

Marie Human

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Missing Voices Project

Interviewed by Mike Cadman

	SIDE A
Interviewer	Tell me about where you grew up, what sort of family did you have and so on.
Marie	I grew up in... basically did most of my schooling in the Cape in Durbanville. My father is a medical professor, he was a heart specialist. My mother was a housewife, and we're 4 children, 3 brothers, and myself, and I'm the youngest.
Interviewer	Did you ever talk about politics as a family?
Marie	No, not much. My father had this rule of talking about things at dinner every night. But I sort of fell out of that because the men spoke so much and most of it didn't make sense to me. And then my father was a heavy Christian, DRC, the NG Kerk. And obviously a lot was based on that but the one saving thing about him was that because he was a doctor he always explained to us, look, whether people are black or white they die from the same diseases, they've got the same blood, so... they've got the same brain, they've got the same possibilities. So that was quite liberating.
Interviewer	And then when you were growing up, your brothers were older than you, they would have been called up to go to the army. Was there discussion in the family about it at that time, about was it the right thing to do? Were they concerned about your brothers going off to the military?
Marie	No, never... they had to go that was norm. And for us young girls it was quite romantic that these boys went, and they had to go, it was just like that. But for example my older brother, the one that went first, he had some problems and he got himself into the navy and not into the army. Because there were cousins before that went to the border when it started, from the beginning. But yes, like I say, it was quite romantic, it was quite accepted. It's what you have to do.
Interviewer	Did you go to an Afrikaans speaking school?
Marie	Yes.
Interviewer	And when your brothers went off, did they go straight after school or did they study first?
Marie	The first two went, I think, straight after school, but the last brother he went after studying.
Interviewer	And what did he study?
Marie	He studied medicine.

Interviewer	When you say, it's what you did, you had to go, there was no debate about whether it was right or wrong, it was accepted in your society that military service was something that was done.
Marie	Yes. And you must remember how we grew up. Since I can remember we had to sing these patriotic songs for our country, and " <i>Uit die blou van ons hemel</i> ", even though we were rebellious at school it still had meaning. And there was a...an incredible patriotism amongst us, you know.
Interviewer	And that was driven through church, through school, through every aspect of your society.
Marie	Absolutely. And also through...there were still remnants, like there's remnants of the World War in Europe when you go there, you see it, how people relate to one another. This whole Boer War thing still went on that time. I felt it very strongly.
Interviewer	Its interesting you say that because the Boer War ended in 1902. And you were going to school in the seventies. Yet you say that played a role in your thinking about the country.
Marie	Yes, because it was part of this patriotism. It was part of the legends that were carried out, and the stories that were told to us, who we are. It was part of our identity of who we are. We were these poor people that fought for our freedom in the same way. But we never brought anybody else's freedom together with how we were taught about our freedom.
Interviewer	That's an interesting concept because when your brothers went off to war, who did you think they were fighting?
Marie	I suppose...you know I don't remember now, but I suppose the blacks, the enemy, the <i>Rooi Gevaar</i> . I knew it was SWAPO. But at that time I really can't remember how I felt.
Interviewer	But the sense was that they were going to the army to defend the freedom of the South Africa that you knew.
Marie	Yes.
Interviewer	And then when they started going off to the army they would I'm sure send letters home, come home on pass, and so on and so forth, what was that like for you? Were you concerned about their safety or were you just proud of them as brothers?
Marie	Personally I missed out on that because my parents put me in a hostel. So I missed out on the home thing on that. So I just saw them every now and again, and I was quite interested in them and obviously friends that I had also went. But I don't know, nobody gave me an opinion that I can remember where they came back strongly when I was still at school. although I finished school in '75, in '76 I was quite aware suddenly of what was happening, through not sort of news or debate or anything, through pictures that I saw.

Interviewer	In '76 did you go to university or college?
Marie	Yes, in Bloemfontein.
Interviewer	And of course '76 was the year of the Soweto uprisings, so there would have been lots of pictures of civil unrest that were unusual in South Africa at that time.
Marie	But I also remember in '75 I didn't know what Communism was, but I called...I was in a girls school hostel...I called the head teacher whatever, the principal, I called her a Communist. <i>Laughs</i> Because I thought she was wrong. Do you know what I mean? So there was this...we were terribly uninformed.
Interviewer	Did she pull you up and say, listen, do you know what you're calling me?
Marie	Yes, she did, they called my father. It was big. And I suppose what I meant is that she's a fascist. <i>Laughter</i>
Interviewer	But you intended it as a less than complimentary term.
Marie	Yes, like these are bad people.
Interviewer	And then at university what did you study?
Marie	Drama. Theatre studies.
Interviewer	And in those days would there have been any black actors or actresses that you encountered while you were studying drama?
Marie	No, never, no. I didn't know...yes, the other thing about our family is that we have this farm in the Free State. It's a family farm, it's big time, it's also part of the patriotism thing. But because most of my father's brothers – there were 7 children – they all became quite academic orientated. And nobody really farmed, so we had these pieces of farm that was about 3000 hectares each. So it's not very big. And it's in a cattle area so you can have 300 cattle on 3000 hectares. So it became family farms, and the relationship with black people on the farm was so much different from the relationship with black people in the cities. On the farm we were taught...I know everything about Sotho culture, I was taught that, and how to have respect and I just respect older people and that kind of thing. But in the city it was quite different. It was like a vacuum between black people and us and on the farm it was different.
Interviewer	That's interesting, and at university did you sort of debate the issues of the day politically or were you just focused on your drama?
Marie	No, never. No, suddenly you're free and Afrikaans growing up you're not free, hey. So suddenly when I went to university I was just playing, that's all I did. There were debates and there were influences – I had a friend from Holland and I had a friend from Germany strangely enough, who came to study medicine at Bloemfontein University because it was such a good faculty. And

	information came in then and I didn't resist any of that and I just became like a sponge from that time on.
Interviewer	Did you think to yourself, for example, when you were on the farm and there were black people and you were showing them respect and sitting there with their culture and norms and standards, did it ever strike you as strange that there your brothers who had been compelled to go off to the military to do service, to fight whatever they were fighting against, and yet black people weren't required to defend the same nation, or did you view yourselves as separate?
Marie	It's hard...how did I view...as separate. Something that I'm starting to understand now about being an Afrikaner and that kind of identity is that... <i>tape turned off</i>
Interviewer	So you were studying at the Free State at Bloemfontein, studying drama as an actress, all the time people close to you were going to the army, your brothers were there, you knew people in the army, did you ever hear any stories of anybody who got killed in the army?
Marie	No, nobody close to us. And I think it was because we were more rich. <i>Laughs</i>
Interviewer	You mean in the sense that you might not have been exposed to other guys who had a harder life, who were going to...how do you mean that? When you say you were rich, was that a kind of protection?
Marie	I suppose so. Because none of the people that was close to me ever died. Maybe they were not troopies as such, they became lieutenants, whatever, but then still they would have gone in. And maybe I was also just sheltered from these things in a way.
Interviewer	It strikes me that many people were because the idea that your brother or your friend could go to the army and die was a remote idea for many people for a long time. It was only in the eighties when it became more common that people were dying. And I think that was part of the shock of it all that you could go to the army and get killed, because in the early seventies before Operation Savannah, which was the first foray into Angola, there was very little conflict going on. So all the time you'd been drama, you know guys going into the army, coming out of the army, and so on and so forth, when was the first time you ran into military people who weren't either friends or your brothers?
Marie	So after university I got accepted into the Arts Council of Suid Wes Afrika at that time, which is no longer here. And it was South African run into the theatre in Windhoek, and part of our mandate was to perform to all the little towns – we did a tour every year, and then that time...I went there '79 and '80. I was part of that theatre company. And it must have been 1980...I can't remember...we were invited to do proper stage plays for the big brass in Rundu and Oshikati. I think we went three times. Once

	we went with a Flossie. Very low...that was fantastic. <i>Laughs</i> That was a quick one. We just had to do one performance. So this was serious theatre that we were doing, it wasn't like getting the troopies a bit softer or anything like that.
Interviewer	So you weren't going and singing a few <i>liedjies</i> to the soldiers.
Marie	No, no, we did a play for the big brass. So it was interesting because it was part of our tour, so we do all the school tours and the library tours and then we would be in Oshikati and they'll come fetch us and in convoy...well, first a small unit will fetch us from...in Etosha? They'd fetch us there in the camp and then they drove us up, and then somewhere we got a convoy. And there I became very aware of what is happening...because I actually kind of saw it, or heard it. One thing that I realised from that time, you know we're actresses, so we're very playful, so when there's boys around we all got very playful and funny, whatever. And these guys...really shocked me that they had no reaction to the women. It was quite extraordinary. There was somehow there was...and then I realised this is something serious. These guys aren't smiling at us, there's no reciprocal playfulness, there's...so we'd drive past gates and things and these guys are standing there and they're just blank-eyed. This is weird. Up in Rundu we sat at a military gate thing waiting for some reason, and guys came past and they showed us some dead terrorists at that time and they lift this sail (<i>a piece of canvas</i>). And the sail was like dark. You know that army colour but this one was darker and it was like oily, and underneath there were these black guys that were killed and there was their red skin and there I really realised...I think what I realised there, I realised what is bush war. Because these boys were just Afrikaans boys like I know them, and I know them as wild and beautiful, they're fantastic to be with, but those guys just had more of a wild beast to them. They were shouting and it was like they were drunk.
Interviewer	Why do you think that a bunch of young soldiers would have wanted to show a bunch of young actresses dead bodies?
Marie	I don't think they even knew...it's like I don't think they saw us really. They were showing people around us as well. I can't remember that any one of them looked me in the eye or really chose us. It was like they'd brought their loot and they wanted everybody to see it, and they were celebrating.
Interviewer	You say they made you realise that the bush war was something quite serious. Did it shock you to see these dead bodies?
Marie	I suddenly realised hell, these are people just like those boys that's alive, also young, who I really had a deep understanding just suddenly there. And also the black skin and the red blood was something that...it's like maybe my father told us that we're all the same and to me that was...deep.
Interviewer	And you were there to entertain the troops, it was part of your job

	basically, but also part of your profession, you're in a play now. Did you question who you were entertaining and why after that?
Marie	Yes, they made us...like in Rundu...they invited us to come look at an attack that happened across the river that was like fireworks. And this was big brass and they'll go sit outside those houses with the...have you seen those houses <i>laughs</i> it's like colonial houses with the mesh wire...
Interviewer	With mesh across the windows and across the veranda and the doors.
Marie	Yes. For the mosquitoes and the flies and things. And they sat on those camping chairs with the <i>brandewyn</i> and...it was like an outing watching war happening on the other side, it was an attack. And I thought they very blasé, and especially...when we performed in this school hall or whatever hall we performed for them, I can't remember where, mortars would go off every now and again. And I started feeling that every time that sound was happening I'm getting more and more nervous. It just had an effect on me. But they were very blasé. They were very arrogant, very...I suddenly also realised something about my people, is that they have no...it was like they...I can't remember how I thought about it that time but I sort of lost respect in a way.
Interviewer	And how long did you do this sort of work while you were in Windhoek?
Marie	Just for two years for...
Interviewer	'79, '80.
Marie	Yes, '79, '80.
Interviewer	And during that period the war in that area was starting to pick up quite considerably. Did you have communications with your brothers and say, well how are you guys, what did you experience, and things like that?
Marie	No. Never on that level.
Interviewer	And then at the end of your 1980 year, what happened? Where did you go then?
Marie	I came here...
Interviewer	To Johannesburg.
Marie	Yes, in 1981. And then '82 I went to Cape Town. All in theatre companies.
Interviewer	And during that time, did you start encountering black people in theatre or was it still all white?
Marie	Look, when I was living in Namibia I started encountering black people, and to me it was a kind of an easy...look, us in theatre, we study human emotion and human...I think just living with the arts makes you tolerant to all people. It also makes you not

	wanting to join any political party. For example, when I turned 18 I could vote. I just knew, don't ever vote, don't ever sign up for a political party because that's a trap. And I didn't think...I looked at PW Botha and I thought, I'll never vote for you. That kind of...but I just didn't like old fascist men like that. The thing about Afrikaans women is that paternalistic authoritarian thing is heavy. We don't like that. We run away from that. I could never stand those men with the hats. Men telling me what to do all the time, men telling me I'm stupid.
Interviewer	But that was very prevalent in society in the sixties and the seventies. Those hats, I know just what you mean, that little black hat that Vorster wore, and PW Botha wore and so on and so forth. And then having moved Joburg, Cape Town there was a very strong political awareness in many parts of the country and I'm sure in theatre, there were aspects of the theatre that were very political. Did you talk about what was happening in South West Africa, there was internally the eighties war and as you know things started getting very tense politically.
Marie	Yes, so in 1981...I think in 1982 I'd left theatre...left Cape Town, and I went to Namibia, I wanted to go back to Windhoek because I love that city. And I became a teacher in Katutura, teaching Afrikaans to black children, to Nama kids. And I suppose...and it was great. It was hard. I felt very white. But I did that. And then after that I went travelling overseas by myself. And then I came back to Johannesburg to the theatre and I started doing protest theatre. I was in a play called Black Dog, Injanyama, where I was the white girl and it was about '76 and we went to Edinburgh Festival and that process was fantastic because I came in...this was '83 or '84, and I came in, in a black cast. Suddenly I had to work with black revolutionaries about '76. It just happened all like this and a big thing I remember is that I came from Pretoria – my parents were staying in Pretoria at the time – and I came by train and I had to walk down Bree Street to get to the Market Theatre, and I walked down Bree Street, and I suddenly understood like this that we live in Africa. This is an African city. And it was fantastic.
Interviewer	There you are a young Afrikaans woman living in Namibia, doing plays for the military brass and watching a night time battle like it was television, and then a few years later you're in protest theatre, it's quite a transition. Do you think that that little bit of what you saw in Ovamboland, Rundu, Ondangwa, those places, do you think that made you more aware of what was really happening?
Marie	Oh absolutely hey. And they used, in that theatre, some of my experiences in my character. Because remember we had to write our own plays at Market Theatre, struggle theatres. We wrote our own characters. And I used some of that. But you know I...didn't fight to get there. I didn't go look for it really.
Interviewer	But it found you.

Marie	No I found it but I didn't go look for it.
Interviewer	So it's more circumstantial than by desire.
Marie	Yes, maybe I just work that way.
Interviewer	And all this is going on, and your brothers are South African men, they're military commitments...when did their commitments finish or did they serve camps throughout the eighties?
Marie	No, I can't remember any of that but the thing where I was in contact with my brother who was a doctor who was in the Recces and a Parabat with that beautiful maroon...they were so sexy weren't they?
Interviewer	Well, I'll take your word for it.
Marie	They were so sexy, they were. I really love Afrikaans men, on another level. They're fun. Yes, then my brother became that, and he's a Parabat and he's this and that and that. So I got glimpses of him. I always saw him in his victorious moments. And then he was stationed...anyways they were all qualified doctors, they went off...what I know is...like at Hangklip, they took me diving. All these doctors that came back. And I also watched them and they were not frantic, but they weren't normal...there was just something different. They dived deeper, they dived more, they never sat on the rocks. It was a frantic thing. And there I must have...I can't remember when this was. I was in Cape Town. So they really fascinated me. and then the glimpses that I got, I always wondered...if I think about it...I always wondered if they chose psychopaths to be Recces. So I don't know where I got that thing from. And I always wondered what was he really doing, because he was too frantic, he was too happy, he was just overly...and he's not a very butch oke. He's more an academic guy.
Interviewer	So everything was done to extremes.
Marie	Everything. And it worried me and it fascinated me. And then once I saw a deep, deep anger, deep hatred, deep something that doesn't go with our family or our morals or anything. Just something changed in this guy. And then when he came back...yes, I once travelled to Malawi, which wasn't allowed. And he was home for some reason, and I said, well I'm going to go, I don't care. And I used to travel alone, I'm sort of not scared. And he came to me, he said, yeah you can go, and I knew he knew Africa outside of the borders suddenly. He said to me, yeah you must watch for jaundice. You can get jaundice from the food, he told me. And he gave me antibiotics or something, he gave me pills from his army bag. And then he said, don't cut yourself, and if you do cut yourself here's some antibiotic powder, just pack it in there and just heal it. He had this knowledge of...and then I scraped through his bags one day and I found pictures of him in a...he'd just come back from the army and his hair was short but here his hair was long, they were wearing civilian clothes, and

	they were at a Land Rover. And this wasn't South Africa. And as a family we did big holidays all over South Africa, I just knew it wasn't South Africa, so that fascinated me. And then when he came back he went to work as a doctor on the Lesotho Highlands project for six months or so and he took his wife and they left. And they're in Canada. So I'm fascinated by what did he go through. I never spoke to him.
Interviewer	And has he spoken to anybody in your family?
Marie	You see I don't know. I'll find out now from my other brother. Best I can.
Interviewer	But in the way that you knew him he was definitely a different person to the person you'd known in years gone by.
Marie	Yes.
Interviewer	And your other two brothers?
Marie	They're unaffected. <i>Laughs</i> And they're both...they would have...the oldest one wouldn't have spoken to me but he was just in the navy. And he's now building yachts. He's like that, so he went and he was there for his own reason and the other one went into the Bereedemag. And he's just a farmer.
Interviewer	Thinking about it now, do you think that this society was geared to hide some of the reality to young men before they went to the army, to actually shield them from what the real situation was?
Marie	I don't know, but while we were there in Rundu, we always asked, how many people died? And I knew they're not giving us the right numbers somehow. But what we knew about was all the casualties that happened in Rundu or around Rundu. All the drunken shooting, the Buffel accidents...more people died that way. That fascinated me so there were obviously...there was something wrong. But of course they told us...yes, but I can't tell you how I thought then and now, because now I know better.
Interviewer	Yes, sure, but I'm thinking now you're looking back with the benefit of experience and deeper knowledge, do you regret any of those entertainment things for those two years that you were there?
Marie	No. I had no <i>laughs</i> what do you call it? <i>Geweete</i> . No, no. How can I? I can't be against my own people, I still love them. As much as they irritate me or as much as I sometimes step out of conversations because it just doesn't...because I love Afrikaners.
Interviewer	When you're talking to people outside of your normal professional world, or your close circle of friends, with broader society, do people ever talk about those days? The army, what happened in the border war?
Marie	No. But I haven't really been inside Afrikaans society for a long time, maybe twenty years, on a day to day basis.

Interviewer	Just thinking about your exposure to the military and how it happened to you and what happened to your brothers, is there anything you want to sort of add to this discussion that's aimed at looking at those times?
Marie	I just think that war is so bad, it hurts people for ever. You can't send anybody in a war and think they're going to come out...in any war situation, whether it's township violence or SADF was at that time, and think that people are going to become whole again. They never become whole, I don't think people ever become whole. And I've worked a lot now with '76 people and I'm from that generation so I know a lot of black people from that time, and also the eighties, the East Rand violence and that, they're not whole. They're just...war is just very bad.
Interviewer	Do you think it can never be healed? There's no way?
Marie	I don't think so. Never completely.
Interviewer	Even if people do talk and process it through, you feel that there's still going to be some part missing?
Marie	Yes. It breaks people.
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