked in the law firm of Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo, where she became active in the Federation of South African Women, playing a leading role in the processes leading up to the women's march in 1956. After the ANC was banned she began working underground, and recalls the work members of the Women's League did at the time. Mompoti went into exile in 1962, leaving her children behind. She underwent military training before working closely with Oliver Tambo in the ANC's External Mission. She became a member of the NEC, and also recalls her work during this period.

I was born in Khanyesa of peasant parents. My paternal grandmother's family were non-believers, but my paternal grandfather's family were believers; they became Christians. My paternal grandmother lived to a very old age. We didn't know exactly how old she was, but she was definitely over a hundred. She used to talk a lot with me; we were so close. She had a very clear mind. Sometimes she could quote hymns because her husband had been a Christian and a church leader. I found it most remarkable that a woman who could not read or write had this wonderful memory and could remember this type of thing.

One time I asked her how she got married. I said: "I understand that you got married in Kuruman." My grandmother said: "When your grandfather's parents came to ask for my hand in marriage, they accepted them because they were a respected family in the village. So they were able to allow me to get married to them although we were different because they were believers and we were non-believers. But what my parents insisted on was that we have a Tswana marriage with all the rituals of the Tswana marriage: *bogadi* which is the introduction, and then *mokwele* which is *lobola*, and then the wedding ceremony itself where all the people come and are told that our child is being given to this family in marriage." I asked her: "What was your wedding dress like?" She said: "Oh, I was so beautiful! I was decorated with beads and my hair was done up and made up with *sebito*." *Sebito* is like a bulb, black and shiny, and you apply it to the hair to hold the hair up. That's when I realised that make-up was not just a white invention. She said: "After the wedding, my parents said, 'Well, you people say you are not married to Christians. That's your problem. As far as we are concerned, our daughter is married. You can take her. Where you go and do your Christian thing is your problem.'"

My grandmother then travelled with my grandfather to Kuruman to go and get married in the church in Kuruman; that was the missionary station. My grandmother never really became a full member of the church. But she supported her husband fully. She went to church. She did all she had to do as his wife, although she herself kept to her own traditional beliefs and customs.

¹ Edited by Mbulelo Vizikhungo Mzamane from an interview conducted by Sifiso Ndlovu and Bernard Magubane, 15 August 2001, Vryburg, SADET Oral History Project.

I was born in 1925 on the 14th of September. My mother's name was Seli Seichoko and my father Khaonyatse/Gaonyatse Seichoko. Both were church leaders in Vryburg in what was then the London Missionary Society Church (LSMC), which is now the United Congregational Church of South Africa. My mother was in the Mothers' Union. She became a very big leader, a very powerful speaker in the church, until the end of her life, when she died at ninety-eight. There were six of us children; three boys and three girls. We lived in Khanyesa. The people ploughed very big fields and, when the ploughing was over, my father went to work in the diamond diggings in Kimberley and later in the gold mines in Klerksdorp. Working in the mines, he taught himself to read and write; he never went to school. He also used to knit very beautiful scarves and sell them to the farmers. He was a very enterprising person who did all sorts of things to make sure that we were comfortable. We had cattle; we had sheep; we had goats.

My elder brother used to walk six miles every morning to school and six miles back. So, my father decided to come and find work in Vryburg because then it would be easy for us to go to school. In 1931, when I was six years old, we moved to Vryburg. But we, as a family, never looked upon Vryburg as "home". "Home" was always in the village, Khanyesa. When the school closed in summer, we went to the village for the ploughing or for chasing birds. We had to get up at 5am to see that the birds didn't settle on the sorghum or the corn. Then, in winter, we went home again for the harvesting. I stayed in Vryburg until I passed Standard 6 and then I went to Tygerkloof Teachers Training College. Actually, I didn't go immediately. I had to work first for a year in Vryburg. I worked for a white family, looking after their child, because my father had died when I was fourteen and my mother didn't have enough money to keep two children at college. Then I joined my sister at Tygerkloof. It was her last year. She was finishing. My mother felt that she could sell one or two cattle and pay for the fees. That's when I went to the college.

I finished my Primary School Teacher's Diploma in 1944. Then I went to teach at Dithakwaneng, about thirty-five miles from Vryburg. It was a very nice village. They had everything. There's a stream at the top of the hill that cuts the village in two. People used water that came down the hill. They had orchards – every fruit you can think of, we had. They had two harvests of wheat each year. We had maize; we had all the other things that people grew. They had reeds from the river to thatch their houses. So they had very neatly thatched houses. They really lived well.

I left Dithakwaneng after three years; in 1948 my mother was not very well so I decided to get a post at Vryburg Higher Primary School. Those were perhaps the years that really made me realise what life was like for a black child. I taught the beginners' classes. We had classes of about sixty and sometimes two such classes at the same time. How we managed to teach those children, I don't know. But we did. They passed; they managed to learn all they had to learn. A very difficult thing was that a number of them died from measles and from all these little ailments which could have been cured if they had had doctors or their parents had had money to take them to the doctor or hospitals.

It used to be so cold in winter and these children – some of them walked six miles every morning to come to school and six miles back – were sitting there. You were the teacher; you had a jersey on, a child has got one garment. If it was a shirt it was the only thing he had on. If it was a dress it was the only thing that this girl had on. She was sitting there and shivering. You were supposed to teach them. They were supposed to learn like that. These were some of the things that made me realise that life is not right.

I had been in the students' union in Tygerberg and then when I became a teacher I joined the North West District Teachers' Union. The issues then were the conditions of teachers and salaries, and not so much working hours, because our people were very happy to teach their own people. Nobody ever worried about how many hours they spent at work. It was more the conditions of work and salaries and, of course, teaching material for the schools, books and that type of thing. The church buildings were used as classrooms and there would be about two or three of us teaching in one church. We didn't realise that there were areas where there were classrooms. So for us, this was normal and we just taught our children and kept one class away from the other. Sometimes there was just this little space in between the classes and we just carried on, one class facing their teacher and yours facing you. Our children were really good to be able to concentrate and to learn anything under the circumstances. Some of them went to high school. There were about five to six women teachers and about four to five male teachers at the school.

Vryburg has always been a bit of a racist town. If you went into a shop, the white person serving you would say: “*Ja, Annie, wat wil jy hê?*” (Yes, Annie, what would you like to have?) We didn't like this at all. We would respond: “*Ja, Sarah, ek soek brood.*” (Yes, Sarah, I want bread). They would be furious and ask: “Who is your Sarah?” You would say: “Who is your Annie?” Perhaps one of the greatest trials was to see a young white harassing a person who was old enough to be your grandfather. It just didn't go down well. And when we looked at these things, we decided something had to be done. Fortunately, we already had an ANC organisation in Mafikeng, and one of the Thengiwe brothers we were teaching with was a member of the ANC from Mafikeng. He's the one who really introduced the ANC to us. That was in the late 1940s.

Then, in 1951, there was also one of the teachers, Thenjiwe Mathimba, whose father worked in Johannesburg and used to send him newspapers such as the *Guardian*, that ultimately became *New Age*. It used to be very interesting to read this because it was not like the newspapers in Vryburg. It was outspoken, saying what black people should do for themselves. Then Mr Thengiwe told us that we couldn't form a teacher's branch because as teachers we were not allowed to do that. At that time there were regulations that civil servants couldn't join a political party, that type of thing. He said we could still do work. That was alright! In 1952, during the Defiance Campaign, the ANC was selling stamps all over the country. Thenjiwe brought them to Vryburg, so we sold them to raise funds for the ANC in Mafikeng.

That was the year I got married, in April 1952. My husband, the nephew of the Reverend Mogorosi, who was the minister of the LMSC, was resident in Khanyesa. Whenever he came to Vryburg he came to our home. That's how I met him. He was at Merebank, working in Durban as a health assistant. After we got married, I remained at home until December 1952. I joined him in June during the holidays and then I had to move permanently to Soweto, to Orlando West, where his parents were staying. I stayed with my mother-in-law and she was an elderly person. We lived just opposite the Nokwes, although they actually came later, and we had Dr Mji behind us. My husband was a member of the ANC. I also became a member.

When I first got to Johannesburg, the government was on the verge of introducing Bantu Education. The Education Department had asked the North West Teachers' Union, a very good organisation, and various other teachers' organisations to look at education and advise the government. Teachers worked hard and came up with documents which were supposed to have been used. And just after they handed these in, Bantu Education was declared. They really never intended to use what those teachers proposed. The ANC organised schools and moved children from the schools in Johannesburg, in the East Rand, in the West Rand. Everywhere we had schools. Teachers at those schools were members of the ANC, although they were not being paid. That is when the government came up with the law that made it a criminal offence for anybody who was not a teacher to teach. And in the end, the children went back to government schools.

When I left Vryburg I didn't want to go and teach. I didn't find work immediately. I went to a private school to study shorthand and typing. Then my neighbour, Mrs Njiwa, who was working at Mandela and Tambo law firm, wanted to go and study medicine. When she left I applied and I got the job. In the beginning it was a little traumatic for me. I was a village girl. And I get to Johannesburg; there are all these stories about *tsotsis*. I used to go to town once a month because that was when I had to go to the bank to get money and buy whatever I needed and come back fast. I only started moving around when I became active in the ANC. For me it was a very big change. At first I didn't think I would ever get used to it. But you know, when you are busy in an area, you begin to get used to it. And working at Mandela and Tambo also meant working with all sorts of people – with *tsotsis* who had been arrested, with people from the church, and with ANC people. They came in all the time. So you got to know people across the divide. And, therefore, even as you went home from work, you met people, you know, whom you would not necessarily have met. Working at Mandela and Tambo became one way of getting to know people. And, of course, in joining the ANC, I became part of the struggle. I got to know that I had brothers and sisters and I had friends.

I got so involved in the ANC that in no time I was in the Women's League. I don't even know when. The speed at which everything happened! In 1954, we launched the Federation of South African Women. The Freedom Charter was in 1955. Before the conference in Kliptown, the ANC decided that there would be street committees. We went round organising people around their demands and issues they wanted to be resolved. We were not saying: "Join the ANC." We were saying: "We want to call up a very big conference. We want this government to know that we, as the black people of South Africa, demand our rights." We were bringing in more people, more women. We were concentrating more on women. Kliptown was a success, despite the police.

The women had also taken up the anti-pass campaign. It was already quite clear that passes were going to be extended to women. The Federation of South African Women, the ANC Women's League, the Coloured People's Organisation, the Indian Women's Organisation, Women of the Congress of Democrats, all came together. We invited other women's organisations under the banner of the Federation of South African Women, which didn't recognise colour. At the beginning, some white women's organisations used to come. The Black Sash used to come. I can't remember the others. In 1956 we decided that we would have the anti-pass march to Pretoria. The ANC was not very supportive at first. Actually, they felt that as women we would just mess things up. They didn't think women would be able to organise a meaningful crowd. It was not that they didn't want us to go. But I don't think they had confidence that we would be able to organise enough women who would really make a difference. We were later informed that it was through Walter Sisulu that the ANC National Executive eventually agreed. We went everywhere, organising women for this march to Pretoria. We used to get into trains, go to places like Zeerust. You would get a train in the evening from Johannesburg and you'd arrive at midnight in Zeerust. You would do about three meetings with women, and then in the afternoon you would catch a train back to Johannesburg. It was your own money that you would use. Women used to do that. And then, on the 9 August 1956, we marched to Pretoria. I was in the National Executive of the Women's League then.

I retained my job at Mandela and Tambo, which was a very active practice. They were popular. Actually, if they had been working for themselves just for the money, they would have been rich people. They would have led an easy life, although not necessarily a good life. But they would have been out of the struggle. Because they were in the struggle, the majority of their clients were people who didn't have money to pay – black people who had been forcefully moved or who had been arrested for passes or for one apartheid-related wrong or the other. So, every day the office was full of people, even though Mandela and Tambo were banned and the government made sure that it became difficult for them to function. They were very good leaders and they were respected.

When I first got to Johannesburg, Nelson Mandela was already banned. He couldn't go outside Johannesburg to appear for people. Oliver Tambo dealt with outside cases and Mandela dealt with cases in Johannesburg. When the 1956 Treason Trial came, they ran the practice and they also had to appear in the Treason Trial. At that time, we already had two articled clerks, Mendi Msimang and Godfrey Pitje. And then they took on Douglas Lukhele. I used to go to work at 6am. I was the typist and receptionist and secretary, all in one. Then the ANC was banned and a State of Emergency declared. So, Oliver Tambo left the country. Nelson Mandela was arrested for having left the country illegally. He used to come to the office under escort because they had decided that we couldn't go on and they must close the practice. Msimang had left; Pitje had finished his studies and opened his own practice. Lukhele had left because there was no longer a practice, really.

During the State of Emergency, when most of the leaders were arrested, we worked under Moses Kotane and J.B. Marks, who were in contact with the leaders in prison. They went into hiding. I was chosen by those leaders who remained to report to Moses Kotane and hear what the instructions of the leaders were. We had to keep the ANC alive. We decided that Dr Kazi had to find money because we had to pay for the pamphlets that we were going to print, etc. They were ANC pamphlets, calling on people to organise and also telling them what was happening, what the leaders were saying from prison. Most of the people who read them were our members. That was a way of communicating with them. Our people had to know.

I was in charge of the printing and distribution. I worked with people like Henry Makgothi and John Mavuso, who joined other organisations. We also worked with this man who became a traitor, Tlhapane. It was very difficult to distribute these pamphlets because they were illegal documents that I had to carry to Soweto. I had to go to a taxi and say: "Can your taxi move? Let's go." The driver would ask: "Where to?" I would say: "Just drive." You would get to the place and say: "Stop here." You would get out. You would go round the corner. You'd bring a box, open the boot, put it in and say: "You know, if the police find that, it's your problem, not mine." If I was bringing the pamphlets in the taxi, I would stop the taxi about two houses away from where I was going, take the box, pay the taxi and say: "*Baba*, you better move on. You'll get into trouble."

You know, sometimes when I think back, I feel that we think we were revolutionaries who were active in the struggle, but we never think of these men who risked their lives. I mean, if they were arrested, we would have also been arrested. But I might have said: "These things are not mine!" and just walked out of the taxi. Of course, I wouldn't have done that. But they took that chance with us. They knew, because I came to them quite often. I did it right through the State of Emergency, right up to the end. After the State of Emergency, some of them used to talk about it in the taxis.

The other interesting thing was that, when the ANC was banned, in the Women's League we decided that we were going to form women's clubs; that we were not going to go down; and that our branches would remain. They would just be called women's clubs and they would do different things. Sometimes we called meetings camouflaged as some tea party or something. That's how we got the Women's League going even during the State of Emergency. In the end, the police came for me. But I ran away. I then had to work underground. I still held meetings with the committee. I also held regular meetings with Uncle Moses Kotane, who held our group together and was the most important link when the leadership was in jail.

Before the State of Emergency, I knew Moses Kotane. But not very well. I knew him as a very serious ANC leader whom I feared in a way. And then I worked with him during the State of Emergency and got to know him well. He was a very strict and cautious man, a disciplinarian. He kept time. I had to arrive at a certain spot, at a certain time, not wait there. If I was waiting, he would drive away because, he would say, the police may have been observing me, standing there. "I don't want to get arrested," he would explain. "The men in jail will kill me if I get arrested." When I arrived, if I saw that I had time, I would go into a shop, buy something. Then I would go out and walk. When I'd get to this spot, his car would stop there, at the appointed time and then I would get in. As I said, he was a very strict man, but a very fair man. Very open; sometimes brutally frank.

But always fair. Most people loved Kotane because even if he tore you to pieces, you could see why. And after doing that he would correct you. You learnt a lot from him.

Also interesting were the women in Vryburg with whom I used to have meetings. I had been meeting them even before the State of Emergency, to tell them what would happen when they carried passes or when they refused to carry them. They all refused to carry passes and they said: “*Ruth o re signetse ga raro ko Gauteng*” (Ruth has signed three times for us in Johannesburg and said that we shouldn't carry passes. We are not carrying them). My mother was very frightened for me. She was also very angry with them. It took a lot of coercion from the police to get the women in Vryburg to carry passes. I admired them because it's a small town and the police are vicious.

When the State Emergency was declared, I was asked by Walter Sisulu to go underground. I was very unhappy because other women were going to prison. Why should I go underground? I'd never really been sentenced. I'd been going in and coming out of jail. Spending a weekend, coming out, and my case would be withdrawn. I just felt this was unfair; I also wanted the experience of going to jail with other people. But those were the instructions. It meant that I had to work secretly; nobody had to know what I was doing. In the beginning, that's what it was. I had a special car to use, and go deliver whatever or receive whatever and also meet with Uncle Kotane. At the beginning we had Uncle J. B. Marks, John Motshabi, Dan Tloome and a number of leaders they kept arresting one by one. In the end, Uncle J. B. also went into exile. Then when Uncle J. B. went, I was instructed not to get arrested. So I had to go underground.

After I went underground, the police came to my house several times. And then somebody told them that I lived at my friend's place. Duma Nokwe's niece, who knew where I was staying, ran across to my friend's house and said: “Aunt Ruth, the police are coming for you.” My friend at whose place I was hiding said: “Move.” It was in the morning and I had been cleaning and washing. I was not even dressed. So I just put on clothes – I even had funny shoes on – went out through the back door and ran. By the time they came to the house, I was gone.

My husband, Peter Matsawane, was still working in Durban. Just before the State of Emergency – I suppose it was also because of politics – my marriage broke down. Actually, it was because he lived too far away. I lived in Johannesburg and he lived in Durban. That didn't help things. He was not there. It was just me and members of his family, who were not very keen on the ANC and politics in general. During the State of Emergency I had moved to friends and was looking for a house of my own. I have never spoken about this part of my life. Those are the tribulations of my life.

I was arrested after the State of Emergency was lifted. I took my son to town; my second baby who was born in 1958. My first son was born in 1955, the year of the Freedom Charter. It was the first Saturday after the State of Emergency. He was about two or three then. He didn't have shoes, so I took him to town early in the morning by taxi.

I had already found a house in White City, Jabavu. I went to the ANC office for a meeting. When I came out, the Special Branch police were on my trail. I walked towards a shoe shop in Commissioner Street, not far from the office of Mandela and Tambo and the ANC. Just as I passed Orient House, a Coloured policeman, Sharpe, came up to me and said: "Ruth Mompati, you are under arrest." I said: "Where is your warrant of arrest?" I just walked on to the shoe shop because I realised that they might grab me and I didn't want my child to go to prison. At the shoe shop I asked for a phone and called Pitje's office. He was not there. I called somebody else and told them: "I think I'm going to be arrested and I've a child with me. Could you come and collect him?" Then I decided: "This is not right; I must get out of here and go back home. These people will really arrest me with the child." As we came out of the store, however, Sharpe and other policemen immediately grabbed me. I was holding my child's hand. They just threw me in the back of the car. My child followed me because I held on to him.

Then they took me to Marshall Square. They didn't want to take responsibility for the child. They took me home, where I left my child. On the way they asked me whether I wanted them to take me to Orlando East Police Station or to Meadowlands. You know, Meadowlands had flush toilets, while Orlando East used buckets. I didn't want them to know my preference, because they might just take me where I didn't want to go. So I said: "I don't care where you take me. You didn't ask for my permission when you arrested me. Why do you ask me now?" So they took me to Meadowlands, where I spent the whole weekend. It was cold. Nobody knew where I was. They looked for me all over but they couldn't find me. On the Monday I appeared in court. They opposed bail because they said it was a very serious charge. I didn't know what I was supposed to have done. Three days later they withdrew the charge because they had nothing against me. They had never caught me doing anything wrong during the State of Emergency.

I got a job with Andrew Lukhele, after Mandela and Tambo closed down. Clients of Mandela and Tambo showed up every day, wanting to know about their cases. I had to inform them, but it meant I had no time to do Lukhele's work. I had to leave. I got a job with the Defence and Aid Fund before it was banned in South Africa. But then the ANC, through Walter Sisulu and Moses Kotane, asked me to leave the country. I didn't know how I was going to leave. I was now divorced since the end of 1959. I had two children. I didn't know how I was going to do it. I went home to see my mother. I told her that I was going to school abroad and asked her to remain with the children. She asked: "How long are you going to be away for?" My parents loved education. If you spoke about education they listened. I said: "Only one year." Actually, I was supposed to be away for a year. I was supposed to go and train and then come back to train our guerrillas. That was the idea. She didn't realise that I might never come back to the country in her lifetime.

I had a house in White City, Jabavu that I didn't want to lose, so I took in Alfred Nzo, who didn't have anywhere to live because he was banned from living in Alexandra. I went to the municipality offices to register him as my sub-tenant. They registered him, gave me the piece of paper, and I left. You remember that snow in 1962 in South Africa? It snowed the day before I was to leave!

I left the country with two other people, Flag Boshielo and Alfred 'Kgokong' Mqotha. We left through Botswana and went to Tanzania. Tennyson Makiwane was the chief representative there when we arrived in September 1962. In Dar es Salaam I was confined to the house. I couldn't go out and talk to people. I was not supposed to be seen because I was leaving for training. We were the second group of people after Andrew Mlangeni, Joe Gqabi, Wilton Mkwayi and Raymond Mhlaba. They had already been trained and were coming back when we were going to the Soviet Union. This was one of the most interesting parts of my life. I could not even speak the language. We started classes immediately, learning about the history of the working class, political economy, socialist philosophy, surveillance, topography, sabotage, etc. After our year's training they decided that they would take us for a holiday to the Black Sea. We travelled from centre to centre after the holiday. One day we picked up a British Communist Party newspaper. Rivonia had been raided and the leaders arrested. Do you know how I felt? That was the worst thing ever to befall me. What was I going to say to my mother? How was I going to get to my children? It was a tragedy for me.

Boshielo and I were supposed to go back to Tanzania and then back to South Africa. We were experts now. But I couldn't come back. They sent me to meet the leaders in Prague. One of the things that our leaders were able to do, especially abroad, was to move without the Boers knowing where they were. The conference in Prague was attended by people like Joe Matthews, Joe Slovo, Malume Kotane, Ruth First. I can't remember the other people. They were reviewing what should be done about people like us. They had contact with the leaders inside who said: "If you send them in they will go straight to prison. It would be a waste." So I told them: "No, I'm ready to go home." They said: "The people at home say it would be a waste for you to go." I said: "What about my children?" They said: "Your children are better off without you; if you get there, you are all going to be harassed by the police." I said: "Are they not being harassed now, by my absence?" That's what they wanted to tell me. In the meantime, I didn't realise that the documents for travel that I was using had expired and, therefore, the only place I could go back to was the Soviet Union. I went back for a second year, training again, and in the end I was in exile for twenty-seven years.

I went back to Tanzania with Flag Boshielo in September 1964. In fact, all three of us came back because even Mqotha, who was supposed to be there for two years, had now finished. I started working in the ANC office with Malume Kotane, O.R. Tambo (he moved around, he was in London), Uncle J.B. Marks, James Radebe (he was the chief rep there) and the growing community of exiles now flocking into Tanzania. I was everybody's secretary and, because I was from the Women's League, I organised the Women's League. We were a very active Women's League in Tanzania. Some of the people who were there were Mrs Matlou, Mrs Ngalo, Agnes Msimang, etc. And then, of course, we had camps in Tanzania, in Kongwa. I travelled very often to Kongwa. I dealt a lot with MK cadres because I was trained. So I could be involved. I used to go to Kongwa, sometimes just to address them and to be there because it was good for them to know that people cared. And then also, of course, we spoke to the very few women actually at the camp. In fact, in the beginning there were hardly any women. I remember four that came together: Daphne (her MK name), Jacqueline (also her MK name), and then there was Nomsa (also an MK name), etc. I don't remember how many men there were, 200 or so, and only about four women!

Afterwards more women came, so it became even more necessary to visit the camp. The men all thought they had to be related to these women. This was the greatest problem right through, even later on when we were no longer in Kongwa; when we were in Angola. You had to be there to talk to the women; they also had to know that they could talk to us. We definitely had problems. Men were the problem. Not that all our men were really problematic. But this was life and everybody wanted a girlfriend and there were only so many women.

One other thing that I did was to attend women's conferences. We were invited by women all over the world. I attended conferences in Sudan, Nigeria, Ghana, Mali, Guinea Bissau, etc. Later on I went to Europe. It was very difficult sometimes to travel in Africa. We had no passports. We used the papers we got from Zambia and Tanzania; the only two countries really prepared to give us those things that we used to call Freedom Charters. In some African countries they were unacceptable. Many times we had to sleep at airports because we couldn't get into those countries. We had to go to Addis Ababa for a conference and were detained at the airport. Some white South Africans passed and we saw their passports. We said to the Ethiopian immigration officials: "We're here as a liberation movement. You are the head of the liberation organisation. White South Africans can pass through but you can't let us in. What kind of support are you giving to this struggle that you boast about?" Then one of them, the head, told us to follow him. That is how we got in. Kenya was always the most difficult. If there was a conference in Kenya, we would spend about three nights unnecessarily at the airport before we were allowed in. And yet there were members of their government who, when we interacted with them, were very good. We didn't know where the problem was. But there was definitely a problem about us somewhere in their government.

Meanwhile, in Tanzania, the cadres were starting to feel restless. That is how the Wankie operation came about. They demanded to go inside South Africa. They couldn't wait any longer. They felt that they had to find a way into the country. And then very serious training started in Tanzania before they went to Zambia. I knew them all because I dealt with them. I had to check what they were carrying and see to it that they left anything that would incriminate them if caught in South Africa – like a Russian watch or a shirt with a Soviet label. That is where we got a lot of our clothing from and a lot of the things we used. I had to go through everybody's luggage and personal belongings.

All this led us to convene a consultative conference in 1969 in the Tanzanian town of Morogoro, the first conference ever that called people from everywhere in exile to discuss our strategy and programmes, including taking care of our supporters, and then education and training. Apart from that, we had a grave problem with some of the people, especially from the leadership, influencing young people to break away and go their own way – people like Ambrose Makiwane and Alfred Mqotha. They were confronted during the conference and suspended after that. There was no way the ANC was going to have people like that in the leadership. Those were the main issues that were discussed.

By that time I was part of the National Executive. I had the experience of working closely with O.R., a very dedicated member of the African National Congress who felt very strongly that those people who were in prison had to remain happy in the knowledge that the work was being done. Not only that, there were countries that were pouring money into the struggle and we had to work hard to make sure that the money was not wasted. In the beginning it was very difficult. Communication was not what it is today, although maybe it was better then because afterwards people used computers to communicate, not knowing that some of these things could be picked up, to be passed on to somebody going to London to be sent home. This was very complicated work and very hard work because it also had to be very accurate work. I did the actual work, but under the supervision of O.R. He checked everything.

The other thing was, of course, political work with the heads of state of the countries in which we lived, and the countries of the world. O.R. was a respected man, very able, along with Moses Kotane and J.B. Marks. The three of them also kept the peace at the camps all the time we were in Tanzania. It didn't matter how serious the problem was, they had a way of addressing these cadres to make them realise that, as cadres, they were a very important part of the struggle whose success was really in their hands. And then Malume Kotane had a stroke, as did Uncle J.B. before him. They were taken to the Soviet Union, where they were in hospital for years.

O.R. remained. He really was the political strength behind the ANC. He was so selfless and hard working, always at the centre of whatever was being done. He was an amazing man, a very honest man. You know, things like money didn't mean much to him. He would say: "Come, let's go and have a drink." O.R. would order drinks and when he had to pay he would put his hand in his pocket and come out only with paper he used for mostly writing. He would realise for the first time that he had no money. He was that type of person. He had no interest in money. He was one of the people who encouraged me to carry on. And for many years I had a lot of problems because my children were in the country and I agonised over whether I would ever be able to choose between my children and the struggle. It was an agonising thought. He was one of the people who really made us feel we were not alone. We were part of a collective that was going through similar suffering.

One time I was in a delegation to Australia and I came back via London. O.R.'s wife had had an accident; she had fallen and had about three fractures on the leg. But he had to go to the UN. Thomas Nkobi was passing through London at the same time I was there. He said: "You go and help Mrs Tambo; we cannot as the ANC send O.R. to the UN and then leave his wife unattended." He never really had time from the struggle for his family. One other thing that was amazing about him was his strength. He was asthmatic; he used to have such terrible attacks. That's when you would see the old man, Kotane, nurse him like a woman, because for him, if anything happened to O.R., the movement would go. As soon as O.R. got a little better, he was up and about again and working. If he had to go to Kongwa, he would be on the way to Kongwa. It just never stopped him from working. I think he was the best thing that ever happened to the ANC in exile.

I tried to keep contact with my people. Sometimes I would get a letter from my mother. I don't know how her letters managed to reach me. Then a cousin of mine died in Botswana. I decided to go to the funeral. I applied for a visa. I spoke to the Botswana Minister of Foreign Affairs, Archibald Mokgoe. He said: "Ruth, when you passed here, you were made *persona non grata*." I said: "No, I was not, because I was in transit." He looked at the records and found that I was right. So I got a visa to go to Botswana. By the time I arrived in Botswana the funeral was over. It was the day after. But my sister was still there and a whole lot of relatives from South Africa were still in Molepolole. Then I wrote a letter to my boys. One of them was doing Form III, the other one was in Standard 5. I told them: "I am in Botswana. If you want to come to me, I will wait for you for the whole week." I had to know whether my children wanted to come or not. I hadn't seen them since they were young. I told my sister I wanted the children to come to me. She said: "Don't put me in trouble." But she went and gave them the letter. They decided that they were coming. They said to my brother-in-law that they were coming home to Vryburg. Instead they came to Gaborone, where I met them and took them to Zambia. We lived at Ray Simons' place, who had a cottage at the back where we lived. That was at the beginning of the 1970s. They went to school in Zambia.