

THEY ALSO SERVED: ORDINARY SOUTH AFRICAN WOMEN IN AN EXTRAORDINARY SOUTH AFRICAN STRUGGLE

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Introduction

In the period 1960 to 1994 women in South Africa were divided into separate groups because of the apartheid system. But South Africa's women of all races, like many other women around the world, take their positions within the framework of male domination in the family, in politics, economy, and society in general.

White women, who shared the right to vote with white men, and who had access to higher education and live in more efficient conditions, lived also in a sexist, male-dominated society. Most women were absent from the organs of decision-making and control in politics, in the economy and in the armed forces. Women often make equal cash contributions to the household and at times even greater than men, yet are all too often ignored when it comes to major issues. According to Fatima Meer in her article *Women in the Apartheid Society*, Coloured and white women share a common cultural system, which appears to be less repressive of women than the Indian and African ones. Coloured women, however, are not as liberated as white women are in their relations with men. The difference is largely due to the economic factor. White women attain a very much higher standard of education and are able to reach out to a far more varied and relaxed life.

The role of sexism in the lives of white South African women is different in significant ways, as in any upper class or caste system. As Paula Hathorn said, "I think white South Africa is a very sexist society. In the 1950, 1960, 1970's White women have pretty much been relegated to the role of looking after men and providing a home for them. Many employ 24-hour domestic workers to cook, clean, iron, and garden for them, as well as to raise their children. The function of white women is to demonstrate that white men can afford to own and financially support them. They indulge in drinking tea, arranging flowers and hosting dinner parties, and pursuing such non-productive pastimes." This changed in the late 1970's and 1980's when white women had to start careers to support their households financially.

African women suffer first and foremost because they are black. Their disabilities whether arising from social custom, cultural indoctrination or legal barriers, cannot be separated from the overall system of apartheid. Law and custom discriminated against black women. As long as racism continues and a people, not a particular sex, is the object of oppression, the women will continue to overlook their own discrimination and dedicate themselves to the liberation of their people.

There were many women who participated and made a contribution in resistance movements during the so-called "struggle" in the apartheid years in South Africa. To identify woman who took part in the resistance movements in South Africa is a topic that is extremely broad, the reason being that there were many women who made a contribution to the struggle. Many are very well known activists, who played a very important role in resistance movements, but many of them are unknown and their participation unrecognised.

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The purpose of my research is broadly to indicate the role played by women in resistance movements during the struggle, and to emphasise specifically that there was a myriad of 'small people', who were very much involved and that without their dedication towards the struggle, the end result may have turned out very differently. Eventually the focus of my research will be to identify women who took part in the resistance movements in the Vaal Triangle. Because of its large numbers of black people in an industrial environment, this area played a most important role in the struggle.

A very interesting phenomenon is that not only black women participated in the resistance movements, but also white women. In her book, *Lives of courage, Women for a new South Africa*, Diana E. H. Russell refers to several white women like Di Bishop, Paula Hathorn, Audrey Coleman, Anne Mayne, Sheena Duncan and Hettie V who became involved in the struggle against apartheid. The reason why these white women got involved can be contributed to many factors. In my paper today I will focus on the participation of Erna Buber, a white women whose story is a very good example of the contribution of white women in the struggle. When the contribution and efforts of people like her are all added up, their efforts made a considerable difference to the lives of those who were oppressed

Erna Buber was an art teacher in the 1980s in Vereeniging, a middle sized town in the Vaal Triangle. Her contribution was at first very small, but by the time her contribution had reached a specific level, it became significant and cannot be overlooked. She is a tipical of many hundreds of other women who have played similar roles.

Erna's background and the way she became politically aware had a powerful impact on her impressions of black people. As she came into more contact with black people and as she discovered through her experiences that her impressions of them were incorrect, she started to contribute to the resistance movement.

Organisations such as 'SACLA' and 'Koinonia' will be discussed because they had a detrimental influence on Erna and 'directed' her towards doing something active about the struggle, rather than sympathising with the 'oppressed', but without actively protesting against it. She also contributed significantly to rectify the inferiority of black education.

Who was Erna Buber?

Erna Buber was born in Pretoria and comes from a middle-class Afrikaner background. Her parents were members of the Afrikaner Nationalist Party, which came to power in 1948. Her father became the first Afrikaner to be appointed in a Diplomatic post overseas in Stockholm and Sweden.

The memories of Erna are very important because they show that, although she was not quite 'politically aware', she was starting to evaluate situations from a very young age.

One of her first memories is when she was a 5-year-old staying in a Cape Town Hotel. She made friends with the waiter, whom she called "Oom". She asked him where he lived. He said he could show her because he lived at the back of the hotel. Erna, as a

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young girl, was shocked at the state of his quarters and experienced extreme feelings of guilt. She was very frightened because she got involved. It was not at all 'right' for a white girl to be in the company of a black man, let alone in his quarters. From this episode, Erna, a girl of five, realised that there was politically something strange going on and that it had something to do with race.

Another episode that influenced Erna was when her family was overseas in Stockholm and Sweden. Erna went to a diplomatic school where she made friends with the daughter of the Ethiopian ambassador. Erna invited her to her birthday party but her friend did not come. Erna later found out that it was because her family represented the South African government and the family of her friend did not agree with the South African governments' policies. Therefore, her friend could not come because the ambassador could not support South Africa's politics and therefore he could not let his daughter go to a party of a South African.

Her father later took the time and told her what he understood what Apartheid was. He told her that South Africa had adopted a policy of separate development. This separate development was in order to prevent the exploitation of blacks by whites and, to slowly, but surely, educate the blacks to the same level as that of the whites.

At art school in Johannesburg, Erna came in contact with the Progressive Party through people who supported it. One of the aims of the Progressive Party was to promote the growth of a black middle class. She thought the party was 'communist' because it was pro-Black but it was not until Erna came into 'contact' with Blacks that her attitudes changed.

Another organisation that played an important role in Erna's participation in the struggle was the South African Christian Leadership Assembly, (SACLA).

Erna was profoundly influenced regarding her personal thoughts and participation in resistance against the apartheid system after attending the South African Christian Assembly

South African Christian Leadership Assembly (SACLA)

"In 1979, an evangelical organisation called African Enterprise had organised a huge meeting of South African Christian Leaders of all ethnic backgrounds. About 6 000 people had attended and it had been an emotional occasion with blacks, whites and coloured reaffirming their commitment as *Christians* to one another." SACLA was a major turning point in her life because she re-evaluated her impressions of black people. She later explained that she could never be the same after this meeting. She met black graduate students, who obviously studied at universities. (A far cry from her ideas before, that black people were not that intelligent and could only learn like parrots.) Not only were they well educated, but also probably most importantly, she could speak to them like friends. Through SACLA, Erna formed friendships with people of different races.

She discovered that she had been totally blind regarding her opinion of black people and would from then on endeavour to create situations in which whites could meet blacks. From then on she made an effort to bring people of different races together with the ultimate purpose that people would change their negative attitudes towards one another.

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She also joined people like Nico Smith and organisations like “Koinonia” to bring people of different races together.

Nico Smith

Nico Smith, a white academic from Pretoria was in close contact with the black young people of Pretoria, Johannesburg and the Vaal Triangle. In time they had grown to trust him. Nico Smith shocked many people when he, as a white man with an impeccable Afrikaner pedigree, with a prestigious university job and a comfortable home, moved with his wife, Ellen, to the deprived and despised South African township of Mamelodi.

Although there were many people who felt the same as Nico, none of them had gone as far as living with the blacks and taking it upon themselves to share in the suffering of the township, as far as he did.

The following was said regarding him by Piet Mabuza, an old evangelist from Mamelodi, in May 1987: “Dr. Smith is the white swallow and he has come to live with the black swallows beneath the Magaliesberg hills. He has built himself a swallow’s nest among the four rooms. He has come to be among us, and to help us to fly free.”

Koinonia

Nico Smith was the organiser of an organisation called ‘Koinonia’. The integral aim was to bring people of different races together. ‘Koinonia’ means fellowship. It’s a word used to express the spirit of generous sharing as opposed to the spirit of selfish getting. The people of Koinonia actually do a most basic thing. *They eat together*. True get-togethers are only possible when people regard each other as equals. This is one of the basic problems in South Africa. Horizontal relationships did not exist between whites and blacks.

Nico Smith started off by identifying seventeen people who were willing to participate in an experiment of reconciliation by sharing meals together in their individual homes. The seventeen people, equally divided between blacks and whites participated. And this was where ‘Koinonia’ was born. Within three years, it had spread nation-wide and was to attract international attention.

Therefore, the plan of ‘Koinonia’, was that couples should be divided into groups of four, and that once a month they should take it in turns to eat at one another’s homes, alternating between the township and the white suburbs. “For blacks, as well as whites, the first meal had been a very emotional time.”

Erna and her husband both joined ‘Koinonia’ where they arranged for Christian exchanges. During the early 1990s Erna was involved in trying to open a ‘Koinonia’ branch in the Vaal Triangle but there was not much support, with people believing that apartheid was coming to an end. It is ironic that ‘Koinonia’ ceased to exist after the 1994 elections. ‘Koinonia’ had relied on overseas funds and knowing that South Africa was becoming a democratic country, foreigners did not see the need for organisations like “Koinonia” anymore.

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Many South Africans disagreed and felt that if ever there was a time for such an organisation, it would be now! Through Koinonia whites and blacks learnt to be friends across the race barrier.

Education

One of the most controversial measures passed by the Nationalist government in South Africa was the Bantu Education Act of 1953. The immediate result of this law was the decline in the quality of education of Blacks from the 1960s. A deterioration in the standard of education occurred and a mentality of subordination of black school children to the state, was created.

This was also an important issue that Erna had to deal with. The education system's aim, according to her interpretation of the Minister of Education's view, was to keep the Black child a Bantu child... Black children must be so educated that they did not want to become imitators, that they would want to remain essentially Bantu."

According to her interpretation the Apartheid government (Dr H.F. Verwoerd) had the following view regarding Bantu education:

The school must equip the Bantu to meet the demands which the economic life of South Africa will impose on him... There is no place for Blacks in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour. Within his own community, however, all doors are open... Until now he has been subject to a school system which drew him away from his own communal land and misled him by showing him the green pastures of European society in which he is not allowed to graze... What is the use of subjecting a Native child to a curriculum when he cannot use it in practice... That is absurd. Education must train and teach people in accordance with their opportunities in life... It is therefore necessary that native education should be controlled in such a way that it should be in accordance with the policy of the state.

The aim was to educate the African children only up to the level necessary to serve the needs of white employers for unskilled labour. This led to a system of schooling, which was in all respects inferior to that provided for white children.

"Until the National Party came into power, most African education was provided by the more than 4,500 Christian mission schools throughout the country." The NP claimed that at these schools, 'dangerous, liberal ideas were being fed by outsiders into untrained minds.' The NP government, with H.F. Verwoerd as Minister of Native Affairs, undertook to take control of the education of black children and to provide a new curriculum.

The new curriculum entailed that a minimal knowledge of Afrikaans and English was necessary to enable the Bantu child to follow oral or written instructions.

There was widespread protest against the Bantu Education Act. African education, many believed, was now an official attempt by the government to produce a slave mentality in African children.

Education is so very important but children were figuratively being 'poisoned' by the government to become inferior.

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Erna was paramount in trying to give these children a better education through supplementary education. We can also say figuratively that Erna was acting as a “detoxifying agent.”

On Saturdays, Black children would go to Erna’s flat, where she would teach the children. However, there was much protest to this. Erna was kicked out of her flat and the tyres of her car were slashed. All of a sudden, there was no flat available for Erna in Vereeniging. Eventually, she found a flat over a café and continued to make contact with pupils and friends in the townships. Erna would also organise for other teachers to get involved in teaching the black children, and therefore also broaden the subjects that were being taught.

Erna made a big effort, organising meetings and programs for white and black school children, around Christian activities Her main aim was to get children of different races together in order for the children to realize that there were actually little difference between them. Erna joined the ‘Hospital Christian Fellowship’, which is similar to SCA (Student Christian Association), where she took school children to the townships.

However, her trying to bring people of different races together was not always that easy. Soon Erna’s and her friends’ mail was opened and their phones tapped. She was frequently stopped while driving, and body-searched. The security police also came to the school because she was being investigated.

It was times like this that Erna could have stopped ‘fighting’, because she had the responsibility of two children of her own and situations were starting to get slightly out of hand and even dangerous at times for her and her family. However, she did not give up at any time.

In 1976 the Soweto riots erupted. The cause of the march in Soweto was not against the use of Afrikaans as education medium only, but also for a better education. The pupils were protesting for FREEDOM. Education is a gateway to freedom. The events of that day were disastrous and many of the pupils must have resented the police as well as white people.

Erna was very active in trying to keep her friends calm and she kept on spreading the word of ‘forgiveness’. When she went to Kwa-Zulu Natal on holiday, she would go to visit people in the rural areas and address the black school children. At a school in Evaton, Erna addressed the entire school where she spoke of the importance of forgiveness. Anger, tears, hate, humiliation are some of the emotions that filter through the mind amid images of guns, freedom songs, burning cars and houses, but most of all the loss of young lives.. This she tried to ameliorate.

Conclusion

We must realise that ‘good’ and ‘courageous’ work is not only done by well-known people whose efforts are constantly published in autobiographies, newspapers and on television, but also by ordinary people like Erna Buber.

We must realize that it was much more difficult for the ‘small’ person to make a difference because they did not have as much support as well-known people with followers. People like Erna had to work to persuade and break the hard-set attitudes of people. By teaching the pupils, Erna gave them a chance to succeed further in life and to have some sort of acceptance and freedom in society.

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If people like Erna did not join organisations, such as SACLA and 'Koinonia', they would not have existed to protest against the Apartheid system. People like them were passionate and they were dedicated towards trying to make a difference.

True, the contributions Erna made were not on a scale to cause protest and uprising, but her efforts nevertheless had considerable impact on the pupils she taught in her flat, spoke to in Kwa-Zulu Natal and at schools such as in Evaton. She encouraged them although she knew that the policy of apartheid was in essence a policy of wrongdoing. For a white woman to go and speak to black people must have taken courage but it must also have had an immense influence on the people she talked to as well.

The myriad of small people, such as Erna, cannot be overlooked because their contributions were paramount in changing the attitudes of not only whites but blacks as well. She may not have affected thousands of people, but her actions, I am sure, had very much a ripple effect. Learning is an experience, and by interacting, Erna and many others, learnt that, in interacting with other people, race is not important.