

## Shirley Kok

Facilitator: I'm with mama Shirley Kok we are in Thema, the interview is done by Brown Maaba. Can you just give me a background, you were you talking earlier that you speak Sixhosa but you grew up in the Northwest. How did that happen?

Respondent: My grandfather relocated to the Northwest because he loved the Northwest because of the farming opportunities in Northwest. My father was already born at the time, we were born in the Northwest, our home language was Isixhosa. My mother's name is Mma-Radebe, and my father is Kok. We would speak Isixhosa at home, at school we were studying in Setswana. Somehow we managed. In the Northwest there were no Sixhosa schools, it was only Setswana.

Facilitator: do you remember when did your grandfather relocate to the Northwest and from which area did he come from in the Eastern Cape.

Respondent: My father told us that he was Engcobo, we don't know which part of Engcobo, my grandmother, my father's father was from Matatiele, Empharama.

Facilitator: so even your father was born in the Northwest?

Respondent: I think when my grandfather relocated to the Northwest, my father was still a young boy

Facilitator: what about your mother, was she Xhosa?

Respondent: my mother is Mma-Radebe

Facilitator: how did they end up in the Northwest?

Respondent: my mother is also from Matatiele, but my grandfather had come to the Northwest because he worked in the mines in Klerksdorp, they first lived in Lichtenburg.

Facilitator: when were you born?

Respondent: I was born in 1965, we were 2 kids in the family, two girls

Facilitator: When you look back how was the Northwest when you grew up, I'm sure at the age of 7 you were beginning to be aware of the place?

Respondent: Because my father was a farmer, we grew up in a farming environment, my father was farming and had cattle. During winter, we knew that we had enough food, the harvesting would have been done.

Facilitator: So between school and farming, which one did your parents emphasise?

Respondent: According to my father, he left school at the age of standard five after his father died, he had to take over taking care of the cattle and the farming, my mother had the old standard six, she would say "I completed Royal". My mother encouraged us to go to school, and assist with the farming over the weekends

Facilitator: do you think it was because she saw a need for you to be educated?

Respondent: At that point in time, most children were not interested in school and prioritised farming. My mum was not impressed with young children on white people's trackers assisting them when they were harvesting, she didn't like young children to work for whites. She wanted us to study so that we can make a life for ourselves.

Facilitator: did your parents own the piece of land they farmed on?

Respondent: yes they owned it, the chief had given us the piece of land. This was in Mafikeng in a place called Kraaipaal. The chief was Chief Letsapa

Facilitator: Is he still there?

Respondent: yes it's the royal family of Letsapa

Facilitator: so your home is the Northwest?

Respondent: yes home is the Northwest for me

Facilitator: In terms of schooling, because my mother was more interested to get you to school than working in the fields. How far did you study?

Respondent: I went as far as Matric, I disappointed my parents because I became pregnant when in Matric. My father was very strict. He told me

that I chose to be a parent, he will look after my baby but I must go and work.

Facilitator: so what happened to your Matric?

Respondent: I managed to write my Matric, I didn't pass it, but I wrote the supplementary exam

Facilitator: what year was that?

Respondent: 1985, I wrote again in 1986

Facilitator: so after Matric how was the world like for you, you have a baby, you must go and work etc. How did you take it, where did you go?

Respondent: You know when your parents ask you to leave home life doesn't become any easier, it's like you did a very wrong thing, they are trying to get rid of you. Later on I realised later that my father wanted the best for me, he wanted to be responsible for my life. He made me realise what it means to be a parent. Parents cannot bless you for having a child outside wedlock. My father was teaching me a lesson.

Facilitator: so what happened, did you get married or came to Jo'burg to find a job?

Respondent: I never married, my baby stayed with my parents. When I came to Jo'burg I came and lived with my aunt's daughter who was working in Jo'burg. She had children and didn't have someone to look

after her children, so I came to Jo'burg to look for a job but I kept myself busy by assisting her with her kids. That is how I came to Jo'burg.

Facilitator: Because you grew up in Mafikeng you were ruled by Mangope, how was it like to grow up in that homeland, and when did you really become aware of the apartheid, repression, racial division and so on.

Respondent: Because we were Xhosa speaking, apartheid was not only from white people, from black people too. When Mangope became president, my father had to change his dompas and become a citizen of Bophuthatswana, he didn't want to, he was so stubborn, he felt that he was okay with the dompas. It was difficult for him to go about his business because he had to have citizenship in Bophuthatswana, the process of applying for citizenship was extremely long. They called it the book of life, everybody who was not Tswana speaking had to apply for citizenship before they can get the book of life.

Facilitator: what is the book of life vs citizenship?

Respondent: They called it "Lekwalo la Mosepidi" in Setswana, for Tswana speaking people it was their ID. For us to qualify for the book of life we first had to apply for the citizenship.

Facilitator: Was the fact that you were born and bred there not considered?

Respondent: they would ask you what nationality are you (ethnic group) if you are not Tswana you first had to apply for the citizenship, your application must be accompanied by the parents citizenship.

Facilitator: How did you take it as a person, was it normal for you to go through all those things, were you beginning to think "something is wrong here"

Respondent: it was difficult in the sense that you were born there, went to school there, what is the difference, why should I apply for the citizenship while others don't have to do that in order to obtain the book of life. It was difficult to understand. They would say things like "they are not from here, they are here to take away our country".

Facilitator: How did that make you feel?

Respondent: Well because my mother had some education, she told us about the history of the boers, and why things are the way they were.

Facilitator: In terms of you coming to Jo'burg, did your parents approve of that or were you just joining the family as a person who was concerned about your own child?

Respondent: Because I could not get the citizenship and the book of life, in the Northwest there was Lichtenburg and Dela Ray, I ended up applying for my ID book in Lichtenburg. It was better for me to move from Mafikeng, my father arranged with my aunt so that I can come and assist them whilst looking for a job. He approved it.

Facilitator: what year was that?

Respondent: It was in 1987 when I came to Thema at Masimini Kgaletsane. I stayed there for a long time. During the day I would be alone, I would meet with someone and they would ask me where I'm from and what am I doing there. I would tell them where I'm from and that I'm looking after children. I was then told about a community organisation that meets at the Catholic church, discussions are held about politics, jobs etc. I was invited to this meeting. I didn't know where the church was, I went to the first meeting, it was so interesting. I heard about unprotected strikes, even though the radio used to talk about that, I became more enlightened and began to understand. I learnt so much from this organisation, it was called the Unemployment Organisation. They had organisers. Political activists and school children used to attend the gatherings. There was always an agenda, the last item before closure they would talk about employment. The organisation used to go around companies and find jobs for people. They would submit names to the companies that had vacancies. I then submitted my name, I attended the meetings for quite some time. They also informed us that we should not go and look for jobs in companies that were on strike because you can easily get hurt.

Facilitator: Who was running this Unemployment Organisation, who was funding it and what was its future?

Respondent: Special Radebe was the organiser, companies like Jabula, Funa Food, Kelloggs, when they find you a job you would pay a subscription of R1 per week for running costs

Facilitator: How keen were you on getting a job or were you happy looking after the children?

Respondent: I attended the organisation in 1987/88, we then started getting temporary jobs. In most cases it would be afternoon jobs, or shifts. I remember my first temporary job, we would work nightshift weekends, some would work day shift. I was able to do this because it was a weekend and the parents were home. My first job, I was appointed in 1988 as a temp, I'm still working there. The company was Crabtree, we would start at 5 and end at 11 at night. I will be able to get the kids ready for school, when I leave in the afternoon their parents are home. I was fortunate in that sense. I carried on with the temp, from June to December, working 5 to 11 at night, those few hours contributed something. At that time we were able to live with little money

Facilitator: In terms of a permanent job, when did you become permanent?

Respondent: the temp ended in 1988 December, in January 1989 we were selected and offered permanent jobs. They registered us, because there was a union, NUMSA, they asked the employer to register us from 1988, the registration was from 1988.

Facilitator: So you have a union that argued your case to say that you must be backdated ?

Respondent: not really backdate, although we were temps, we were paid according to the main agreement because NUMSA was one of the organisations, we were governed by the main agreement. So when you



get into the industry, you were already covered to the collective bargaining agreement that they had. So we were paid according to the collective bargaining agreement. So the union got involved because we had worked for 6 months before we were given permanent agreements, because there was no break it was a continuation of the contract.

Facilitator: your awareness of the power and influence of unions is this where it started for you, or was it earlier or later?

Respondent: The power of unions I started realising it when I was a member of the Catholic organisation, they educated us on labour issues. When there were strikes they would give us clarity as to what the strike was about. They addressed us on labour issues.

Facilitator: so by the time you got the job you had the knowledge?

Respondent: yes I had some knowledge?

Facilitator: What was the production of Crabtree like?

Respondent: Crabtree makes switches and sockets

Facilitator: more or less electrical/engineering company?

Respondent: yes

Facilitator: so was it affiliated to NUMSA?

Respondent: yes, we were NUMSA members

Facilitator: when did you join the union?

Respondent: At the time once you became permanent, they will start recruiting you. I just want to go back a little, at the Unemployment Organisation whenever they found jobs for us, they would inform us that the union is going to approach us once we become permanent. They also told us whether you join the union or not whatever unions negotiate for you will qualify even if you are not a union member

Facilitator: In terms of Crabtree, how powerful and strong was the union?

Respondent: it was so powerful because the company was dominated by females, at the time the Chairperson of the committee of shop stewards at Crabtree, George Mogosoane, he was also the chairperson of Spring local, NUMSA. We were so vibrant as workers at Crabtree, and of course at the time we were much younger and full of energy. If there were issues we were always in a hurry for a strike. The employer knew that the workers were organised, everything had to be done procedurally

Facilitator: at that time who were the most popular and powerful leaders within NUMSA or the local branch

Respondent: at that time Crabtree was one of the companies that was vibrant ..., it is normal that women are expected to drag their feet when it comes to politics, people assumed that women would not show an interest politics. If there was an issue around wage negotiations, NUMSA will always bargain on behalf of their members.

Facilitator: yourself did you begin to participate full time in NUMSA activities, did you see yourself as a worker, okay I'm a member of NUMSA but this is not my problem?

Respondent: as a member of NUMSA, NUMSA's constitution taught us about discipline of workers, this does not mean that they will call strikes that are uncalled for, illegal strikes, but to say ..., if there meetings, participate in those meetings, attend general meetings around Springs, not sit around and say I joined NUMSA and wait for the benefits. They taught us that we are NUMSA, if there's an issue in your company address it, you are NUMSA. The office was there to advise us. We are the ones that know the problems and we were encouraged to address those issues. I became very involved and eventually appointed as a shop steward in 1996.

Facilitator: so all along you were groomed in the culture of NUMSA?

Respondent: yes

Facilitator: When you arrived there in 1988, in terms of racial segregation and all sorts of things that were happening there, how bad was it, were things better then in 1988 when you arrived, or did they become better in 1991/92 or was it just the same?

Respondent: When I arrived in 1988 Crabtree was one of the companies, for instance companies like Chenzo, we know that mostly they employed coloureds and blacks, Crabtree employed mostly black people. We didn't have coloured people at Crabtree. When it comes to racial discrimination, it existed in administration because they employed mostly

white people. There was only one black person. All administrative positions were given to black people. We only operated on the floor. There was also the maintenance ..(unclear) maintenance, they also employed white people only, no blacks. Industrial engineers were all white, no blacks at all. Now things have changed, things have changed. The operational side was not so big. De Lite Master, was their sister company, the companies merged and became one. So some of the administrative duties like tool room etc was a joined operation with the sister company.

When it comes to engaging the employer, although collective agreements existed, the main agreement, we were allowed to have other agreements. For instance compassionate leave was not part of the main agreement, those are some of the issues that we negotiated on our own at plant levels.

Facilitator: You also mentioned that Crabtree was dominated by females, the structure of the local branch of NUMSA, did it reflect that, dominated by females?

Respondent: NUMSA had recruited a lot of companies in Springs, most of them were dominated by males, very few companies were dominated by females. Crabtree, TENZA telephone, Micropress, most big companies like Ringrollers were dominated by men. When it comes to the local structure, you would find one woman in 5 office bearers. Women were afraid to get involved with the labour movement, even when they were nominated they were afraid.

Facilitator: .why was that?

Respondent: things like sometimes meeting start late because we have to cook as women, the other issue was transport late at night to go home, also weekends we have to do our washing it was almost impossible for women to join union structures, mostly it was domestic issues.

Facilitator: am I right to say that you presumed that this is a man's field?

Respondent: yes at first we felt like that.

Facilitator: when did the attitude change?

Respondent: the attitude changed because some of the decisions taken were affecting us, particularly the issue of compassionate leave, women stood up because it affected them personally. For instance maternity leave, six months leave. Because we were represented by men in our company, the employer would give you 2 or 3 months, depending on who the employer is. In the main agreement it clearly stated that maximum maternity leave is 26 weeks. We started getting involved with issues that affected women. I became a shop steward in 1996, 1997 I became pregnant, because I was involved in the union structure, the gender structure. I was then told that I should not be told by the employer how long should I be away for, it was clear in the main agreement. I was told to go back to my organisation and address the issue with the employer. That is when we started taking the proper maternity leave of maximum of 26 weeks.

Facilitator: In 1994, the democratic elections and so on, what did it mean for you as workers, in particular in your structures?

Respondent: 1994 was really a breakthrough of workers issues. One would say at the time workers started to be so vocal. In 1994, remember we had the LRA which didn't cover all the workers. There were strikes around the amendments of the LRA. After 1994, the amendments were considered. Public workers were also part and parcel, in agriculture and domestic workers, we started to be part and parcel of the LRA. NEDLAC was launched, new regulations that would really benefit workers came into place. We managed to make a breakthrough through NEDLAC to the departments that were dominated by white people. People were encouraged to go to institutions like Wits to study industrial engineering, in the past only white people were taken into consideration. Some workers had done administrative courses and were not taken into consideration, the regulations assisted us a lot, especially for those in private sectors, we were able to make a breakthrough in those departments whereby black people were not considered.

Facilitator: Going back a bit in the 1980s, was there a link with the workers struggles within a camp in Crabtree, and what was happening in the township, you know the revolts, the COSAS, student activities and so on?

Respondent: Yes one would say through COSATU because NUMSA was an affiliate of COSATU. COSATU, although NUMSA had its own office, also COSATU, the umbrella, the federation held its own meetings where through it, all the active organisations were able to meet with one agenda

Facilitator: speak in one voice?

Respondent: yes.

Facilitator: When you became a shop steward, why you, how did it happen?

Respondent: because I talk a lot and love to sing, like I said when we first started with were so full of energy, noisy etc. If there was an issue and we were feeling compromised, our committee was very pushy, so workers we judge each other with small little things, that is how I was nominated. Nominations will be put forward and then go to vote for the final candidate.

Facilitator: so you've since been a shop steward or you became a shop steward for a particular time?

Respondent: Yes I was about a shop steward for 3 terms

Facilitator: that was 1996 just after 1994, when you look back from 1996 to this period things have changed from this era to that, this is what was achieved?

Respondent: yes there are issues that I can state, from 1996 up until now the following issues were achieved: for instance in the public sector there was a lot of job reservation. We managed to deal with it, we also understood that everything had to be done procedurally – jobs were advertised with unnecessary requirements which were not relevant, but because of job reservation, they will make it almost impossible for a black person to apply. So we would question such adverts and find out why so many requirements because the past is not being addressed. So as

workers, I would say we have achieved so many things. This is when black industrial engineers were appointed – transparency.

Facilitator: If I may ask, as a local member of NUMSA, are you allowed to stand for regional, national and so on elections and if yes are there not gender discrimination in those positions?

Respondent: no there are not. You are allowed because me as a NUMSA shop steward I was also an office bearer in Springs, I would participate in their gender structure, in general meetings everybody is allowed to be a member, shop steward council, all shop stewards are allowed. There were education structures, gender etc, I participated in the gender structure. By participating in the gender structure, I was ended up being elected to COSATU gender structure as a chairperson – at the time we called it the region of COSATU because now it is provincial

Facilitator: PWV?

Respondent: yes

Facilitator: are there any other female activists that were active that you can actually think about, there could have been something striking about them, do you remember any, or was it just a few people?

Respondent: there were female comrades by that time that participated. They were involved also in the union structures, like Dora Nyathela, she is now a councillor. She was one of the ladies who was very active and then the other one was Zodwa Motha, she is also one of the shop stewards that was very vocal



Facilitator: in the older generation?

Respondent: the older generation, I took after Rain Mxiya, they are the ones that developed us to this level.

Facilitator: when you look back, was it worth it maybe to get involved in the unions or was it just a waste of time?

Respondent: it was really worth it, as you know Christians say "you must work hard to go to heaven", things will not come to you you have to make them happen. We cannot achieve anything .., when we were at school there was a debate topic "the stroke of a pen is mightier than a sword" – engagements must take place in order for things to happen. You cannot just sit around and expect things to come to you. I learnt a lot .., as a worker, use the resources and engage

Facilitator: In your experience, ever since you joined Crabtree, was there ever tension between unions that are under COSATU and those that are sitting outside COSATU, perhaps a white union?

Respondent: no, we've never had such tensions. Tensions would be amongst us belonging to the same organisation, that was common because sometimes things are not seen in the same light, and at times people don't want to listen to each other until there's a strike. The strike will tear people apart because the other one would put his issues forward and not consider other people's. There will be tensions but the fact that you are under one umbrella, NUMSA we must reach a consensus.

Facilitator: anything that you feel is important that we didn't discuss or I didn't ask you?

Respondent: I think we have covered all the aspects, but in the new generation, we managed to ensure that blacks are working in all the departments – the challenge now is you fought for the young generation to be in those departments, once they are in they start saying unions is for uneducated people, they just think it's a waste of time. They would say I have my own certificate, only later on they will realise that they can be affected. The young generation need to know that unions were there for a purpose and that they played a very important role. The laws that were approved by the government must be implemented jointly between the employer and the employee.

Facilitator: thanks a lot for your time.

END

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