
A LIFE OF

FIRE & HOPE

ALBERTINA SISULU
CENTENARY
EXHIBITION



SUE WILLIAMSON
A FEW SOUTH AFRICANS
ALBERTINA SISULU, 1984
Photo cutting and screenshot collage

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“I know you are strong, Ntsiki.”

Bonilizwe Thethiwe, on his deathbed

EARLY YEARS

Albertina Sisulu was born Nontsikelelo (Ntsiki) Thethiwe on 21 October 1918 in the Eastern Cape village of Camama, to Bonilizwe and Monica Thethiwe. Nontsikelelo, in isiXhosa, means ‘blessing’.

Bonilizwe was a mineworker and was often away. Monica moved back to her home village, Xolobe, so that her family could help take care of her children. But they had not been there long before they were called back to see Bonilizwe, who was dying.

On his deathbed, he asked Albertina to look after the family – an unusual request in a culture where this responsibility

traditionally fell upon the male heir, her elder brother.

Ntsiki and her family were left destitute when her father’s brothers claimed Bonilizwe’s land and cattle for themselves. She would never forget this injustice, and fought the unfair practice of traditional male inheritance for the rest of her life.



Migrant workers having to go to the mines. Bonilizwe died of what we now recognise as silicosis, a disease commonly contracted by mineworkers.



With so many men going to the mines, it fell to women in the rural areas to take on responsibility for both farming and domestic duties.



“At Middle Xolobe Primary there was a lady teacher, Mrs Mkojana, whom I looked up to. She was professional and smartly dressed. I would look at her and think ‘I want to be like that’... One of her strongest messages was ‘Your behaviour is the best teacher. It is more powerful than anything you say’.” *Albertina Sisulu*

CHOOSING ALBERTINA

Ntsiki was almost ten when she enrolled at the Presbyterian school in Xolobe. As per mission school custom, she had to take an English or ‘Christian’ name. Ntsiki was allowed to choose her own name and she chose Albertina. She was an outstanding pupil, well respected in the community.

In 1939, despite missing two years of school because she had to look after her siblings, Albertina was awarded a full scholarship to attend Mariazell College in the Drakensberg. Xolobe village had a big feast to celebrate her achievement.

Albertina flourished at Mariazell College. She aspired to become a nun. However, Father Huss, her mentor at Mariazell, suggested she take up nursing, as she would earn a salary while studying and could thus help support her family.



TO THE BIG CITY

“Albertina took to nursing like a duck to water. Her upbringing, which had inculcated high standards of cleanliness, discipline and a strong work ethic, stood her in good stead. Her compassionate and empathetic nature made it easy for her to relate to patients.” *Elmer Steinhilber*

Albertina was accepted at the Johannesburg Non-European Hospital in January 1940. The journey to Johannesburg took two days by train from the Transkei.

The big city was a scary place, and it was here that Albertina experienced blatant racial discrimination for the first time.

Albertina loved her nursing course and worked hard, but was angered when junior white nurses were promoted over their more experienced black counterparts. She made good friends at nursing college, including Rosabella Sisulu and Evelyn

Mase, who would soon marry Nelson Mandela.

In 1941 her beloved mother passed away. The white matron denied her leave to attend the funeral. Doing so would have cost Albertina her full scholarship to the nursing college. Many years later Albertina said: “It was as if a dog had died”.



The Johannesburg Non-European Hospital opened in 1929 on Hospital Hill in Hillbrow.



Nurses in the 1940s, when Albertina started her training.



“Albertina appealed to me right from the beginning. I at once made efforts to take her out ... In a short space of time the question of marriage came up.” *Walter Sisulu*

AN ENDURING LOVE AFFAIR

Albertina first met Walter Sisulu when he came to visit his sister Rosabella at the hospital. Walter was immediately enamoured and quickly introduced her to his mother.

Walter was a founder of the ANC Youth League, which brought a new militancy to the organisation. Albertina was the only woman present at the formation of the Youth League.

When Walter proposed in 1941, Albertina mischievously responded that she couldn't marry him, as she already had three children. Walter was dismayed, until

Albertina explained that she had promised her dying father that she would take care of her siblings.

They were married in Coimvaba in the Eastern Cape on 15 July 1944. A reception was held in Johannesburg. In his speech, Anton Lembede warned Albertina that she was marrying a man already married to the struggle.



A few of the ANC Youth League founders: Walter Sisulu, Anton Lembede, Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo.



Albertina Sisulu was the first woman member of the Youth League.

“My mother was always a giver. Both of my parents were givers, and they would take nothing from anybody.” *Zwelakhe Sisulu*

Walter's mother, Alice Manse Sisulu (pictured below), used to run a feeding scheme in Orlando West in Soweto with Father Trevor Huddleston.

FAMILY LIFE

Albertina and Walter moved into 7372 Magang Street, Soweto, to live with Walter's mother, Alice Manse Sisulu. Albertina continued her mother-in-law's tradition of making the Sisulu home a welcoming place for political activists, a 'non-racial' island in a segregated society.

Walter and Albertina had five children: Max, Lungi, Zwelakhe, Lindiwe and Nkuli. They also raised Rosabell's children, Beryl and Gerald, after her death, and later also Jongumuzi, Walter's cousin's son.

The 1950s was a time of mass mobilisation, with Walter at the forefront of ANC activity. He was one of the first volunteers of the Defiance Campaign. He helped organise the Freedom Charter

campaign and the Congress of the People. He was one of 156 people arrested for high treason in December 1956.


His frequent banning orders forced him to stay home for long periods. His children cherished the rare luxury of spending time with him and recall how he washed and dressed them. He also made them clean the house before Albertina returned from work!



Walter and Nkuli in the Soweto home.



Four of the Sisulu children: Lindiwe, Zwelakhe, Nkuli and Max, early 1960s. Walter and Albertina were extremely strict about the children taking responsibility for household chores, regardless of gender.



“The Bantu must be guided to serve his own community in all respects. There is no place for him in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour.” *Dr HP Verwoerd*

NO LIBERATION WITHOUT EDUCATION!

Given her own childhood in rural Transkei, and the struggles she had to overcome to access schooling, Albertina was keenly aware that education was the only route for black children to escape a life of poverty.

Albertina was outraged by the introduction of Bantu education in 1953, designed to prepare black children for a life of servitude. Many African teachers resigned in protest and the ANC called on parents to remove their children from primary schools. Alternative community schools were established.

The Sisulu home became a classroom for the children of the Orlando West community until the government shut down all unregistered schools.

Later in life Albertina and Walter would be endowed with many honorary degrees and would celebrate the educational achievements of their children.



Albertina Sisulu receives an Honorary Doctorate in Literature and Philosophy from UWC in 2007.



Sisulu receiving her degree at UWC, with her proud father Walter looking on.

“All these years the women had been fighting side by side with men ... and I dare say without women in every struggle there is no progress.” *Albertina Sisulu*

WOMAN OF FORTITUDE

Walter's intense involvement in the ANC meant that Albertina was the family's main breadwinner. She was fully supportive of Walter's political activity.

This didn't stop Albertina from becoming a political force in her own right. In 1954, she was one of the founding members of the Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW) and was elected onto the executive.

Albertina was one of the organisers of the 1956 Women's March to the Union Buildings. At 2am on 9 August she was buying tickets at Phefeni Station for women to take the train to Pretoria.

In 1958, after taking part in a women's march in Sophiatown against forced removals, Albertina and a pregnant Winnie Mandela were amongst those arrested.

Winnie almost miscarried in prison, but fortunately Albertina's nursing experience helped save the baby.

The demonstrators were defended by Nelson Mandela and found not guilty.

“I became the first woman to be detained under the notorious 90-day detention law.” *Albertina Sisulu*

The Simlu children were known as ‘the 90-day orphans’. At this time, Walter was forced to go underground and both Albertina and Max were in detention, leaving the young ones to fend for themselves.

NINETY DAYS, AN ETERNITY

“In April 1963, Walter skipped bail and went underground. Two months later I became the first woman to be detained under the notorious 90-day detention law. My seventeen-year old son Max also made history by becoming the youngest person ever to be detained under the 90-day law.

The police had arrested us in order to interrogate us about Walter’s whereabouts. After Max was released from detention the police continued to harass him, so ... I arranged for him to go into exile. Little did I know that it would be another twenty-five years before I would see him again.” *Albertina Sisulu*

The 90-day law allowed the security police to detain activists for up to 90 days without charge. When the police came to arrest Albertina, an enraged Nkuli shouted: “So the dogs have come to take her!”



Albertina in September 1963 on the day she was released after her 90-day detention.



Albertina celebrating her release from prison with friends and community members.

“I could cope with the constant police raids, with my banning orders and with prison. I could cope with my husband being in prison – but when the regime went for my children, the pain was unbearable.” *Albertina Sisulu*

‘MME O TSHWARA THIPA KA FA BOGALENG’

In 1964 Walter was sentenced to life imprisonment and sent to Robben Island. This was a very traumatic time for Albertina. The next decades would hold great hardship – but she remained a rock for her family and community.

All the Sisulu children were politically active and frequently targeted by the security police. For their own safety, the children were sent to boarding school in Swaziland.

Zwelonke, a journalist, was constantly harassed, imprisoned and later severely restricted. Lungi also suffered periodic arrests and detention.

After Max was released he escaped into exile. In 1974, he was almost killed by a parcel bomb in Lusaka. Lindiwe was arrested just before the June 16 uprising, detained and severely tortured. On her release in 1977, she also went into exile.

In 1986, Jongumuzi was sentenced to five years on Robben Island on charges of harbouring ANC guerrillas – but by that time Walter had been transferred to Pollsmoor Prison.

Albertina leaving the Palace of Justice in Pretoria after Walter and seven of the other Rivonia trialists had been sentenced to life imprisonment.



Albertina calling for the release of her son Zwelonke and other detainees in 1986.



Left: Lindiwe Sisulu with her daughter Amanda after being released from prison in 1977.



‘LEAVE OUR CHILDREN ALONE!’

“In June 1976, I personally witnessed the unfolding of the horrific drama that was the Soweto Uprising ... No black mother who witnessed the madness of police shooting children in the 1976 Soweto school uprisings remained untouched by the tragedy ... ‘Kill us if you must,’ we said, ‘but in God’s name leave our children alone!’” *Albertina Stula*

Nkuli and Jongumuzi were actively involved in planning the 1976 student uprising. As the police unleashed an onslaught on the marching children, Nkuli and Jongi had to duck bullets as they raced for cover.

Hector Pieterse, a child from their neighbourhood, was shot and killed by the police. Albertina was consumed with anxiety, not knowing where her children were: “Nobody cooked, nobody ate in our house on that day.”

Albertina and other FEDTRAW members (pictured above) visited Hector Pieterse’s grave in 1987 on the 11th anniversary of the Soweto Uprising.



Some students in June 1976 protesting against the introduction of Afrikaans as the medium of instruction in African schools.



Albertina Mahabane joining Hector Pieterse with the car of journalist Sam Ntsho, with Pieterse’s wife, Antoinette, looking on in horror.



The first executive of the UDF. The empty chair in the front row represented Albertina, who was in prison at the time, and served as a reminder of state repression.

‘OUR MULTIRACIAL BABY IS BORN’

In August 1983, mere weeks before the launch of the United Democratic Front, a broad coalition of more than 600 anti-apartheid organisations, Albertina was arrested for furthering the aims of the ANC and kept in solitary confinement in Diepkloof Prison.

“Sons and daughters of Africa,
Today I’m a great big mother
For today our multiracial baby is born
For today our baby that will rule this
South Africa in future is born.
The multiracial baby,
the United Democratic Front
Which is uniting the people to speak
with one voice . . .” *Albertina Sisulu, first anniversary of the UDF, 1984*

In her absence, she was elected president of the Transvaal UDF “as a great homage and as a warning to the state”. At the UDF national launch in Cape Town she was elected, again in absentia, as one of the UDF co-presidents.

Albertina was sentenced to four years in prison, two of which were suspended for five years. Pending appeal, she was released on bail of R1000.

In 1985 Albertina was charged with treason, the only woman among 16 accused. She was detained in

Pietermaritzburg for almost three months before bail was set, and in December the charges against her were dropped.

In June 1989 Albertina, together with UDF and FEDSAW comrades, embarked on her first ever overseas trip. In the UK, Albertina met with Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

This was the first time a British Prime Minister had met black South African anti-apartheid leaders since Josiah Gumede and Sol Plaatje held a meeting with Lloyd George in 1919.



In the US, Albertina met with President George Bush and former President Carter.



Albertina and members of her delegation held a press conference in the House of Commons on 13 July 1989. Left to right: Gwladys Mkhomo (UDF), Thabo Mbeki (UDF), Achille Mbembe (UDF), Ruth Siphiso MP (ANC), Albertina Sisulu (UDF), Archbishop Desmond Tutu (President, AAM), Steve Ntshang Ntshang (UDF).

“Albertina and Abu Asvat were kindred spirits. Both felt deeply about the plight of the homeless. Both were committed to the overthrow of apartheid ... There were a few raised eyebrows about the president of the UDF working for the health secretary of AZAPO, but ... they developed a particularly close bond, which was never affected by their political differences.” *Elinor Sisulu*

A KINDRED SPIRIT

In 1984 Albertina retired from the Council of Nurses to work with Dr Abu Baker Asvat in his clinic, in Rockville, Soweto. Abu Asvat was deeply committed to improving the plight of the poor and worked tirelessly to serve the Soweto community. They sometimes treated a hundred people a day, most of them free of charge.

Dr Asvat fully supported Albertina's political commitments and even continued to pay her salary while she was incarcerated in Pietermaritzburg prison.

Abu Asvat became like a son to Albertina. In 1989, she suffered a devastating blow when Asvat was gunned down in his

surgery. Albertina was in the reception at the time of his murder, and rushed in to find the doctor dead on the floor. She was absolutely shattered.

At his funeral, it was the first time ever that Albertina was seen breaking down in public.





THE TWO CENTENARIANS

“Living one’s beliefs combined with a generosity of spirit are qualities that both Walter and Albertina shared. It has made them a very special couple who have moved together in thought and action at all times. Because they as a couple were totally giving of themselves, they have at all times been secure in their relationship.” *Nelson Mandela*

Albertina had an enduring friendship with Nelson Mandela. Both were born in the Transkei in 1918. Mandela was very close to Walter, serving as a groomsman at Albertina and Walter’s wedding.

The Sisulu home in Soweto was always a gathering place for political activists. For a while, in the 1950s, Mandela moved in with Walter and Albertina.

At Walter’s 90th birthday celebration Mandela entertained the guests with stories of Walter and Albertina. “As young men we used to visit the nurses’ home. When Walter saw Albertina, he said to me ‘ndiyayithanda le’ntombazani.’”

After the ANC came to power in 1994, Albertina had the honour of nominating Nelson Mandela for election by parliament as president of the country.

Following Walter’s death, Mandela made sure to spend quality time with Albertina and helped her celebrate special family moments. He described Albertina as “wise and wonderful”.



In 1944, Nelson Mandela performed the role of best man at Walter and Albertina’s wedding, which was a government-issued occasion.



United in mourning at Walter’s funeral on 17 May 2005.

“If we have chosen the position in life in which we can work for mankind, then we shall experience no petty, limited, selfish joy, but our happiness will belong to millions, our deeds will live on quietly but perpetually at work, and over our ashes will be shed the hot tears of noble people.” *Karl Marx, quoted in the COSATU eulogy to Albertina Sisulu*



‘OUR DEEDS WILL LIVE ON QUIETLY’

On 2 June 2011, aged 92, Albertina Sisulu died at the family home in Linden, Johannesburg. Tributes poured in from all over the world.

The humble girl from the Transkei could never have imagined that on her death she would be honoured by international leaders, luminaries and human rights crusaders, and mourned by millions of people across South Africa.

Her legacy lives on in places named in her honour, like the Albertina Sisulu Multi-Purpose Resource Centre in Orlando West. But what keeps her on the radar

of thousands of commuters every day, is Albertina Sisulu Road, a 45 km stretch of road from OR Tambo International Airport in the east of Johannesburg, to Roodepoort in the west.

A bustling thoroughfare, it is aptly named after a woman who was simultaneously a steadfast rock and an activist for change, with an unbreakable spirit and a heart of purest Mzansi gold.

CREDITS

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