

Motivation and Mobility in the Archive and Life of Alzinah Zondi

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Alzinah Zondi created an archive—an archive that documented not only her life but the presence of her friends in the struggle against apartheid and their dreams for the future. The papers are undated and had no order, but some of the pages were numbered and suggest sequence. Some of the photographs have dates or locations penciled on the back. There could yet be more of this personal archive, stashed in the corners of her home. In the midst of one interview, she referenced documentation of her participation in the 1956 women’s march: “I do have those papers, but they might have gone missing. There were also pictures of the women who were present there.”¹ Among this archive are five different versions (some of which are drafts of the others) of her autobiography, ranging from two to five pages and written largely in English. Their content and numbering suggest that the first pages of the two longest versions are missing, though some of the drafts fill in these gaps. All of these autobiographical documents are handwritten, except for one condensed, typed version. She also shared three copies (again, some of which may have been drafts) of letters handwritten in isiZulu to her comrade, then President Jacob Zuma.

These biographies may have been compiled on the eve of her recognition by the Ethekwini municipality as a “Living Legend” in 2016, though the ultimate publication contains errors in dates and inconsistencies and does not suggest such. They could also have been composed in the wake of the recognition, to elaborate and correct, to offer her own representation. They may have been drafted in the wake of the loss of her friend Ethel. Whenever she wrote, she was certainly spurred by the memory of this long, exciting friendship.

Zondi documented her life but there are also absences—absences that can be interpreted as intentional. As an active member of the ANC underground and in exile, certain omissions can reflect her deeply engrained knowledge of security measures. All of the named women had passed on by the time she wrote and spoke—were the accounts of those still living not hers to tell, for personal or security reasons? That we need to take these possibilities seriously is evidence by her surviving Security Legislation Directorate file.² This was an era of increasing surveillance of women—their long enjoyed relative mobility threatened not only by the extension of pass laws but also the state’s empowerment of the Special Branch. Zondi endured extensive surveillance between 1956 and 1963, after which she was banned for a decade. *New Age* coverage of an August 1962 Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW) meeting at the Bantu Social Centre in Durban that she attended documented the presence of “what appeared to be the entire staff of the Special Branch.” Van loads of armed police sat outside.³ In an interview with Helen Bernstein, Zondi’s comrade Eleanor Khanyile stressed how one did not talk about their underground work. She rarely drops names of the other women in the interview.⁴ When interviewed in 2019, Zondi still did not trust the police. Decades in the underground and exile may have shaped her written and spoken testimonies.

¹ Alzinah Zondi, interview with Thandeka Majola and author, Lamontville, May 10, 2019.

² Applied for access through the Promotion of Access to Information Act. Security Directorate 2/1/1143, Alzinah Zondi, copy in author’s possession.

³ “Release Nelson Mandela!” *New Age* (August 16, 1962).

⁴ Eleanor Khanyile, interview with Hilda Bernstein, Hilda and Rusty Bernstein Papers, A3299, 109, WHP.

The security file, which includes copies of her banning notices, Department of Justice correspondence, and a lengthy, police-informed memorandum recommending her restriction, must be used with caution. Jacob Dlamini’s work on the “Terrorist Album” of the Security Branch makes clear that, despite the widespread repression and violence, the police were never as omniscient or efficient as they believed themselves to be.⁵ As Paul Landau grappled with in his extensive use of compelled testimonies in political trials, using these is “a precarious moral as well as methodological choice, and demands extra care.” It requires cross-referencing, caution, and the recognition that the state did not act ethically.⁶ Just because the Security Branch documented it as such does not mean it happened that way.

The impact of constant security presence in her life brought traumas beyond that of the everyday violence of apartheid that may have shaped her decisions about what to transmit. Such tragedy and its aftermaths can be lived out in taken-for-granted habits such as when elder women shield the young from memories of brutal experiences.⁷ Zondi was arrested on a number of occasions, operated underground with dangerous liaisons, and worked amid the repercussions of at least one deadly security police raid in Swaziland. What did she not want to remember? To share?

It must also be considered in what ways she might tell her own story within long history of politically active isiZulu-speaking women documented in oral accounts such as izibongo. While Zondi chose to write, oral narratives remained embedded in her writing and in her life. She cites the stories and songs of impi yamakhandla in conversation and on paper and does so notably in way that brings gender forward. Her accounts demonstrate little to none of the restrictions that isiZulu-speaking women might engage in when discussing of men as part of ukuhlonipha practices. She refers to senior men in the struggle directly as comrade and remembers none of the named men by their izibongo. This might be on account of an insistence of equity or a recognition of the impact of deploying their given names in the context of contemporary masculine political memory.

Question-provoking absences could be the result of memory or again, deliberate choice. Landau points out the “emotional importance” of the sensual impressions of the moments that bombs exploded in many recollections of MK work—in interviews or on trial. But while many remember the fear, the action, the exhilaration, “most of one’s hours were about accumulating supplies, logistics, and men.”⁸ Zondi’s narratives, oral and written, stress similar moments of fear and exhilaration, from a joyous arrest in which she sang from the police van to the clever machinations of women to conceal incriminating documents. In what ways might she intentionally be stressing the affective in her experience of decades in the struggle?

The strength of public memory around the contemporary ruling party, the ANC, may also impact the manner in which Zondi’s archive elides between SACTU, the ANC, SACP, and FEDSAW often in favor of the ANC. This likely reflects not only the illegal nature of communist organizing in the 1950s but also the overlapping—and at times unequal—membership in the organizations that came to form the Congress Alliance. It may also be the

⁵ Jacob Dlamini, *The Terrorist Album: Apartheid’s Insurgents, Collaborators, and the Security Police* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020).

⁶ Paul Landau, *Spear: Mandela and the Revolutionaries* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2022), 147.

⁷ Athambile Masola, “Every Time a Black Woman Writes Their Story They Are Resisting Marginalisation - Athambile Masola Reviews Barbara Masekela’s Memoir Poli Poli,” *The Johannesburg Review of Books* 6, no. 4 (September 8, 2022).

⁸ Landau, *Spear*, 146.

product of the manner in which the ANC's tripartite alliance post-1994 came to be a relationship in which the ANC dominates.

Zondi's personal archive is small, but it is suggestive of the scattered archives of women and resonates with the work of women writers who worked "against erasure." Pumla Dineo Gqola positions author Miriam Tlali's career as one preoccupied with the connections of history to the present.⁹ Laretta Ngcobo hoped to make visible the stories of prominent Zulu women in history and documented the stories of exiled women.¹⁰ Zondi's papers list women, squeezed into the margins if overlooked. Drawing on Babalwa Magoqwana's work on umakhulu/ugogo as archives themselves, foundations of historical understandings, "archive" should be seen as not only Zondi's papers and photographs but also Zondi herself as a sharer of knowledge.¹¹ This paper draws not only on Zondi's archive, but two oral history interviews conducted with her in 2019. We need to take seriously Zondi—and women like her—as active intellectuals in the efforts to make a new world, drawing on history, on experience, and on dreams for the future. In these loose-leaf sheaths, she demands that women be recognized for not only their historical work in and for the struggle but the nature of that work—gendered and supportive, rooted in love, family, and friendship. She seeks accountability for the shortcomings of democracy. She suggests these women's historical methods as a path forward.

Motivation and Mobility

Zondi was born in Inadi, outside of Pietermaritzburg, Natal, in 1922 to Sarafina Nokumila Mchunu and Johan Zondi. She grew up listening to the anti-colonial war songs of her mother and the accounts of her father, who participated in impi yamakhandu in 1906 and fled to Pietermaritzburg with his father after the death of rebellion's leader Bambatha. The longest of her drafts is worth citing at length here:

My motivation dates back and my own father is my ANC hero. My father is one of these who took part in the Bambatha Rebellion in 1906. He used to relate to me the reasons for that rebellion, which was in Greytown. My father together with Chief Zondi and a large number of people from his area moved to P. Maritzburg and settled there. My mother used to sing the War and Freedom songs they sang during the Bambatha Rebellion and tears used just to roll down her cheeks. These incidences stuck in my mind—and as a child it bothered me.¹²

This anti-colonial war—specifically against a new tax on each man—inspired many who came to fight for liberation. Jacob Zuma heard of it from those who had witnessed the war: "so before politics you had that teaching... where I come from, where my father comes from, is an area where the Bambatha War ended. There is, when I grew up I remember very distinctly ... there

⁹ Pumla Dineo Gqola and Miriam Tlali, *Miriam Tlali: Writing Freedom* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2021), 4.

¹⁰ Laretta Ngcobo and Barbara Boswell, *Laretta Ngcobo: Writing as the Practice of Freedom* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2022), 258; Laretta Ngcobo, ed., *Prodigal Daughters: Stories of South African Women in Exile* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2012).

¹¹ Carolyn Hamilton et al., *Refiguring the Archive* (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2002); Babalwa Magoqwana, "Repositioning uMakhulu as an Institution of Knowledge," in *Whose History Counts: Decolonising African Pre-Colonial Historiography*, ed. June Bam, Lungisile Ntsebeza, and Allan Zinn (Stellenbosch: African Sun Media, 2018), 75–89; Kholeka Shange, "Ngiphathel' uGubhu Lwam' Ekhaya Lapha, Mnawami! UMntwana uMagogo and the Photographic Image" (PhD, University of Witwatersrand, 2020).

¹² Alzinah Zondi, handwritten m.s., copy in possession of Zondi and author, n.d.

was an old man who was a young man during the Bambatha War – he was still living. There was again another woman at Ndlovu area who was also a young girl during the Bambatha War – they actually saw it – they used to tell us stories.”¹³ Zondi and Zuma recognize the women storytellers and songstresses who conveyed history to them.

Zondi remembered too that her father went on to join the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU). The ICU formed in 1919 in Cape Town and grew to be the first nationally-based African workers’ organization. Active in the ICU during the 1920s, Zondi’s father shared what he learned as his daughter grew: “My father was a member of the ICU and politicized me.”¹⁴ This intergenerational commitment to trade unionism was not unique to the family. As Luckhardt and Wall argued of the ICU, “One cannot overestimate its importance in establishing a tradition of African working-class resistance to exploitation... the sons and daughters of many ICU veterans became SACTU militants in the 1950s.”¹⁵ The young Zondi felt aggrieved about the disparities between white and black South Africans and asked many questions of her parents, who encouraged her questions about inequality during her school days at KwaMzimba Roman Catholic Primary.

While women migrated to the cities for work in increasing numbers from the interwar period,¹⁶ Zondi pursued an idea—the idea that the world could be better. She recognized the challenges of doing this as a woman: “It wasn’t an easy decision as a woman to take charge in political issues, but I did.”¹⁷ She decided that she would seek out and learn from the trade unionist Moses Mabhida: “I wanted to meet Moses Mabhida but I didn’t know him.”¹⁸ Mabhida became involved in the Pietermaritzburg trade union movement under the tutelage of Harry Gwala during the early 1940s, joined the SACP in 1942, and the ANC in Natal after 1945 during the tumultuous years leading up to Albert Luthuli’s ascension in 1951. In the wake of the 1950 Suppression of Communism Act, Mabhida extended his work to Durban to step in where other unionists had been banned.¹⁹ It is unclear how early in her life that Zondi made the decision to seek him out, but she told her father: “I believe he has information that I need.” (7/9) She hopped a bus and enquired of the driver where she could find Mabhida. “He then said, you see that big tree... you ask any man, and he will show you [Mabhida].” Zondi found Mabhida surrounded by those who came to join or to listen to his stories. He promised her work and she returned home, packed her things, and moved to Lamontville township to stay with her sister.

Around the time of the 1952 Defiance Campaign, she joined the ANC. It is unclear when she joined the Communist Party—whether before the CPSA banning in 1950 or later joining the underground SACP. She attended the Congress of the People in 1955 to see the launch of the Freedom Charter. Beyond her organizing work, Zondi also sold the leftist newspapers *New Age* and *Fighting Talk*. “New Age! I’phepha lomzabalazo!” another remembered of their sales.²⁰ Hawking the papers in Cato Manor, she became familiar with women residents.

¹³ Jacob Zuma, interview with Julie Frederikse, A24.03.1, AL260, SAHA.

¹⁴ Zondi, handwritten m.s.

¹⁵ Ken Luckhardt and Brenda Wall, *Organize or Starve! The History of the South African Congress of Trade Unions* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1980), 46.

¹⁶ The percentage of African women living in the cities increased more than three times between 1921 and 1951. Cheryl Walker, *Women and Resistance in South Africa* (London: Onyx Press, 1982), 128.

¹⁷ Alzinah Zondi, interview with Thandeka Majola and author, Lamontville, July 9, 2019.

¹⁸ Zondi, May 10 interview.

¹⁹ Moses Mbheki Mncane Mabhida, “Biography,” BC 1081, Manuscripts and Archives Department, University of Cape Town Libraries (www.disa.ukzn.ac, accessed December 13, 2022).

²⁰ Kasrils, 17.

While many have pointed out how women could be relegated to such supplementary roles as serving tea in the struggle, Mabhida assigned Zondi to organize for the trade union movement. She did fondly remember serving tea to President Luthuli—but she also became a leader in SACTU in Durban and strove to form a domestic workers union.²¹ Zondi found a growing city in which Africans claimed physical space, exploited economic options, and carved out space for protest. Between 1932 and 1949, the city’s African population more than trebled. The development of a manufacturing industry during the interwar years coincided with increasing impoverishment in the rural reserves.²² The push and pull of labor migration contributed to a budding trade union presence that catered to African and Indian workers. The 1946 African Mine Workers Strike, though failed, inspired new connections between the CPSA and ANC, bringing party members and trade unionists into ANC positions in the face of the 1950 Suppression of Communism Act that banned organizations and individuals who furthered the aims of communism.²³

Zondi described herself as “a central participant in the development of the South African Congress of Trade Unions [SACTU] in Durban.”²⁴ After the formation of the South African Trade Union Council, trade unionists who had voted against its exclusion of African workers began to build a trade union movement to unify all workers. SACTU emerged in 1955 as the first non-racial trade union coordinating body.²⁵ In Natal, Zondi worked alongside the former teacher and African Textile Workers’ Union leader Steven Dlamini, the Natal Indian Congress and trade union leader Billy Nair, and Mabhida. She may have taken on extra responsibilities during 1957 when Dlamini and Nair traveled to Pretoria while on trial for treason. Evidence suggests her presence at SACTU meetings with their Congress Alliance partners NIC, COD, and ANC as well as numerous unions aligned with SACTU—the Durban African Municipal Workers’ Union, Iron and Steel Engineering and Metal Workers’ Union, South African Railway and Harbour Workers’ Union, the Railways and Stevedores Workers’ Union, and the Domestic Workers Union for which she was responsible. At times she served as the official SACTU representative to the meetings. Security documentation of several of these meetings suggest she likely was not silent.²⁶

Zondi faced tremendous challenges in recruiting women to the trade unions. Despite growing numbers of women in industrial work in the post war period, the majority of urban women still labored as domestic workers.²⁷ The difficulties of those recruiting domestic workers into the labor movement in the better studied 1930s and again in the 1970s and 1980s likely applied to Zondi’s work in the 1950s and 1960s. The isolation of domestic workers hired by individual families—upon whom they often relied for food and accommodation as well as their salaries—made recruiting difficult and joining a union risky.²⁸

²¹ Alzinah Zondi, “Biography,” copy in possession of Zondi and author, n.d.

²² Introduction, in Paul Maylam and Iain Edwards, eds., *The People’s City: African Life in Twentieth-Century Durban* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1996).

²³ Luckhardt and Wall, *Organize or Starve!*, 72–73.

²⁴ Zondi, “Biography.”

²⁵ Luckhardt and Wall, *Organize or Starve!*, 37.

²⁶ Department of Justice, Beperkings: Alzinah Zondi, 2/1/1143 Zondi, Alzinah, PAIA, copy in author’s possession.

²⁷ Iris Berger, *Threads of Solidarity: Women in South African Industry 1900-1980* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 162.

²⁸ Jacklyn Cock, *Maids and Madams: A Study in the Politics of Exploitation* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1980), 152–53; Berger, *Threads of Solidarity*, 119–21.

During the years in which Zondi organized, SACTU grew from its 1956 membership of 20,000 to 55,000 in 1962.²⁹ She encouraged support for SACTU's £1-a-Day campaign, announced in the midst of the 1957 Alexandra Bus Boycott. In 1958, Natal was among those convening local Workers' Conferences to urge support for the campaign. As women revolted across the province in 1959, they too adopted the call for £1-a-Day. SACTU recruited over 5,000 new members in Natal in the wake of the women's protests and the campaign continued into 1963 despite increasing repression of SACTU activists.³⁰

Gendered Mobility and Mobilizing Women

Zondi also engaged in the major Congress campaigns of the late 1950s—the potato boycott, the urban beerhall protests in Durban, and the rural protests against passes, Bantu Authorities, and betterment planning, working alongside some of the better-known women activists, including Bertha Mkhize, Dorothy Nyembe, and Henrietta Ostrich in the women's protests and Congress Alliance campaigns of the 1950s. Moving by bus, train, horse, and while under arrest police van, Zondi traveled across the province and to Pretoria to mobilize women and push for an equitable future. The growth of surveillance and the expansion of pass laws announced in 1955 threatened women's comparative mobility. This threat was only one grievance among many that fueled women's mobilization against apartheid legislation.

The Security Branch documented her presence at nearly 100 different meetings of those in the Congress Alliance between 1956 and 1963. She gave speeches at ANC, FEDSAW, and SACTU meetings and to the Women's Anti-Pass Committee. She traveled to Pietermaritzburg to circulate ANC materials and rallied women who stood trial after a Durban ANC demonstration. She protested MacMillan's 1960 visit to Durban, the banning restrictions on Congress Alliance attorney Rowley Arenstein in November 1962, and the General Law Amendment Act on two different occasions in 1962. She was among those who bid farewell to ANC President Luthuli when he departed for Oslo to accept the Nobel Peace Prize in 1961.³¹

In all of these actions, Zondi drew on gendered knowledge to inform her strategies. As a member of the ANC Women's League in Durban, Zondi became active in the Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW). FEDSAW organizers, regardless of their own status as mothers, deployed a discourse of political motherhood to advance their goals.³² Zondi relied on public conceptions of mothers to protect herself—even when she then was not a mother. She organized a Durban contingent of women who traveled to Pretoria for the 1956 Women's March to protest the extension of passes to women. Police turned back busses of the women en route to the march, preventing some of the leaders of the women's movement in Natal from attending.³³ But Zondi traveled on a bus with Indian women that escaped detection. She carried with her the Durban petitions to be presented at the Union Buildings. When she saw the police searching people, she hatched a plan. "I noticed that some women from Johannesburg appeared to be

²⁹ Luckhardt and Wall, *Organize or Starve!*, 37.

³⁰ Luckhardt and Wall, chaps. 5 and 9.

³¹ Department of Justice, Bepenkings: Alzinah Zondi, Security Directorate 2/1/1143.

³² Meghan Healy-Clancy, "The Family Politics of the Federation of South African Women: A History of Public Motherhood in Women's Antiracist Activism," *Sigms: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 42, no. 4 (2017): 843–66.

³³ '60 Iconic Women.'

carrying babies at their backs. I went back to the bus to take a pillow and pretended to be carrying a child as well.”³⁴ She evaded arrest.

The rural rebellion of women and trade unionist women such as Zondi shaped the actions of SACTU during these years. Zondi, Frances Baard, and xx may have exerted pressure on SACTU leadership to make opposition to the extension of passes to women an ongoing part of their mission for workers’ rights. SACTU annually passed resolutions condemning pass laws and in 1958 and 1959 pressured industry bodies to intervene with government and refuse complicity in the pass system. At the 1960 SACTU conference, Secretary Billy Nair acknowledged that the women’s resistance contributed to an influx of membership to SACTU.³⁵

The intersection of her work with SACTU and FEDSAW is clearest in her promotion of the potato boycott where women’s understanding of bloody violence done to loved ones inspired their use of coercion to enforce the boycott. Boycotts by African consumers were not new to the time period—men and women boycotted municipal beerhall in 1929-30 and public transports in the 1940s—but had begun to evolve in the wake of the 1952 Defiance Campaign as the Congress Alliance sought ways to massify. These early economic boycotts, largely in the ANC’s Port Elizabeth stronghold, targeted individual firms and government industries with the objective of improving pay and working conditions and offering employment for Africans. A national boycott of United Tobacco in 1954 was the exception.³⁶ The potato boycott emerged as a similarly targeted effort against forced farm labor. For several years, from 1947, *New Age* and *Drum* magazine documented the forced and brutal labor conditions for African workers—many of whom had been arrested for pass offences and compelled to accept work on the potato farms. By 1957-1958, white farmers hired nearly 200,000 “convicts” each year.³⁷ Such forced labor was widespread throughout the Eastern Transvaal.

At the December 1958 National Conference, the ANC resolved to prepare for a nationwide economic boycott against Nationalist products to begin on June 26.³⁸ Robert Resha followed this at the May 1959 Mass National Anti-Pass Conference in Johannesburg with a specific call for a boycott of potatoes in protest of the farm labor conditions; he was met with wild applause.³⁹ SACTU’s Frances Baard described the motivation: “So after a time we thought no, if they are going to do this to our children then we must not eat potatoes; we must stop eating the potatoes that are hurting our children so much.”⁴⁰ The potato protest began immediately on May 31 and was planned to continue through June 26 as the “first use of the economic boycott weapon in the struggle against pass laws.” The Planning Committee of the Anti-Pass Conference pointed out that burning passes often brought disillusionment when passes were reimposed. The

³⁴ Zondi, May 10 interview.

³⁵ Luckhardt and Wall, *Organize or Starve!*, 307–8.

³⁶ Simon Stevens, “Boycotts and Sanctions against South Africa: An International History, 1946-1970” (PhD, Columbia University, 2016), 71–74.

³⁷ Luckhardt and Wall, *Organize or Starve!*, 196.

³⁸ Copy of Resolutions Adopted at the 46th Annual Conference of the African National Congress, Durban, 13-16 December 1958, AD2186.Ba6.6.01, WHP; Luckhardt and Wall, 342.

³⁹ Press Statement, African National Congress, June 26 1959, AD2186 E8.91, WHP; Mary Benson, *The African Patriots: The Story of the African National Congress of South Africa* (New York: Encyclopedia Britannica Press, 1964), 257.

⁴⁰ Frances Baard, *My Spirit Is Not Banned: As Told by Frances Baard to Barbie Schreiner* (Harare: Zimbabwe Publ. House, 1986).

boycott would be an offensive weapon, with potatoes as the initial target to be followed by a boycott on other Nationalist products.⁴¹

The campaign's target—a domestic foodstuff—gendered participation in the boycott. The ANC later recognized this when they thanked participants, including “the consumers, especially house-wives, on whom fall the task of preparing meals for the family.”⁴² Baard pointed to how they drew on concerns for family when recalled: “So again we went from door to door in the location talking to the people about how we feel about this thing, and organizing them... We used to condemn a potato when we see one that had a hole or a black mark. We used to tell the people in the public meetings, ‘you see this mark here? It’s where your child’s blood went in. You see this mark here? It’s the blood of our children, that’s why the potato is so.’”⁴³

The SACTU campaign slogan, “If you eat a potato, you are eating the blood of a fellow worker who has been killed and buried on these farms,” captured women who still recall it decades later as they vividly associated this forced labor with the burial of laborers in the potato fields. Ntombikababa Mseleku recalled the arrival of urban women like Zondi in Hlokozi to mobilize them: “We were also informed that we shouldn’t plant potatoes because Boers are killing our people in Bethal and burying them in the potato garden.” Thembelihle Mazibuko recalled the community’s engagement with the boycott in Maqongqo: “It was said that Bethal was supplying us. People got angry that, where they plant these potatoes, people are killed and buried in the same garden where they plant potatoes. And they start to boycott potatoes, in such a way that until today potato is not my favorite dish.” Ngitheni Mthembu described: “Then people boycott potatoes because they believed that the fertilizer is from prisoners buried there... It was actually suspicious the way those potatoes looked; it was like potatoes have breasts and the size was not normal like the potatoes we plant at home [laughing].”⁴⁴

The women used intimidation to prevent merchants and consumers from violating the boycott. The use of coercion in enforcing strikes in support of political action would become a topic of interest for Luthuli and Mandela from early 1960.⁴⁵ Here were women moving the needle already in mid-1959. In late June 1959, Hlena Joen [sic] Kunene wore an ANC badge to her hearing for “inciting” Indian storekeepers and African shoppers not to buy potatoes.⁴⁶ In the Swartkop location, eleven women intimidated those who had violated the boycott and forced them to return purchased potatoes. Mshudo Dladla told the court: “I was accosted by a group of Native women who ordered me to return the potatoes to where I bought them and to demand the return of the money I paid for them. I was surprised at their order. I complied with the instructions and they accompanied me to the European’s house... These women were all carrying sticks.” She later furthered, “I was afraid of the accused because they had sticks and I was afraid they might hit me.” The agricultural overseer who had sold the potatoes also stressed the potential violence of women “carrying sticks and shouting.”⁴⁷ Stanford Mtolo remembered

⁴¹ “Potato Boycott Launched,” *New Age* June 4, 1959.

⁴² ANC, Press Statement, 28 August 1959, AD2186 E13-01, WHP.

⁴³ Baard, *My Spirit Is Not Banned*.

⁴⁴ Ntombikababa Mseleku, interview with Thandeka Majola and Jill Kelly, Hlokozi, April 20, 2019; Thembelihle Mazibuko, interview with Thandeka Majola and Jill Kelly, Imbali, May 31, 2019; Ngitheni Mthembu, KwaSwayimane, February 27, 2019. See also Gertrude Mkhize, Hlokozi, July 2, 2019; Bakhulumile Mkhize, April 30, 2019; others.

⁴⁵ Landau, *Spear*, 81–83, 91–94.

⁴⁶ “Native Guilty of Incitement,” *Natal Mercury*, (July 2, 1959).

⁴⁷ Regina vs. Mbongwa and others, 1406/59, 2/PMB 1/1/1/2, PAR.

that Congress volunteers would search people at the Cato Manor bus ranks.⁴⁸ Mthembu, whose father had been arrested and sent to Bethal, stressed that women took the lead in ensuring the boycott: “When these riots occurred, men were not part of it, only women. We were told not to buy or eat potatoes from Bethal. If you were in town (Pietermaritzburg) buying a sack of potatoes, and someone saw you, those potatoes would be thrown away and they would beat you up.”⁴⁹

The concerted attention, boycott, and a number of legal cases (in mid-June, a court declared the farm labor scheme illegal)⁵⁰ forced the state to temporarily suspend the program pending a commission. The ANC opted to continue the protest in recognition that the forced labor “is only one aspect of the farm labour conditions. The whole system requires a thorough investigation...”⁵¹ The ANC announced the campaign would end on August 31, 1959, as the Transvaal potato season drew to a close and the government tacitly recognized its success with a change in policy regarding potato sales.⁵²

Women built bonds of solidarity in these gendered protests—bonds that then inspired further actions together. A sense of duty drove Zondi to show up with her fellow activists and friends. With Dorothy Nyembe, Gladys Manzi, Frida Mhlongo, Florence Mkhize and others she organized infamous 1959 women’s beerhall protests at eMatsheni. She explained of their frustration: “We were tired of different women complaining about the policemen throwing away their beer at their homes and the white policeman grinding their meat on the sand so we said we want to show them that we can also show them.” (IMG0223)

The day of the first protest in Victoria Street, Zondi could not attend due to a pressing job sewing a wedding dress (7/9). Worried that she let down the women with whom she had planned the protest, she proceeded later alone. “On my arrival, I started singing this song, ‘Chief Luthuli, Dr. Naicker, yibona abosimela ephalamende...’ Hawu, women arrived but I never met the women participating in that strike. We sang, and eventually the Boers’ van arrived to collect me. I went inside the van, and when I looked on top of my head, I could see that the sail covering on top was already torn. I used that hole and I started singing inside the van and the crowds outside the van were singing along with me.” The arrested women spent three days in the Smith Street police station before being released.

From these urban protests, via mobile women and organizers such as Zondi, the protests expanded to Natal’s countryside as women drew on knowledge to decide where to use violence and when to challenge officials peacefully. Court records and her own testimonies suggest she was responsible for organizing women’s protests in at least three rural areas—in New Hanover district, in Pietermaritzburg’s Zwartkop location, and in the Ixopo district. Despite police surveillance of her from 1956, there is no evidence in her security file or the central police reports that they connected her as active across these districts. In New Hanover she was arrested for malicious injury to the Etsheni dip in late July 1959. She was again arrested for destruction of government property in Pietermaritzburg’s Zwartkop location in early September.

⁴⁸ Iain Edwards, “Mkhumbane Our Home: African Shantytown Society in Cato Manor Farm, 1946-1960” (PhD, University of Natal, Durban, 1989), 281.

⁴⁹ Ngitheni Mthembu, interview with Thandeka Majola and Jill Kelly, KwaSayimane, February 27, 2019.

⁵⁰ Cornelis Hermanus Muller, “Dealing with a Hot Potato: The Commemoration of the 1959 ‘Potato Boycott,’” *Historia* 55, no. 2 (November 2010): 91.

⁵¹ Press Statement, African National Congress, undated, AD2186 E17.01, WHP.

⁵² “Potato Boycott is Over,” *New Age* (September 3, 1959).

Zondi evaded arrest in the Ixopo District where she also organized women to protest passes, Bantu Authorities, and other apartheid legislation. She met women from Ixopo through the migrant laborer and trade unionist Johannes Phungula on the streets of Durban. “Whenever I had finished selling the papers and feeling hungry, I would go past the bus rank. I would find Phungula selling fruits there... I would then approach women sitting down and exchange greetings.”⁵³ Phungula knew Zondi from Lakhani Chambers, the offices of the Congress Alliance. One day as Zondi passed Phungula, he introduced her to several women from his village of Hlokozi. They invited her to visit them at home in the Embo chiefdom.

Thanduyise Chiliza, who Phungula recruited into the ANC underground and later the armed struggle, remembers when Phungula arrived in Hlokozi with Zondi, they would each dedicate themselves to different areas. Zondi recruited from the Msomi home while Phungula would recruit around his family home. The pair would also stay with the family of healer Stetisi Maphumulo to organize in the Goxe and Veletsheni valleys. In Nkawini, “they were staying with the Maphumulos and now people will go there, because those people were helping with medicines. So many people would come there and collect information from that spot.”⁵⁴ Zondi herself recalled the joys of her work in Hlokozi: “Indeed, I did meet men and women in the community. We talked about how they ride horses [a practice much more common in southern Natal than Zondi’s midlands], and I promised them that I would come back when Chiliza was there as well.” Their activities began to bear fruit around the time that an Ixopo delegation of women first marched on the commissioner’s office in August 1959. Zondi suggests she was present on the day of the women’s arrest in October, but ran away when the police arrived.⁵⁵

She organized busloads of rural women to attend the Natal People’s Congress in September 1959, called for by the Congress Alliance to help harness the power of rural women’s protests. She recalled of her success, “The date arrived and they arrived there in their best clothes and they were so beautiful... They arrived in three buses.”⁵⁶

The heady days of rebellion in Natal took a deadly turn on January 24, when women and men in Cato Manor attacked raiding police officers. Members of the crowd beat to death nine of them. As Zondi recalled it, “when they arrived at the scene, they attacked the community, and we fought back. On the day, ten [sic] police officers died... and I ran!” Zondi snuck out of the group, running with her copies of *New Age*. “When this battle occurred, I said, I cannot do this.” Leaving the crowd, she passed by Lakhani Chambers and was asked to “serve chief tea.” She became responsible for updating Luthuli about the events that she had just fled.⁵⁷

Surveillance and the Underground

After the death of police in Cato Manor, the Sharpeville Massacre two months later, the subsequent State of Emergency, and banning of the liberation movements in 1960, Zondi continued to organize through the unbanned SACTU and FEDSAW while under constant police surveillance. Then living in Lamontville with Maria (her sister) and Anton Mtiyane, working out of her home as a tailor, she explained: “When the ANC was banned, we operated under trade unions—SACTU and Domestic Workers Union. I continued to organize women’s groups, was

⁵³ Zondi, May 10 interview.

⁵⁴ Henry Thanduyise Chiliza, interview with Thandeka Majola and author, Hlokozi, March 22, 2019.

⁵⁵ Zondi, May 10 interview.

⁵⁶ Zondi, May 10 interview.

⁵⁷ Zondi, June 9 interview.

harassed, and my home searched day and night.”⁵⁸ The ANC call for a stayaway in response to the massacre at Sharpeville, Durban workers stayed in strike for ten days. FEDSAW and SACTU remained formally legal but the banning of its leaders and new legislation that widely defined sabotage led to their slow decline. Mabhida left the country as the state rounded up trade unionists and leaders under Emergency Regulations. Zondi continued this work publicly until her ban in 1963.⁵⁹

In this period of extreme repression, women continued their work underground and aboveground and bristled against their exclusion from planning. The relationship between Congress Alliance groups was blurred further during this time by the launch of MK and the directives of the ANC under their plan to rebuild underground. As Bheki Nxasana describes of work in Natal, they worked in the underground ANC branch, the aboveground Lamontville Residents’ Association, and SACTU.⁶⁰ Upon the release in late August 1960 of those detained in the State of Emergency, the ANC set about rebuilding via the underground and preparation for mobilizing the masses. The implementation of the M-Plan (Mandela’s strategy for house-to-house, street-to-street organization) required the dissolution of the ANC Youth and Women’s League. The stream-lined, by appointment M-Plan’s implementation was uneven across the country and contested in places, but evidence suggests women’s participation in the transition. In Soweto, Ruth Mompoti initiated underground structures and organized “tea groups” as a front for the Women’s League.⁶¹

Zondi shaped the transformation in Lamontville. In Durban, the M-Plan divided the region into ten zones with stewards and branch executives; ANC branches such as those in Chesterville and Lamontville transformed into aboveground Residents’ Associations.⁶² Samson Ndou suggests what this might have looked like for Zondi as she worked with SACTU, FEDSAW, and the Residents’ Association: they recruited others to the underground and to go out of the country, provided political education, and kept the ANC name alive.⁶³ Some of Zondi’s underground work during this time typifies the “supportive” work often documented of women’s activism. Zondi herself described some of her underground work as such: “I used to contact other comrades and be supportive.” She remembered sending Christmas cards to keep up the spirit of imprisoned men, including those on Robben Island.⁶⁴ Another woman explained this practice: “all the comrades in the location they used to say: Write to so-and-so, he hasn’t got anyone to write.”⁶⁵

⁵⁸ Zondi, handwritten m.s.

⁵⁹ “Who, Really, is Who: Comrade Stephen Dlamini,” in Issues No 48 & 49 (1985), clipping shared by Peter Limb; Luckhardt and Wall, *Organize or Starve!*, 363; Margaret Kiloh and Archie Sibeko, *A Fighting Union: An Oral History of the South African Railway and Harbour Workers Union, 1936-1998* (Randburg: Ravan Press, 1999), 57.

⁶⁰ Bheki Nxasana, cited in David Hemson, Martin Legassick, and Nicole Ulrich, “White Activists and the Revival of the Workers’ Movement,” in *The Road to Democracy in South Africa*, vol. 2 [1970-1980] (Pretoria: University of South Africa, 2006), 249.

⁶¹ Bernard Magubane, *Bernard Magubane: My Life & Times* (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2010), 76.

⁶² Landau, *Spear*, 74, 81.

⁶³ Luckhardt and Wall, *Organize or Starve!*, 373. See also Siphokazi Magadla, *Guerrillas and Combative Mothers: Women and the Armed Struggle in South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Kwa-Zulu Natal Press, 2023).

⁶⁴ Zondi, handwritten m.s.

⁶⁵ Eleanor Khanyile, interview with Julie Frederikse, AL2460 A11.5, SAHA.

Zondi also embraced the militancy of the newly sabotage campaign—even as struggles for control of the region raged between the ANC and new MK regional command.⁶⁶ Some of the new Natal MK cadres remained in public view—underground at night and operating as normal during the day. Others went fully underground, like Zondi’s SACTU colleague Dlamini. Zondi continued her seamstress work in plain sight and her SACTU and FEDSAW activities aboveground. She explicitly connected herself to the underground after the banning of the liberation movements, but the exact nature of the work in these early years is obscured. Her militant words suggest embrace of the armed struggle in theory if not in practice prior to her banning. At a SACTU conference on 9 August 1963 she warned: “The women say the Government must change their thoughts before something drastic happens. Volunteers who are active are needed. What is a firearm after all? You should see what will happen tomorrow.” She further threatened, “The day Luthuli gains the leadership, we will be free and that will mean the end of the Boers.”⁶⁷ Her knowledge of domestic workers may have enabled Dlamini to draw on the domestic workers’ union she had been organizing for housing (and romance).⁶⁸

The ANC Women’s League may have been dissolved under the new underground structure, but FEDSAW remained unbanned and in operation. After the banning of so many FEDSAW leaders in 1962—including Lilian Ngoyi and Helen Joseph—Zondi increasingly took on leadership roles. The Security Branch described it thus: “since a large number of FEDSAW belligerents had already been imposed restrictions, Zondi had now taken the responsibility of this organization's operations on her shoulders.”⁶⁹ Nearly 1,000 attended a FEDSAW meeting at the Bantu Social Center in Durban in August 1962 to demand the release of Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu. Speaking to the crowd, Zondi reminded them of the leading role of women in the province in 1959. “We fight on against the Dom Pass and the oppressors,” she proclaimed to applause. “When the call comes you must respond.”⁷⁰

FEDSAW continued to operate on their own terms and often in defiance of the ANC plans to wait for the activation of the M-Plan. Paul Landau documents an instance in which Vuyisile Mini attempted to reign in FEDSAW’s work without ANC guidance in this interregnum. Florence Matomela is to have rebutted: “Mini must put on a dress and go around telling the women not to join the Women’s Federation.”⁷¹ Zondi similarly challenged ANC leadership when they failed to involve local women in planning. In late June 1963, ANC branch executives in Lamontville met at Reverend Ntlati’s home. Mtshali, testifying for the state, remembered at least 18 people present at that meeting—Zondi, Dorothy Nyembe, Mrs. A.C. Shangase, and Freda Mhlongo among them. When George Mbhele and Selbourne Maponya presented the ANC Regional Committee’s plan to challenge the scheduled date for the extension of passes to women, the women present “criticised these plans a lot.” Mtshali remembered Nyembe decried the RC’s failure to make concrete plans despite the women’s efforts. As those present queried whether or not women should take passes if refusal meant they could not access homes in the locations, Nyembe articulated the women’s own plans. They intended to fast, wear black clothes, send a resolution to the Bantu Commissioner, and boycott the beerhalls. Those

⁶⁶ Landau, *Spear*, 130–78.

⁶⁷ Department of Justice, Beparkings: Alzinah Zondi, 2/1/1143 Zondi, Alzinah, PAIA, copy in author’s possession.

⁶⁸ Landau, *Spear*, 129. CHECK ORIGINAL IN BABENIA

⁶⁹ Department of Justice, Beparkings: Alzinah Zondi, 2/1/1143 Zondi, Alzinah, PAIA, copy in author’s possession.

⁷⁰ “Release Nelson Mandela!” *New Age* (August 16, 1962).

⁷¹ Landau, *Spear*, 131.

present agreed on the boycotting of the beerhalls. Mbhele would organize pamphlets for the branch executives to distribute.⁷²

Zondi remained under constant surveillance at this time and yet used every opportunity to recruit people into the struggle. Her daughter remembered, “white guys coming at night knocking, taking my mother, but then at least there were other cousins in the house. Well, my life was like that, I would just wake up, go to school, and then at times she will come back the following day, at times she won’t come, and I won’t know what is happening.” Evelyn Groenink described of Ivan Pillay the manner in which people built the underground: “meeting with people is not a chore. They are all important... I get to know a trait of Ivan that has always been there and will remain: making connections.”⁷³

On December 12, 1963 police handed her a copy of what would become the first of two banning orders under paragraph (a) of sub-section (1) of Section ten of the 1950 Suppression of Communism Act. In the first six years of the law’s implementation, authorities drove out 56 trade union leaders from their positions with bans including leading figures such as Harry Gwala, Ray Alexander, and J. B. Marks.⁷⁴ 936 by 1966; nearly 2000 by end of apartheid (how many women?)

The classified memo to the Minister of Justice recommending her banning reveals the extent to which the security branch considered Zondi and the Federation of South African Women a threat. Authorities described her as “a particularly influential member of the ANC” before condescending that “She apparently considers herself a leader.” In justification, they outlined her involvement with trade unions, her engagement with President Luthuli and “listed communists,” and speeches that demonstrated her support of boycotts, hatred of Boers, and acquaintance with “communist ideology.” They cited lines from speeches as evidence of said ideology: “The forces of liberation must succeed. Down with the Nationalist Republic. Forward to a free and democratic South Africa,” she is alleged to have dared share.⁷⁵

The notice confined her to the Durban District and banned her from any African, Asian, or Coloured location (except that of her home, Lamontville), any factories, harbours, or hostels, educational institutions, or places of listed organizations for five years. It prohibited her from speaking to any other listed person, publishing or presenting, and giving educational instruction.⁷⁶ On November 30, 1968, authorities renewed the ban for an additional five years.⁷⁷ The memo requesting its renewal claimed that when asked by the Security Police earlier that year whether she was prepared to disinvest herself from the struggle, she defiantly responded: “I will not promise anyone that I will stop my political activities and organizing work, even if my restrictions are lifted. I do not consider my policies and politics to be nonsense. We did not get what we wanted.”⁷⁸ The banning and continuous police harassment isolated her: “This caused

⁷² Stephen Mtshali in *The State v. Pascal Ngakane* in the Magistrate’s Court for Regional Division, RC 139/64, Durban/Pietermaritzburg, 1964, Boxes 20-21, AD1901, South African Institute of Race Relations, WHP (accessed online).

⁷³ Evelyn Groenink, *The Unlikely Mr Rogue: A Life with Ivan Pillay* (Auckland Park: Jacana Media, 2020), 18–19.

⁷⁴ Luckhardt and Wall, *Organize or Starve!*, 77.

⁷⁵ Department of Justice, *Beperkings: Alzinah Zondi, 2/1/1143 Zondi, Alzinah, PAIA*, copy in author’s possession.

⁷⁶ Notice in Terms of Paragraph (a) of Sub-Section (1) of Section 10 of the Suppression of Communism Act, 1950, to Alzinah Zondi, 1963, Department of Justice, 2/1/1143 Zondi, Alzinah, PAIA, copy in author’s possession.

⁷⁷ Notice in Terms of Paragraph (a) of Sub-Section (1) of Section 10 of the Suppression of Communism Act, 1950, to Alzinah Zondi, 1968, Department of Justice, 2/1/1143 Zondi, Alzinah, PAIA, copy in author’s possession.

⁷⁸ Inperkings: Alzinah Zondi, Department of Justice, 2/1/1143 Zondi, Alzinah, PAIA, copy in author’s possession.

people, friends and relatives, to shy away from me and I was not acceptable to their premises as I was painted a ‘troublemaker’ to the law.” (226) She did find ways to manoeuvre around her restrictions and remained involved in the underground. Her comrade Curnick Ndlovu received a 20-year sentence for sabotage in 1964. It likely pained her to be unable to attend the 1967 memorial service of the ANC leader she so respected, Albert Luthuli, in which her unbanned FEDSAW colleagues participated.⁷⁹ Authorities elected not to renew her restrictions in 1973—enabling her a greater mobility to continue underground work.⁸⁰

Women played critical roles in the rebuilding of underground networks after the conviction of national MK leadership in 1964. Raymond Suttner referred to this continuity with activities that pre-dated the Rivonia trial as often “‘invisible’ associations and formal and informal organisations” that lurked beneath the so-called quiet decade of the 1960s. This required reconnaissance, logistical necessities (and facilitating the structures to provide logistical necessities) ranging from organizing safe accommodation to creating, circulating, and storing publicity materials, and managing communication systems in secrecy. They recruited people for MK and to carry out tasks underground. They facilitated the movement of cadres abroad for military training and education.⁸¹ In Natal, those people who eluded arrest kept the ANC quietly alive. They had to appear inactive to security officials while reconnecting with other activists.

During this time, a number of “less momentous but equally significant” strikes began to mark the revival of the trade union movement—exemplified by the Durban strikes of 1973 in which nearly 100,000 workers downed tools—that had been hampered by arrests and bannings.⁸² Those released from prison in late 1960s and early 1970s, including Zondi’s close colleague Dlamini in 1970, bolstered the revival of SACTU and underground ANC and MK work. By the early 1970s, these networks had contact with the ANC structures in Swaziland.

Zondi made clear her involvement in one of these underground networks in Durban with Joseph Mdluli: “I participated in the recruitment of MK cadres. When Mozambique obtained its freedom [in 1975], it helped us to get more information from the outside as they sent us literature. This helped to intensify the struggle within this country (227).” Three underground networks had emerged in Natal in the early 1970s—in Pietermaritzburg around Harry Gwala, southwestern Natal with Johannes Phungula, and Durban where Zondi worked with Mdluli. Jacob Zuma coordinated these groups after his 1973 release from Robben Island and before his own December 1975 exile.⁸³ Mdluli’s outfit recruited members for MK and arranged for their transport to Swaziland. Mdluli identified MK cadres from his boxing club in Zondi’s Lamontville, sometimes driving them himself to the border. In October 1974, Swazi nationals smuggled the first group of recruits into Swaziland under the cover of their business.⁸⁴ Joseph

⁷⁹ Elinor Sisulu, *Walter and Albertina Sisulu: In Our Lifetime* (London: Abacus, 2003), 266.

⁸⁰ “She has been behaving quietly since the date of her confinement.” Secretary to Minister, October 25, 1973, Department of Justice, 2/1/1143 Zondi, Alzinah, PAIA, copy in author’s possession.

⁸¹ Raymond Suttner, *The ANC Underground in South Africa, 1950-1976* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2009), 62–65.

⁸² Jabulani Sithole and Sifiso Ndlovu, “The Revival of the Labour Movement, 1970-1980,” in *The Road to Democracy in South Africa*, vol. 2 [1970-1980] (Pretoria: University of South Africa, 2006), 187–241.

⁸³ Jabulani Sithole, “The ANC Underground in Natal,” in *The Road to Democracy in South Africa*, vol. 2 [1970-1980] (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2006), 533; Mxolisi Dlamuka, “Connectedness and Disconnectedness in Thembeyakhe Harry Gwala’s Biography, 1920-1995: Rethinking Political Militancy, Mass Mobilisation and Grassroots Struggles in South Africa” (PhD, University of the Western Cape, 2018).

⁸⁴ Mdluli joined the ANC in 1952 and participated in the Defiance Campaign; he was also active in SACTU. The Natal High Command of MK recruited Mdluli in the early 1960s. He was arrested in 1966 for sabotage and banned upon

Nduli, who had papers to enable his legal crossing of the border, moved back and forth between Natal and Swaziland and encouraged the revival of the ANC via the M-Plan from Lamontville. Nduli facilitated the transportation of youths into exile and within Swaziland until his arrest on the border in March 1976.⁸⁵

Zondi's unit sought to exploit the opening of Mozambique after 1975—indeed, she went for training with Mdluli in Mozambique that year under the command of Stephen Dlamini's nephew Cyril Bafana Dlamini (MK name Edwin Ndlovu).⁸⁶ The ANC presence in Mozambique was initially small at the request of the transitional and then new government; they screened new recruits and offered only covert, limited military training courses after promising not to establish a military base. But as this presence expanded, the Mozambican machinery under Zuma began to focus on the ANC underground, arranging for cadres to clandestinely come for training and return home.⁸⁷ By this time, the concept of the “underground” work had come to incorporate lessons from Soviet training. Cadres of the Swazi Machinery such as Ablon Duma and Joseph Mdluli clandestinely transported recruits to the Mozambican border.⁸⁸

It was likely one of these crash courses in Mozambique that Zondi undertook sometime in 1975-1976 prior to her own exile. Especially after 1976, women made up growing numbers of formally recruited MK members—20% by 1989—though this number likely fails to account for those performing more invisible underground work such as Zondi. Women could be confined to stereotypically gendered roles in communications, offices, and medical arenas. But combat operations included communication, logistical, and intelligence roles integral to military success—roles every bit as dangerous.⁸⁹ Her daughter, then staying with her mother during her matric, remembers her disappearing for days at a time and adopting disguises. “I remember one time I was from school, I found her in the house, but she was in a hurry and she was wearing... you know those overalls, she was wearing that worn by domestic workers. She was wearing a pink one. That was funny to me because my mother dressed very elegantly.”

his release in 1968. The wide publicity associated with his death in detention forced the government to acknowledge culpability in 1979. Sithole, “The ANC Underground in Natal,” 559.

⁸⁵ Nduli, also known as Mpisi, had served a short prison sentence in the early 1960s for furthering the aims of a banned organization and was one of the first MK conscripts trained in the Soviet Union. Nduli was the only veteran of the 1967 Wankie Command able to infiltrate South Africa. He facilitated links between Natal and the Swaziland machinery. Gregory Houston and Bernard Magubane, “The ANC Political Underground in the 1970s,” in *The Road to Democracy in South Africa*, vol. 2 [1970-1980] (Pretoria: University of South Africa, 2006), 427; Dlamuka, “Connectedness and Disconnectedness in Thembeyakhe Harry Gwala's Biography, 1920-1995,” 147.

⁸⁶ Alzinah Zondi, “Biography,” typed, n.d. This particular version has her leaving in 1973 and undertaking training in Mozambique the same year, but Mozambique gained independence in 1975 and it was then that the man she describes as “Edwin Dlamini” moved to a newly independent Mozambique. Another of her biographies has a “3” drawn over the “6” in 1976, indicating uncertainty or an error. Bafana Cyril Dlamini's *nom de guerre* was Edwin Ndlovu. Given all of this, it seems more likely her Mozambican training was in later 1975 or early 1976 before Mdluli's murder. “Bafana Cyril Dlamini,” South African History Online, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/bafana-cyril-dlamini> [accessed 11 July 2022].

⁸⁷ Houston and Magubane, “The ANC Political Underground in the 1970s,” 436; Thula Simpson, “The Making (and Remaking) of a Revolutionary Plan: Strategic Dilemmas of the ANC's Armed Struggle, 1974-1978,” *Social Dynamics* 35, no. 2 (2009): 312–29.

⁸⁸ Thula Simpson, “Military Combat Work: The Reconstitution of the ANC's Armed Underground, 1971–1976,” *African Studies* 70, no. 1 (April 1, 2011): 103–22.

⁸⁹ Suttner, *The ANC Underground in South Africa, 1950-1976*, chap. 6; Jacklyn Cock, *Colonels & Cadres: War & Gender in South Africa* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1991), 162.

Zondi assumed political education with potential recruits, sharing her knowledge and what the state would later call “subversive literature” infiltrated from Swaziland and Mozambique, carried messages, and worked to provide secure venues for meetings and safe houses for infiltrated operatives.⁹⁰ These small-scale units operated on a need to know basis. Khanyile, who left South Africa with Zondi, later explained of their secrecy: “my work that I did at home I can never talk about it.” But she did go on to give a glimpse of their responsibilities when she described a feeling of racial equity in the movement: “there were Indian comrades who actually took my decisions – if I say: Well, I think this and this and this will be done – or if I take any responsibility that this is supposed to be done this way and that way, they trusted me... or even the white comrades, my work that I will do sometimes – I would go and carry a message to somebody else and say: Comrades, you are supposed to do A,B,C,D. – they would never query me.”⁹¹

In early to mid-1976, Zondi left South Africa. The Security Branch had infiltrated the Natal units and Samson Lukele, who had often driven recruits from Natal to Swaziland, turned askari. Security police arrested and interrogated under torture nearly fifty of Natal’s underground operatives in late 1975 and early 1976, including two that would motivate Zondi’s departure—Mdluli and Nduli. Police murdered Mdluli within 24 hours of his arrest in March 1976. They used Lukele to lure Nduli and arrest him at the border; Nduli began to talk under interrogation. In what became a high-profile trial intended to curb resistance and assure white constituencies of the state’s capacities to maintain law and order, the state tried Gwala and nine others—including Nduli—for participation in terrorist activities.⁹²

In the midst of these arrests, the police arrived at Shaka Secondary School in Umlazi where Zondi was teaching dress design and tailoring. She decided to leave. “The security forces visited my place of work and came to pick me up they said. I refused to go with these people, stating that people used to come and pick up people under the pretext of security forces and instead went to kill them. They left me at that time.” (IMG0227) She understood the danger immediately: “I decided against informing anyone that I intended leaving.”⁹³ As she prepared to depart, Mdluli’s death in detention furthered her resolve. “He worked closely with me.” (IMG0227). Her daughter remembered her stress that she could not attend to Mdluli’s family after his death because of the police.⁹⁴

The Swaziland Machinery feared the police would force Zondi and her cadres to testify against those charged in the Gwala trial.⁹⁵ Zuma—who escaped in December 1975 as the arrests began—arranged for Zondi, Khanyile (whose husband had also been arrested), Phungula, Chiliza, and MaGloria Mdingi to leave the country.⁹⁶ Zondi’s accounts stress her agency in this decision. These articulations: “they came to pick me up,” “he worked close with me,” do not position Zondi as support for Mdluli or Dlamini. They suggest what the Security Branch believed when they banned her over a decade earlier. Her articulations at public meetings, her mobility, her underground activities threatened the apartheid state.

⁹⁰ Sithole, “The ANC Underground in Natal,” 550.

⁹¹ Eleanor Khanyile, interview with Julie Frederikse, AL2460, A11.5, SAHA.

⁹² On the trial, see Dlamuka, “Connectedness and Disconnectedness in Thembeyakhe Harry Gwala’s Biography, 1920-1995,” chap. 4.

⁹³ Zondi, May 10 interview.

⁹⁴ Anonymous interview.

⁹⁵ Sithole, “The ANC Underground in Natal,” 555.

⁹⁶ Eleanor Khanyile, interview with Julie Frederikse, AL2460 A11.5, SAHA.

Zondi drew on her domestic worker network to hide in the backroom of a domestic worker in a white neighbourhood before returning to Hlokozi. Phungula hired someone to take them to the Swaziland border. Chiliza remembered: “76, Joseph Mdluli was arrested and killed and they knew because we were working closely with him that we did know what happened, that the police killed him, maybe they killed him before or after he was broken down, we don’t know. But at the same time there was now an attempt to arrest us, so we decided then to leave.”⁹⁷ But the driver grew anxious and abandoned them at the Hluhluwe Game Reserve. From there, they walked at night and slept in the bushes during the day. Zondi remembers the terrors of crossing a river and the sounds of wild animals. After four days, they arrived in Swaziland. Khanyile thought their escape would be short-termed. Mabhida promised them such upon arrival; they would go abroad with pseudonyms for training or education but return after the Pietermaritzburg trial. On the evening of the meeting with Mabhida, they were arrested by the Swazi police and forced to give their real names. They were exposed and would stay in Swaziland.⁹⁸

Exile

Exile was “a gendered experience with women exiled not only from home but also as political exiles relegated to the margins in the patriarchal exile community.” (Huma 6) In Swaziland, Zondi “became a fulltime cadre of the underground movement in exile,” maintaining a transit house.⁹⁹ Phungula and Chiliza continued on to Mozambique.¹⁰⁰ Zondi arrived to a divided exile community and one under constant threat. Siphokazi Magadla argues that women’s roles in the armed struggle “need to be understood in line with the varied ways in which women were affected by apartheid violence.”¹⁰¹ Zondi work in a transit house during the first decade of exile meant she was in constant danger of covert operations from across the border and overt harassment from Swazi forces.

When Zondi arrived in mid-1976, Swaziland was already home to a growing community of South Africans of multiple political allegiances—some of whom had been there for over a decade and created comfortable, professional lives as beneficiaries of political asylum in 1966.¹⁰² In six-ish years in Swaziland, Zondi served liberation movement and the South African community of exiles in a number of ways. She worked with Ablon Duma, who in addition to his role in the ANC was a lawyer. Zondi had previously studied and taught dressmaking—an occupation that enabled her an income in Durban and again in exile. She applied for a peddlers’ license. Zondi describing her time in Manzini simply: “I again organised women’s groups and joined some structures.”¹⁰³

Zondi’s knowledge of historical anti-colonial rebellions and organizing enabled her to continue mobilization more subtly. The women migrants were divided about the roles that they should play. Some of the wives of the exiled comrades with refugee status did not want to jeopardize that status and preferred the women to organize around sewing and cooking. With two

⁹⁷ Chiliza interview.

⁹⁸ Khanyile interview with Hilda Bernstein.

⁹⁹ Alzinah Zondi, “Biography,” typed, n.d.

¹⁰⁰ Sithole, “The ANC Underground in Natal,” 545; 555–56.

¹⁰¹ Siphokazi Magadla, “Women Combatants and the Liberation Movements in South Africa,” *African Security Review* 24, no. 4 (2015): 399; Magadla, *Guerrillas and Combative Mothers*.

¹⁰² Thula Simpson, “‘The Bay and the Ocean’: A History of the ANC in Swaziland, 1960–1979,” *African Historical Review* 41, no. 1 (2009): 91–94.

¹⁰³ Zondi, handwritten m.s.

machines, Zondi taught women to sew. The women met every Sunday in the back room of the surgery where Khanyile worked; she called it the ANC Women's Center. They did not discuss politics there. But the political women continued to make an effort to recruit these women into active support of the struggle. Khanyile sheds light on what this might have looked like: "We used to tell them how it is if they were involved and if we would all read... Mabhida would give us the history of KwaZulu, to read Cetshwayo, a Shaka book, ordinarily basic level, but then it goes on, stage by stage, so that people should know and understand the history itself."¹⁰⁴ The country's history served as an opening to discuss the importance of the struggle.

While the backroom ANC Women's Center remained largely apolitical, Zondi and Khanyile undertook more overt work in the transit houses where they stayed—politicizing the youth entering Swaziland after the 1976 uprisings. Here, her trade union organizing and Mozambican training came to the fore. Zondi managed a transit house in Fairview, Manzini, for the Natal Machinery of MK and worked closely with Mabhida and Zuma to host and politicize the new exiles—many of whom came to the struggle through the Black Consciousness Movement rather than the ANC—on their way to Tanzania and Angola. "With the Soweto uprisings, a lot of youth came from Soweto who needed a lot of support."¹⁰⁵ Thabo Mbeki and Albert Dhlomo arrived in Swaziland in December 1974 to contact units already forming in Natal and began to reconstruct the underground.¹⁰⁶ Swaziland became an opportune base for the ANC in Zambia to communicate with South Africa due to its "long and relatively porous border with South Africa, multiplicity of formal and informal crossing points, and easy communications with Johannesburg, Durban and the Eastern Cape, as well as Lourenco Marques/Maputo." While King Sobhuza—his grandfather had been among the founding members of the early ANC—allowed an official presence in the country, security forces constrained mobility and access to arms.¹⁰⁷ In the wake of the Soweto Uprisings, large numbers of youth flocked to the neighboring country. Estimates suggest some 4,000 people left South Africa in the 18 months after Soweto, many of whom passed through Swaziland or Botswana on their way north.¹⁰⁸

Both Zondi and Khanyile emphasized their participation in the education of newly arrived youth. As Zondi recalled, "We were kept busy and our supportive role and politicizing was needed."¹⁰⁹ The ANC processed refugees—who wrote their biographies and shared their motivations before they were sent to Maputo for vetting by ANC security—in Ngwane Park in Manzini.¹¹⁰ Fanny Nkabinde stayed in one such house with Khanyile and therefore possibly with Zondi. She recalled: "We were in Swaziland for one month, underground in the house, we didn't go outside for that whole month. And we left Swaziland in September for Mozambique."¹¹¹ Khanyile stressed of everyday in the Natal house with these youths:

We used to have ANC underground work there, we used to have SACTU work in there, and we used to have people as a transit area for students, because it was

¹⁰⁴ Khanyile interview with Hilda Bernstein.

¹⁰⁵ Zondi, handwritten m.s.

¹⁰⁶ Hugh MacMillan, *The Lusaka Years: The ANC in Exile in Zambia, 1963-1994* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2013), 110.

¹⁰⁷ John Daniel, "A Comparative Analysis of Lesotho and Swaziland's Relations with South Africa," in *South African Review* 2, ed. South African Research Service (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1984), 228–38.

¹⁰⁸ MacMillan, *The Lusaka Years*, 122.

¹⁰⁹ Khanyile interview with Hilda Bernstein.

¹¹⁰ <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/umkhonto-wesizwe-mk-exile>

¹¹¹ Fannie Nkabinde, interview with Hilda Bernstein, Hilda and Rusty Bernstein Papers, A3299 B4.1.2, N, WHP.

during the time of the uprisings.... There were lots of young students who used to come in and we used to sit and discuss and when it was news times we used to sit down, listen to the news and analyze it. Because they were very short on what was happening in South Africa, mostly we used to analyze worldwide what was happening politically. We used to take turns together with the young students and the people who were in transit. So we were involved as women in that.¹¹²

Multiple people also place Zondi as staying in a house in which Mabhida lived during his time on the ground in Swaziland. By the time she arrived, Mabhida had ascended the ANC Executive, been appointed second-in-command in MK, and was elected to the Revolutionary Council to re-establish an ANC presence inside South Africa.¹¹³ Zondi's daughter recalls the stress of her own arrival: "where my mother was staying, in that house, it had body guards for the late Moses Mabhida. They had a problem, those guys, because they didn't know me. Then they didn't really trust that I was a genuine person because, mind you, even if I am Alzinah's daughter, I can be used in a way by someone, you know, the apartheid police."¹¹⁴

The dangerous nature of this work cannot be understated. Zondi worried constantly for the safety of herself and her comrades, with several near scares. Khanyile recalled at least two raids in the year she remained in Swaziland.¹¹⁵ South Africa had remained largely sheltered from international pressure—especially in terms of its southern African neighbors under colonial rule—prior to the 1975 coup in Portugal. After P.W. Botha came to power, the regime sought ways to protect the cordon sanitaire under threat by new governments in Mozambique and Angola.¹¹⁶ Botha's "Total Strategy" combined covert warfare at home and abroad with domestic reforms to counter what he positioned as a "total onslaught" international communism. South Africa unleashed "low-intensity conflict" in neighboring states as a less expensive counter-revolutionary tactic to undermine the liberation movements and new governing parties without accountability.¹¹⁷

South African hit squads operated in these states, as well as Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland—especially after the February 1982 Non-Aggression Pact signed by Swaziland and South Africa. The country was integrated into and dependent upon the South African economy in terms of their landlocked condition, the significance of the South African labor market and South African capital in its own economy, and reliance on regional transport routes, customs networks, and food, fuel, and energy imports. Despite this dependency, as John Daniel argued, Swaziland consented to South African demands ultimately on account of the class interests of the ruling royal family.¹¹⁸ ANC activity in Swaziland threatened Swazi authorities and the link between King Sobhuza and the ANC collapsed. Many then interpreted the change in the Swazi stance to the country's dependence on South Africa and a proposed land deal over KaNgwane and

¹¹² Khanyile, interview with Bernstein.

¹¹³ Tom Lodge, "Moses Mabhida 1923-1986," *South African Labour Bulletin*, Vol. 11, no. 6 (June 1986).

¹¹⁴ Anonymous interview.

¹¹⁵ Khanyile, interview with Bernstein.

¹¹⁶ Peter Vale, "The Botha Doctrine: Pretoria's Response to the West and Its Neighbors," in *South African Review* 2, ed. South African Research Service (Johannesburg: Ravan press, 1984), 188–96.

¹¹⁷ Jackie Dugard, "Low-Intensity Conflict," in *The Role of Political Violence in South Africa's Democratisation*, ed. Ran Greenstein (Johannesburg: Community Agency for Social Enquiry, 2003).

¹¹⁸ Daniel, "A Comparative Analysis of Lesotho and Swaziland's Relations with South Africa."

Ingwavuma. The pact was kept secret and only revealed with the signing of the Nkomati Accord in 1984. The pact drove an increase in arrests of ANC members and raids on ANC houses.¹¹⁹

Zondi's knowledge of the Security Branch and her training in Mozambique positioned her to operate with caution. Beyond stays with Mabhida, Zondi also lived in an ANC flat, No. 8, in Manzini in 1982, where she sheltered others in danger. This included the family of Jabulile and Petros Nyawose (MK name Nzima). Zondi may have known the Nyawoses from their work as trade unionists and in the underground in Durban. Petros ferried her comrade Dlamini into Swaziland the same year of her exile. The Nyawoses followed in 1977 and Petros rose to be the ANC Deputy Chief Representative in Swaziland. The family moved frequently between homes on account of the danger. Nomzamo Nyawose was staying with Zondi the night that the Eastern Transvaal Security Branch planted a bomb in the Nyawoses' car—killing both of them and injuring their MK bodyguards. Nomzamo testified to the TRC about how she learned of her loss, at the age of maybe five or six years old: "I sensed that there was something bad that had happened... Thereafter I was called by Granny Alzina. It was myself and Nokuthula. She said to me, 'Nomzamo, your mother has passed away. The boers had killed her.'" The Nyawose children remained with Zondi for several weeks, until their grandparents could fetch them from Pietermaritzburg.¹²⁰

The pact also forced Stanley Mabizela, the ANC chief representative in the country, and a number of others—including Zondi—to leave the country. Those ANC cadres who remained were forced underground. With no warning, Zondi immediately flew to Dar es Salaam. During her time in Manzini she had earned the trust of Mabizela, who invited her to stay with him as he took on the new role of ANC Representative in Tanzania. She continued her work with the ANC. "I was reunited with the ANC [Women's] Section too and we continued our work (228)." The ANCWL in exile suspended its formal program but began to reconstitute itself after the 1969 Morogoro conference as the Women's Section under Florence Mophosho and later Gertrude Shope. The section was responsible for mobilizing women, campaigning for support internationally, and acting as movement's social worker—the latter of which came to define the Women's Section.¹²¹

At some point, Zondi moved to Morogoro, home to Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College (SOMAFCO). When Mabizela took up the role of chief ANC representative in Tanzania, he became responsible for the development of the school and, according to her daughter, invited her to follow him.¹²² Zondi recalled, "I met others who were coming from this side. They had constructed a beautiful building structure for us there, and we were provided with clothes." By then in her 60s, she continued to sew and teach others to sew until her return home in 1993.¹²³

¹¹⁹ Simpson, "The Bay and the Ocean"; Gregory Houston, "The ANC's Armed Struggle in the 1980s," in *The Road to Democracy in South Africa*, ed. South African Democracy Education Trust, vol. 4 [1980-1990] (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2010), 1052.

¹²⁰ Testimony of Nomzamo Nyawose to the Human Rights Violation Committee of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Pietermaritzburg, November 20, 1996, <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/hrvpmb/pmb3.htm> (accessed December 14, 2022); Ivan Pillay, "Two Lives Cut Short in Their Prime," *Sunday Independent*, June 29, 2014.

¹²¹ Shireen Hassim, *The ANC Women's League* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2015), 39–41.

¹²² "Buzwe Stanley Mabizela (1943-2003)," in Gail M. Gerhart et al., *From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa, 1882-1990. Volume 4, Political Profiles, 1882-1990* (Auckland Park: Jacana Media, 2017), 211.

¹²³ Zondi, May 10 interview.

Way Forward

While Zondi strove to remain invisible to the constant surveillance of the Security Branch during her years above and underground, late in her life she insisted on visibility in a city that often failed to see her. In the trade unions and in the underground, Zondi ran in the same circles as the men after which Durban's streets have been renamed—Stephen Dlamini, Moses Mabhida, Joseph Nduli, and Curnick Ndlovu, to name just a few. The women who not only made their work possible, but in their talents and ideas shaped the nature of that work, treated as “insignificant back roads in the geography of memory.”¹²⁴ Zondi's efforts to document her own life and her motivations suggests her understanding of this geography of memory. The stories of women in the struggle should be told—their knowledge is still relevant.

Her efforts demonstrate an understanding of an incomplete liberation and offer ideas grounded in experience for continuing the struggle for equity in South Africa. She concluded her longest autobiography with two underlined sections, “At Present” and “Way Forward.” She documented her continued engagement with the ANCWL, ANC veterans, and women's groups—especially her efforts to continue to teach women to sew to provide for themselves. She stressed community and mutual support. These, she suggested, can pave a way forward. She envisioned: “I want people to feel the freedom. Better education for our youth. More women's groups and empowerment to women. Better economy to improve the standard of living for all. Better housing and homes for all.”

History remained an integral part of her life—from the inspiration of her parents in *impi yamakhanda* through to her last days when she relished in the celebration of South Africa's history. She attended the repatriation ceremony of her late friend Mabhida originally buried in Mozambique. In 2005, an 80-year old Zondi flew from Durban to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the Freedom Charter in Kliptown. She told the press of her trip: “I wouldn't miss it for the world. This is our history... It was cold that day, but nothing could stop me from joining the crowds.”¹²⁵

She drew on this shared past when she engaged with her powerful former colleagues. In 2016, she received the first accolade that acknowledged her contributions to the South African struggle—eThekweni's [Living Legends Award](#).¹²⁶ She used the opportunity to reprimand the ANC for its failures and in-fighting: “I have come far with this organization... let's fix what is broken.”¹²⁷ Her letters, perhaps unsent, to then-president Zuma with whom she shared some of these historical experiences call for accountability. She challenged him to remember her plea that he see how people still lived in the townships: “You remember on your birthday, we were both talking at the hall? I begged you to visit us in Lamontville... Afterall, I wanted you to see the houses we are living in, especially now since it is rainy season. Then you will also see the road we live on...”

As an archivist of her own life, she insisted that her history, her knowledge, and her experiences be visible and that these might offer a path forward in South Africa.

¹²⁴ Athambile Masola, “Making Space for Women in South Africa's Political Memory, or, the Case of the Non-Intersection of Pixley ka Seme and Charlotte Maxeke Streets,” *Johannesburg Review of Books* (October 2, 2017).

¹²⁵ Solly Maphumulo, “Nostalgia Marks Freedom Charter Celebrations,” *IOL News* (June 27, 2005).

¹²⁶ eThekweni Municipality, *eThekweni Living Legends* (2016).

¹²⁷ Sabelo Ngema, “Kubongwe amaqhawe esaphila koweTheku,” *KZN Eyethu* (September 9, 2016).