Phyllis Naidoo (1928 - 2013) was born in Estcourt. She is the daughter of Simon David, a teacher and principal. When she was ten years old, her father took her to an Institute of Race Relations Conference in Pietermaritzburg at which she was to serve tea. At the meeting someone asked her to go and call the boy. She went outside and when she asked for the boy a very dignified, traditional Zulu woman confronted her. 'The boy you want is my husband.' The woman's regal presence made Phyllis realise that she had given tremendous offence and she was mortified. This incident awakened her, more than any event or speech at the meeting, to the evils of racism.

Phyllis joined the Natal Indian Congress (NIC) and in 1958, married MD Naidoo, a member of the SACP, and in 1961 she joined the Communist Party. She was banned in March 1966. In 1967, MD was charged and sent to prison on Robben Island. His detention together with her banning left her destitute. She could not work and had to depend on friends and family for welfare assistance.

Phyllis could not leave the country by ordinary means; she had never been able to obtain a passport because of her political involvement. So she went to Johannesburg where she sought advice from Bram Fischer. She continued her work in the underground assisting comrades to flee to asylum and providing support for their families and those of detainees. During the ten-year period of her banning, her home was raided fourteen times. When she was placed under house arrest, she began to study law. She qualified as a lawyer in 1973 but could not practice, as she was not allowed in court. Finally her banning order was lifted in 1976 and she set up her practice. One of the people she defended was Harry Gwala of the Communist Party who was tried for treason and sentenced to life imprisonment. People who had been released from Robben Island gathered around Phyllis who tried to find employment for them. They couldn't find work because people were afraid to employ them. At one stage, she had five ex-Robben Island detainees as messengers at her law firm. Among these was Jacob Zuma. The only option for these men was to flee the country.
On 23 July 1977, Phyllis escaped to Lesotho as her underground comrades were detained, along a new route established by Omar Badsha, Rick Turner and others. Here she joined the ANC and was involved in welfare work: providing for children who had left South Africa, assisting members of the SACP and ANC to escape from South Africa and providing them with support in Lesotho. She was working with the Rev John Osmers. In 1979, a parcel-bomb was sent to Rev Osmers and when he opened it, his hand was blown off and Phyllis and four others were seriously injured. While in Lesotho, Phyllis was Chief Legal Aid Counsel for the Lesotho Government. But she was forced to leave Lesotho in 1983, when South African air strikes against Lesotho began and all its twelve border posts were closed. In 1983 she fled to Zimbabwe where she continued her political activities for the ANC, wrote speeches for comrades, taught at the Law Department of the University of Zimbabwe and helped people from South Africa find solutions to problems. She was actively involved in campaigning against the abuse of power by the apartheid government. She was particularly concerned with the prisoners, both political and criminal, on death row. She wrote Waiting to Die in Pretoria, which decried the inhumanity of capital punishment. She also put out a publication Le Rona Re Batho, an account of the 1982 Maseru Massacre.

In 1990, she returned to South Africa and continues to write and is engaged in recording the history of the struggle as she experienced it during her time in the country and in exile. Her most recent publications are 156 Hands that Built South Africa (2006) and Footprints beyond Grey Street (2007), the latter continuing the theme of her earlier Footprints in Grey Street (2002).


Selected Work

Extract from Footprints in Grey Street (2002):
Ntobeko is the daughter of Cynthia Phakathi born at McCords Zulu Hospital in Overport on the 24 April 1977. Not an unusual story? It would be a pretty ordinary event anywhere in the world except in South Africa.

The South African government has four groups, Africans, Coloureds, Indian and Whites. Not satisfied, the Nationalists are set on a path to tribalise the African into 13 tribes. Subsequent white rulers have perfected the British legacy of divide and rule. But in this monolithic white tribe are the various white tribes of Europe: English, Welsh, Scots, Irish, Germans, Austrians, Hungarians, Italians, Greeks. Portuguese, Polish, Belgians and many more. Their tribal affiliation back home is opaque as the shenanigans of the European Union have shown, not to mention the violence these tribes have wreaked on the whole world. But here in South Africa they are a congenial whole. They had special queues, special entrances, park benches etc. to tell their homogeneity.

Both Cynthia and I are South Africans. I know no other home: my father was born here. My grandfather was brought from India to plant sugar cane here for the British in Natal. In the British colony that was India, land and jobs were impossible for the poor South. I am not an Indian. I don't have an Indian Passport. If stranded anywhere, the South African government and not the Indian government will come to my rescue. I don't want to be a South African of Indian origin. Nobody says a South African of British origin? I am a South African and very proud of it.

Cynthia was my legal secretary. I marvel today just how she put up with me. I was house arrested and all the frustrations were heaped on her shoulders. My children bullied her after school. On a Saturday she brought her son Lungelo to the office, as she had no help. My children loved him and keeping the peace was their job.

Cynthia was told after the birth of Lungelo that she could not have more children. If she did she would die. It was that serious. So when we learnt of her pregnancy we were alarmed. But most Black women never tell the date when baby is expected. They work until the last day. I did it too. She was to have three months paid leave.

When she went off we knew the baby was expected in at least two months. Ritta announced on the following Monday that over the weekend she had gone to McCords. I went to McCords and was told that she was in labour. I sat at her bed waiting. When I looked up on the other side was ex-Robben Islander Judson Kuzwayo watching me.

The joy that Judson brought into our office, whether he was on his way home, or to the office he worked at, or released from detention is a story in itself. My staff adored him. My children worshipped him. The moment he entered the office there would be a buzz. All would have coffee and scones! He usually brought the scones once employed. After his second detention when we despaired for his safety, I noticed a hushed silence in the office. No typewriter sounds, nothing. I looked up to find him leaning on the door smiling. The screams of welcome from all, was something I shall treasure.

But now he stretched out to hold my hand across Cynthia's bed. We did not know what to expect. Will she make it? Will she come through? Will the doctors have to choose between mother and child? Ntobeko eventually arrived but Cynthia was fading. The flowers I ordered
Phyllis Naidoo

arrived. The nurses asked if I had sent them. "Yes, they are for Cynthia," I replied. Around 8pm the doctors were satisfied that she was well. The nurses announced that she was returning to the ward from theatre. Jud and I held each other with relief.

I drove Judson to the station, picked up Sukhthi my daughter from Rosa's (my sister) place and went home. The next day, after dropping the children at school, I went back to McCords with the biggest bunch of red roses. Cynthia was seated on the bed admiring her daughter. A miracle yes!

Cynthia said, "The nurses are shocked. They had never seen an 'Indian' care for an African. They saw you crying yesterday, when I was in the theatre. They saw the flowers. They don't understand you. They don't understand that we are all South Africans."

Thank you. Hamba Kahle my friend, Cynthia.

Bibliography
