

Nelson Mhlanga

Facilitator: This is an interview with Ntate Nelson Goodman Mhlanga, the date is 3 August 2012, we are in Mabopane, interview is done by Brown Maaba. Papa thanks very much for your time. Papa please tell me your background as to where you are from, your parents, your family, where you were born, schooling?

Respondent: I came here in 1965 and worked at the mines in Rustenburg, 1965, 1966 and in 1967 I left

Facilitator: Your schooling in Mozambique how far did you go, did you attend school there?

Respondent: Yes up to standard 3

Facilitator: and then you left school?

Respondent: Yes I left schooling and in those days people came to Gauteng to look for work, I came here to look for work in the mines

Facilitator: Why did you want to work in Gauteng, why not in Mozambique?

Respondent: The Portuguese were worse than the Afrikaners

Facilitator: That was before Mozambique was independent, you became independent in 1975?

Respondent: Yes, so I came here in 1965 when the Portuguese were still in power

Facilitator: Tell me about the Portuguese?

Respondent: They are not humans, they were worse and the schooling we were not allowed to go any further than standard 4, so I left with my standard 3. So I came here to work in the mines

Facilitator: How did you get from Mozambique to Rustenburg, how did you get to Rustenburg?

Respondent: I used my passport to come into the country, there was a company which contracted us in Mozambique, they brought us to Rustenburg, it was called Join

Facilitator: So you had never been to Rustenburg before, and knew nothing about it?

Respondent: I knew nothing about it, I just knew people who worked here and I decided to join them. I came here and worked in the Rustenburg mine. So for two years later I left because of the money, we were paid £3 per month, which was too little, R6

Facilitator: Was it a lot of money or too little?

Respondent: R6, 27 cents per day, it was too little, but we worked and were able to eat but that's it. In 1967 I went to work in the factories

Facilitator: Let's go back to your work at the mines, your job in Rustenburg, what were you doing there?

Respondent: I worked in the mines, I worked for Steele Work, it's a firm not under the mines, it still exists to date, they used to cook platinum number 2, they burned it

Facilitator: You dealt with platinum, those are platinum mines not gold mines?

Respondent: Yes this is where I worked – imagine working on a hot rock, the job needs a lot of strength, you must be strong, they would ask you to do anything as long as you had the strength

Facilitator: How was the job?

Respondent: It was very hard, and very hot, you would work after two hours you have to go outside to get some air and come back

Facilitator: How long would you be outside for?

Respondent: When you feel right you go back again and work hard, you had no choice

Facilitator: Where did you sleep?

Respondent: We lived in the compounds that's what they were called, there was a company manager, after work you go to the showers, eat and go to sleep. We slept in a safe environment, the problem was money

Facilitator: Why did you not tell the employer that the money is too little

Respondent: We were not given the opportunity to discuss money, if you did say something about money they will fire you, if you are from outside like us Mozambique, they take you back home. Even the local people did not discuss money at all. They would beat you up and chase you away, where would you go?

Facilitator: So you all kept quiet?

Respondent: Yes we had no choice

Facilitator: So you worked there for two years only?

Respondent: Yes

Facilitator: So when you arrived here were you able to speak any of the local languages?

Respondent: I learnt here, I worked with Sothos, Xhosa's ..., the only language I could speak was Shangaan

Facilitator: So you started working here in 1965 and left in 1967?

Respondent: Yes, here in Rustenburg I left in 1967 and went to look for a job in the factories

Facilitator: Where

Respondent: Alberton, and also worked in Alberton

Facilitator: So you left Rustenburg and went to Alberton?

Respondent: Yes I did and lived in a hostel in Tokoza

Facilitator: You stayed in Tokoza hostel, the very same hostel that killed people in the 1980s, Inkatha or another one?

Respondent: People were killed in 1986 I had already left

Facilitator: I see. What is the mine you worked for in Rustenburg?

Respondent: Corombia mines

Facilitator: So what did they say when you left?

Respondent: They didn't care, they just let you go

Facilitator: So you just left. How did you get to Alberton, did you know someone in Alberton?

Respondent: I had friends that I had met at the steel works, Astuart, I met them there. 1968, 1969, 1970, 1971 up until 1974 I worked there.

Facilitator: What did you do there?

Respondent: I worked with a motor mechanic

Facilitator: Who taught you the job?

Respondent: I was a handler, I would assist the mechanic, I would give him the tools

Facilitator: So you worked there for six, seven years?

Respondent: Now I know a little bit, if a car has a problem I would check it myself

Facilitator: How were the white people there, what is the name of the company again?

Respondent: Stewart

Facilitator: How long did you work there?

Respondent: 7 years

Facilitator: How did they treat you?

Respondent: No problem at all, the money was better then, I was paid R60 per week

Facilitator: so it was better than the mines

Respondent: Yes

Facilitator: How many black people worked there?

Respondent: Quite a lot, it was a big company

Facilitator: So you were many, okay

Respondent: Yes there was a lot of black people some of us didn't know each other

Facilitator: Were you exploited or not?

Respondent: No, I didn't have a problem with anyone there

Facilitator: So you didn't start a union there?

Respondent: No

Facilitator: Why

Respondent: We didn't have unions in those days, I hear about unions now

Facilitator: So from there where did you go?

Respondent: From there I went to Mpumalanga Power Station

Facilitator: Mpumalanga?

Respondent: Arnod Power Station

Facilitator: When did you start working there?

Respondent: Remember I left here in 1975, 1976 I was at home, 1977 I started working at Arnod, up to 1982 for five years

Facilitator: What were you doing at Arnod Power Station?

Respondent: I was their cook there

Facilitator: Where did you learn how to cook, you worked in the mines and at the steel company in Alberton and you were not cooking there

Respondent: When I arrived at Arnod I first started as a cleaner later on I was taught how to cook and eventually remained a cook there.

Facilitator: So you were cooking for white people only?

Respondent: Yes

Facilitator: So white people had their own canteen?

Respondent: Yes

Facilitator: So you've travelled all over, you never married from the time you worked in Rustenburg and then moved to Alberton, from Alberton you went to Mpumalanga, you never married?

Respondent: My family is at home, in 1982 when there were fights in Zimbabwe I brought my family over here

Facilitator: Renamo?

Respondent: Yes, since 1982 my family joined me here, we live in Winterveldt

Facilitator: So you brought your family here because of the war, Renamo and Frelimo?

Respondent: Yes, now I am living here with my family, I have a big house and live with my children

Facilitator: Your house is in Winterveldt?

Respondent: Yes

Facilitator: How did you get the job in Mpumalanga because you had been working in Alberton?

Respondent: At the time I was communicating with some people who worked in Mpumalanga and they told me there was a job opening and I got it

Facilitator: How was it like working there?

Respondent: In Mpumalanga at the boarding house, there was no problem at all, I just went around and did my work, if there was a problem we would sort it out with no problem at all. But now there are problems .., I am not from here I am from Mozambique, all I want is money and I don't like to get involved in other things.

Facilitator: What were the problems?

Respondent: Apartheid, if they call you you do not address them as "baas" that was a big issue, so I didn't want to involve myself in unnecessary issues, even the younger white staff members we had to address them as "baas", anybody who was white had to be addressed like that, black people cannot be addressed as "baas"

Facilitator: Do black people also want to be addressed as "baas"?

Respondent: some (he laughed), now recently, in the past it was not the case – a black person would be told even if you have lots of money you cannot be "baas" you are black like us. People didn't see anything wrong with this, they thought it was normal.

Facilitator: How was the wages there at Arnod Power Station?

Respondent: We were earning £25 (R50) per month

Facilitator: Was it enough?

Respondent: In those days it was okay, it was enough, remember we didn't buy food, we slept for free and the money was for our families, it was enough money to look after the family. At home they always had enough money and food.

Facilitator: Any strikes at the Power Station?

Respondent: No there was no strike at the Power Station?

Facilitator: Why?

Respondent: I don't know we never had a strike. The strikes started now, in those days there were no strikes, maybe people were afraid because they worked at a power station. Everything was close by, we had shops and everything, we could just buy and go back to the compounds.

Facilitator: Where did you sleep?

Respondent: At the compounds, do you know the compounds?

Facilitator: I do

Respondent: There's everything there, kitchen, everything is there

Facilitator: Black people slept there?

Respondent: Yes we had our own compound and white people also had their own compound. So what I would do is they would transport us from the compound to work every morning and after work.

Facilitator: How was the white compound, was it better than yours?

Respondent: Yes everything was nicer than ours, including their food. I don't know how things are today because I left a long time ago

Facilitator: What happened in your compound?

Respondent: Things were okay, we cooked food, meat, chicken good in general, the problem was not the food it was money although at the time it did not seem little, food we ate as much as we could maybe that's why we didn't complain about the money

Facilitator: You ate enough and everything seemed fine?

Respondent: Yes

Facilitator: How long did you work there, at the Power Station?

Respondent: I worked there until 1982, I worked there for five years

Facilitator: So you left in 1982?

Respondent: Yes, I went home to fetch my family and brought them here because of the problems in Zimbabwe. I had other jobs I was busy with, I then got a job as a carpenter, sometimes I would buy and sell things just to survive. Currently I am on pension.

Facilitator: where did you get the carpentry trade because you did not train as a carpenter because you worked at the mines, at a power station, now you are talking about carpentry?

Respondent: You if I can work with you, you will understand the type of person I am. If I was to drive with you from here to Johannesburg, by the time we get to Johannesburg I will know how to drive, I am a quick learner, in a month I can learn a lot. When I was assisting the mechanic, I learnt a lot, carpentry I learnt from a guy here in Soshanguve, I worked with him for 4 months and learnt quite a lot from him. You will be surprised if you can see the work I do now after learning from him.

Facilitator: So when you brought your family from Mozambique you took them directly to Winterveldt?

Respondent: Yes

Facilitator: How did you find the place in Winterveldt because you lived in Mpumalanga?

Respondent: When I lived in Tokoza, I met a young man who was from Pretoria, he left and built a house in Winterveldt, that is how I got to know about Winterveldt. So when I heard that things were difficult at home, I spoke to him and he assisted me to get the stand to build my house in Winterveldt. We are staying in the same area, he is now a long distance driver, he drives to Cape Town and other areas.

Facilitator: So you built your house here when you arrived?

Respondent: Yes. When I arrived he gave me temporary shelter and then I started building my own house. At the moment one of my children works at Waterfall, he went to school after finishing he is working ..(unclear)

Facilitator: So from 1982 you were busy with carpentry?

Respondent: Yes, I worked with this guy who taught me, I later started working on my own after learning.

Facilitator: How was Mangope during those days because when you arrived it was during his time?

Respondent: He didn't want spaza shops, people from Mozambique were all over the place,, I think this was between 1975 and .., when they were shooting, people had started to toyi toyi, people started to understand what was going on, they started seeing the military visible, they burnt busses etc. I can't tell you much about

those because for me I was happy to have my family with me. The free South African people, the citizens of South Africa were the ones aggrieved who had problems, so to me I was not worried at all.

Facilitator: So you never went back to work since 1982?

Respondent: I've been home since 1982, I've been doing carpentry until I received my pension

Facilitator: Were you able to survive with carpentry?

Respondent: Yes, I started receiving pension from 2008

Facilitator: So are you no longer doing carpentry?

Respondent: I'm still doing it to date

Facilitator: Who are your customers?

Respondent: I prepare my stock, and go to Witbank, Secunda, there's a place called Mbalenhle, I sell most of my stock there, and my other stock is sold in Pietersburg, even around here I sell for the people in this area.

Facilitator: How is business now, is it okay, are people buying?

Respondent: Well it's better than nothing, it puts a plate of food on the table.

Facilitator: When you first arrived in Rustenburg in 1965, you were from Mozambique, some of the people you worked with where were they from?

Respondent: A lot of nationalities were there, some people were from Transkei, Shangaan people from Mozambique, others from Zimbabwe, some Nyasa people from Malawi. People from here didn't want to work in the mines, mostly it was people from outside the borders, South Africans were not interested in working in the mines (he laughed)

Facilitator: Why, what was their reason?

Respondent: They were not interested in working in the mines, they thought the job was too low for them, the thought of working in the mines I think they didn't like they thought it belittled them

Facilitator: Where did they want to work?

Respondent: They wanted to work in factories and offices, South Africans were employed as clerks in the mines in those days, they would never work in the mines, you would find Shangaan people, Manyasa, Xhosas and Basotho, they were not interested.

Facilitator: They were not interested at all?

Respondent: Not at all

Facilitator: The cultural diversity in the mines, did the people not fight because of this?

Respondent: No, people did not have such conflicts but because there was a shebeen/bar, people would fight when they are drunk but these were general fights, not because of their ethnicity or cultural beliefs.

Facilitator: what about politics?

Respondent: No politics at all. When I left Mozambique in 1965 I didn't realise what was going on in Mozambique

Facilitator: You didn't know?

Respondent: Not at all

Facilitator: It was just normal for you?

Respondent: Yes, I only learnt a lot of things when I was here in South Africa, I didn't know the reasons, I would visit home when I was on leave and stay for two/three weeks and come back again. I didn't know what was going on – I lived in the rural areas far from town. Politics I learnt about them when I was here in 1974/75, I learnt about the independence, I was surprised. That's when the changes happened.

Facilitator: What were the changes in your opinion?

Respondent: It changed, we were no longer forced to respect white people. I told you that when the Portuguese were there things were far worse than the boers. Portuguese people didn't even want us to stare at them, if you do you are in trouble, why are you staring at him. They were the worst racists. We used to use bicycles in those days, when you arrive at work, you had to push it not ride it, if you pass riding it they would beat you up, they didn't want to see black people riding bicycles. Boers were better than the Portuguese people. Portuguese people would make people work for nothing for up to six months with no pay. You would work for government for 6 months with no pay. They would arrive in your home and say we want 1 person per household. They would take this person to work for 6 months with no pay – doing jobs like farming, ploughing etc. and not get paid. We would work for nothing.

Facilitator: Why did people tolerate that?

Respondent: That is why I came here through the contract, we also paid tax for riding a bicycle if you don't they confiscate it, we paid R50 in those days. The Portuguese were the worst people. So that's it.

Facilitator: In Tokoza, you lived in the hostel?

Respondent: Yes I lived there

Facilitator: How did you get in there, what were the requirements for you to live there?

Respondent: A passbook and a permit

Facilitator: So you paid for the permit per month?

Respondent: Yes

Facilitator: So at the time your family was still in Mozambique?

Respondent: Yes I lived alone at the hostel

Facilitator: So in the hostels there were no politics or people talking about unions?

Respondent: They started in 1976 during the Black Power. I was at home when it happened. When I came back I went back to Arnod, I could not go back to Tokoza because there was a lot of unrest in Tokoza. I was told when I left home that people have been killed in the hostels and that a lot of residents had died and some people were burnt, I didn't go back. I went to Arnod. I didn't go back to Tokoza.

Facilitator: Did you enjoy working at Arnod?

Respondent: Yes this is where I worked at the boarding house, cooking

Facilitator: That's all

Respondent: Yes

Facilitator: So you learnt how to cook there?

Respondent: Yes

Facilitator: How were the white people there?

Respondent: They were arrogant and treated black people with such disrespect, to date things are still the same. If you are looking for a job, you find a job that pays you well, you don't want anything to stand in your way, the pay makes you happy and you tolerate everything, as long as you are working and you are able to support yourself and family other things don't matter. That is why I say the boers were better than the Portuguese, I would fight for myself as an individual, get what I want. That is why people were willing to call white people "baas" we were at their mercy. If a white person complains about you you are fired, we were not allowed to fight with white people.

Facilitator: So black people used to just keep quiet?

Respondent: Yes we had to be mum. Before I came to Rustenburg, I went through Thabazimbi. I was still under age at the time, I worked at the quarters and worked there for a while. Do you know what the quarters are?

Facilitator: What are quarters?

Respondent: Homes of white people, we called them quarters at the time, and you would look after a man, his wife and family. I worked for this guy ..., I didn't understand any of the local languages and Afrikaans, I could only speak a little English because I had held some piece jobs in Zimbabwe. When I arrived there, one day the wife asked me to go and buy wool. She knew I didn't understand Afrikaans, she gave me 20 cents and a piece of wool and sent me to the shops. I couldn't understand what she was saying. I went to the shop and gave the shop owner who was a white woman, I didn't know what to do. She was busy talking and just put the wool on the table. I just stood there. I went back and left the wool and money. When I got back she asked me but we couldn't communicate ..., she can't speak English, I can speak a little bit of English and she only speaks Afrikaans. She screamed for me. I told her in English that I do not understand her, I was speaking all languages at the same time, we were fighting now. Her husband is at work the kids are at school. At least I could communicate with the children. I then take a hosepipe and continued working. When the children came back from school she told them to fire me. When he came to me he just told me to leave. I was told to come back for my money later on. When I get to the compound the people told me that I was wrong I cannot fight with the missies. Everybody told me not to go back. The guy who got me went to collect my money. They gave me R2, I used to work for R6 because I did not work the whole month. I went back to Mozambique. From here to Beit Bridge you would get change from R2. (one pound, it was R2 at the time), from Pretoria to Messina we paid R2.50. I went back home and then joined the contract which took me to Rustenburg. I chose to go back home because the white woman kept calling me kaffir, I didn't understand the language.

Facilitator: And then you came back?

Respondent: Yes and when I came back that is when I got the job at the mine in Rustenburg

Facilitator: Were you not able to find jobs in Maputo etc.?

Respondent: The problem with Maputo is that they wanted people who understood Portuguese, Maputo is in town. If you don't understand Portuguese you could not work with them. I was from the rural areas and moved from there to find work. The distance between Maputo and where I lived was very far, it was better to come here in South Africa – South Africa borders with Zimbabwe and Mozambique. So from here you are in Zimbabwe and then you come here. So Maputo is very far.

Facilitator: Which area are you from?

Respondent: Manika

Facilitator: Close to Zimbabwe and South Africa

Respondent: Manika, Zimbabwe, South Africa. It was better to come to South Africa.

Facilitator: Have you ever been to Maputo?

Respondent: I've been to Maputo, the road was opened from Maputo to Manika. I worked here and bought myself a car, I used to go home travelling in my car. I have a Code 10 drivers licence.

Facilitator: So do you have people assisting you, workers maybe or are you working alone?

Respondent: I do have, I have people who come from home who assist me and some leave others come – others disappear with my money, people from Mozambique one cannot trust. The one from Mbalenhle disappeared with my money, another one in Pietersburg did the same but he phoned last week and told me he is back, he was travelling. He said he will come and see me.

Facilitator: Did you give him money?

Respondent: I give them stock to sell for me, month end they bring the money but unfortunately they disappeared with my money. I cannot go and sell myself there because I have to work here at home. They are working for me and disappeared with my money.

Facilitator: What are you going to do because these people disappear with your money?

Respondent: What can I do? Where will find them, all I know is that they are from Mozambique but you cannot go looking for them in Zimbabwe

Facilitator: Can you not employ others?

Respondent: Yes that's what I do, I teach them from scratch. At the moment I am not selling I wait for orders and then make the stuff. I do not keep lots of stock anymore.

Facilitator: Who is living in Manik now?

Respondent: My family is no longer there, my brother was there but he died, my sister still lives there. She lives with her family, I visit her from time to time, I do visit them.

Facilitator: Do they also visit here?

Respondent: They do visit, I also go and visit them

Facilitator: So there's no one at home?

Respondent: At home there's nobody at all

Facilitator: Who owns the land now, do people just live anywhere?

Respondent: Mozambique is not like South Africa, people do not own stands, if you leave you leave someone else will replace you, I am fine. If you want a stand you go to town and buy it there .., like my business I would look for a stand in place. In the rural communities nobody owns a stand

Facilitator: People just build their own houses?

Respondent: You can .., for instance if I decide to go back home, I will go to the chief and tell them I am back, they know where I used to live, they will say build your house here and speak to the new occupant. But I will not buy the land/stand. If I leave it is given to someone else.

Facilitator: So you worked at the Power Station in Mpumalanga and ..

Respondent: I worked in Rustenburg, and then Alberton and then Arnod.

Facilitator: After three jobs which job did you like most?

Respondent: When I was an assistant to the mechanic – I loved the job, cooking I knew how to cook, but I cannot go back to it, but the mechanic job I can go back because I will have a car to move around

Facilitator: So which one did you not like or were they all okay?

Respondent: I didn't like the one at Rustenburg, it was difficult

Facilitator: You wouldn't go back there?

Respondent: Nowadays they are using machines, people do not need a lot of strength to do the work.

Facilitator: Did people die in Rustenburg?

Respondent: No we used to get very tired. Some people were burnt

Facilitator: So what happened if you are burnt did they fire you?

Respondent: No if you burnt at work they didn't fire you they would take you to the hospital. They had big pots, a big pot, you would throw things in there and close the door, and then later on you .., like the concrete machine, the pot would dip in some container, it was risky, dangerous, we worked with fire.

Facilitator: Fire. So the day you left that place you said Thank You I am leaving?

Respondent: yes plus there was no money but we worked hard

Facilitator: did you work for long hours?

Respondent: Yes we also worked shifts, from 6 to 2, 2 to 10 and 10 to 6 in the morning, three shifts.

Facilitator: Okay thank you for your time papa.

END

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