

# They also served: Ordinary South African women in an extraordinary struggle: The case of Erna de Villiers (Buber)

Pieter L Möller  
*Vaal Triangle Campus*  
*North-West University*

## *Samevatting*

Met die ontplooiing en vestiging van die Apartheidsbeleid<sup>1</sup> in Suid-Afrika na 1948 het by 'n groot gedeelte van die Suid-Afrikaanse bevolking teenstand teen die beleid van afsonderlike ontwikkeling ontstaan.

Gedurende die tydperk 1948 tot 1960 is 'n hele reeks wette aanvaar om die skeiding van rassegroepe in Suid-Afrika aan te moedig. Grootse weerstand teen die reeks diskriminerende wette het onder die swartmense ontwikkel. Vroue uit alle kleurgroepe het tydens die "Apartheidsjare" (1960 tot 1990) aan versetaksies in Suid-Afrika deelgeneem om hulle misnoeë met inperkende wetgewing te kenne te gee. Ander het bydraes gelewer om 'n verskil te maak in die lewens van mense wat onder rassisme gebuk gegaan het. Vroue se betrokkenheid op hierdie fronte was dikwels geminag. Hulle minderwaardige plek in die destydse samelewing was moontlik 'n faktor. Desnieteenstaande het hierdie vroue se bydraes 'n verskil help maak. Vir hierdie doel val die kollig op verskeie vroue se bydraes, waaronder enkele bekende asook minder bekende vroue. Erna de Villiers (Buber) is 'n spesifieke voorbeeld om die rol van 'n vrou wat tydens die Apartheidsjare 'n prominente bydrae gelewer het, uit te wys. Haar rol onder swart skoolleerlinge word beklemtoon.

**Keywords:** Apartheid; African Education; Struggle; Segregation; Racial; Emancipation; Discrimination; Black Sash; Vaal Triangle; SACLA; Koinonia; Erna de Villiers (Buber).

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<sup>1</sup> The political columnist, L Louw, claimed that the word Apartheid was first used with reference to racial policy in a leading article in the Afrikaans daily, *Die Burger*, on 26 March 1943; A Guelke, *Rethinking the rise and fall of Apartheid, South Africa and world politics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 3.

## Introduction

When the Union of South Africa was established in 1910, policies that were adopted were unfavourable to black people. A clear indication of this was the passing of the Native Land Act of 1913.<sup>2</sup> According to this act, blacks, irrespective of their large population numbers, were confined to a mere 13 per cent of the country.<sup>3</sup>

Women's involvement in protest actions can be traced back to as early as 1908, starting with ordinary issues.<sup>4</sup> At the time, it was a heroic act for women as they were excluded from political institutions and lacked participation in politics.<sup>5</sup> Women's oppression and inequality spurred them on to become more vocal and active in campaigning for change.<sup>6</sup> The Bantu Women's League (BWL) was formed as a branch of the ANC in 1918. Members of the ANC founded the organisation as the South African Native National Congress (SANNC) in 1912 to protest injustices against the black South African population. The BWL became involved in passive resistance and fought against passes for black women.<sup>7</sup> A petition bearing 5 000 signatures of women in the Orange Free State requesting Parliament to repeal the pass laws for women.<sup>8</sup> In 1914, Government relaxed women's pass laws.

South Africa had watershed elections in 1924 and 1948 with regard to the racial policy in the country.

The South African general election in 1924 was a realigning election in the Union of South Africa.<sup>9</sup> JBM Hertzog, who also won the "swart gevaar" elections in 1929, promised to preserve a "white South Africa" for the minority whites in the country.<sup>10</sup> His policies provided advantage and opportunity to whites in the workplace.

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2 BJ Liebenberg & SB Spies, *South Africa in the 20th century* (Pretoria, JL van Schaik Publishers, 1994), p. 58.

3 N Worden, *The making of modern South Africa, conquest, segregation and Apartheid*, (Blackwell, Oxford, 1994), p. 49.

4 Y Muthien, *State and resistance in South Africa, 1939 – 1965* (Alderstad, Hants, Avebury, 1994), p. 128.

5 B Bozzoli, *Woman of Phokeng, consciousness, life strategy and migrancy in South Africa, 1900 – 1983* (Clyson Printers, 1991), p. 167.

6 Available at: [www.hurisa.org.za/](http://www.hurisa.org.za/), as accessed on 4 February 2004.

7 Available at: [www.sahistory.org.za/pages/governance-projects/liberation-struggle/organisations.htm](http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/governance-projects/liberation-struggle/organisations.htm), as accessed on 8 February 2010.

8 Available at: [www.anc.org.za/wl/docs/50years.html](http://www.anc.org.za/wl/docs/50years.html), as accessed on 4 December 2009.

9 *Realigning election or realignment* are terms from political history and political science describing a dramatic change in politics.

10 CFJ Muller, 500 years, *A history of South Africa* (Cape Town, Academica, 1986), p. 414.

In 1930, the government in South Africa granted franchise to white women on the same basis as white men. Black women did not qualify to vote, even though some black men did.<sup>11</sup> With this, the African electorate was reduced from 3.1 percent to 1.4 percent of the total votes.<sup>12</sup>

Hertzog's legislation in 1936 represented an ongoing assault on the already limited political rights of African people, and it became clear that the intention of these laws was to whittle the African franchise away even further.<sup>13</sup>

With the implementation of the Hertzog bills, a revival of organizational opposition took place and blacks made a new bid for unified action.<sup>14</sup>

Hertzog and Malan established the Reunified National Party in 1939, while Smuts's popularity continued to slip.<sup>15</sup>

In 1948, Malan campaigned for strict enforcement of white job reservation, a ban on mixed marriages and the establishment of "native" political bodies in African reservations in lieu of parliamentary representation. The ideal state of affairs for him and his party would have been the total territorial Apartheid or separation of whites and blacks. Unfortunately, it was not practicable in view of South Africa's dependence on black labour.<sup>16</sup> He also advocated the periodic forced return of African labourers to rural areas in an effort to discourage permanent urban residency while maintaining a cheap labour supply for Afrikaans farmers.<sup>17</sup>

Apartheid was a policy of separate development, preserving and safeguarding the racial identity of the white population in South Africa,<sup>18</sup> which entailed the separation of races based on colour.<sup>19</sup> Apartheid means separateness.<sup>20</sup> This was a system of legal racial segregation enforced by the National Party government in South Africa between 1948 and 1994.<sup>21</sup> Its underlying principle was the enforced separation, not just subordination, of blacks and

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11 Available at: [www.legalb.co.za/SA/SA-Nat-List-alpha-F-TAGGED.htm](http://www.legalb.co.za/SA/SA-Nat-List-alpha-F-TAGGED.htm), as accessed on 3 May 2010.

12 TRH Davenport, *South Africa: A modern history*, 4th edition (London, MacMillan, 1991), p. 282.

13 BJ Liebenberg & SB Spies, *South Africa in the 20th century*, p. 298.

14 N Worden, *The Making of Modern South Africa...*, p. 85.

15 TRH Davenport, *South Africa: A modern history*, pp. 293-294, 301.

16 BJ Liebenberg & SB Spies, *South Africa in the 20th century*, p. 322.

17 Anon., "Malan", Available at: [www.pbs.org/cgiregistry/2wgbh/commandingheights/CRepLivepl?yearin=1924&yearout=194](http://www.pbs.org/cgiregistry/2wgbh/commandingheights/CRepLivepl?yearin=1924&yearout=194), as accessed on 4 February 2010.

18 A Guelke, *Rethinking the rise and fall of Apartheid...*, p. 2.

19 BJ Liebenberg & SB Spies, *South Africa in the 20th century*, p. 323.

20 A Guelke, *Rethinking the rise and fall of Apartheid...*, pp. 2-3.

21 H Giliomee & B Mbenga, *New history of South Africa*, (Tafelberg, 2007), p. 259.

whites in the spheres of work, residence and government.<sup>22</sup> The government segregated education, medical care and other public services, and provided black people with services greatly inferior to those of whites.<sup>23</sup>

This policy eventually affected every aspect of life in South Africa. Two major acts to prevent racial intermixing were the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949) and the Immorality Amendment Act (1950).<sup>24</sup> The first one implied that all marriages between whites and any other racial group were illegal. The second one declared any sexual relationship across the colour line a serious offence. With the Population Registration Act of 1950, a national register was created. All Black people were classified according to race and had to carry an identification document at all times. This act caused particular hardship.<sup>25</sup> The Group Areas Act of 1950 separated races in residential and business areas. Urban areas were especially affected. Many people were forced to close down their shops and homes and move to specific areas that were allocated to them by law. This act became the cornerstone of Apartheid.<sup>26</sup> One of the most controversial acts introduced was the Bantu Education Act of 1953. This act gave the Minister of Native Affairs control over all black schools and provided blacks with separate education in their own schools.<sup>27</sup>

The introduction of passes for women in 1952 spurred the ANC Women's League to form the Federation of South African Women. They gave the issue of passes a national dimension.<sup>28</sup> The amalgamation of the African National Women's League and the Federation of South African Women saw a strong sense of unity among women, including women of other races.<sup>29</sup> The women's anti-pass campaign brought women of all races together because the pass laws were among the most hated Apartheid laws. These passes meant that African women could live and work only in certain areas in the country.<sup>30</sup> Women were not allowed to bring their children to urban areas where they worked, which separated mothers and children for long periods.<sup>31</sup>

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22 N Worden, *The making of modern South Africa...*, p. 72.

23 TRH Davenport, *South Africa: A modern history*, p. 518.

24 BJ Liebenberg & SB Spies, *South Africa in the 20th century*, p. 322.

25 TRH Davenport, *South Africa: A modern history*, p. 328.

26 BJ Liebenberg & SB Spies, *South Africa in the 20th century*, p. 323.

27 BJ Liebenberg & SB Spies, *South Africa in the 20th century*, p. 325.

28 Anon., "ANC Woman's League", Available at: [www.overcomingapartheid.msu.edu/terms.php](http://www.overcomingapartheid.msu.edu/terms.php), as accessed on 4 February 2010.

29 Anon., "ANC Woman's League", Available at: [www.anc.org.za/woman'sleague/50 years of struggle](http://www.anc.org.za/woman'sleague/50%20years%20of%20struggle), as accessed on 3 February 2010.

30 H Dhansay, *Apartheid and resistance*, p. 14.

31 Anon., "Dawn of Woman's day", *City Press*, 5 August 2007, p. 30.

In 1955, a small group of predominantly English-speaking, white, middle-class women formed an organisation called The Women's Defence of the Constitution League, which became known as the Black Sash because the women wore a black sash over one shoulder when they demonstrated against discriminatory legislation.<sup>32</sup>

The women's march to the Union Buildings in Pretoria against the pass laws on 9 August 1956 was historically brave and left the impression that women were a force to be reckoned with.<sup>33</sup> They indicated strongly that they totally opposed and rejected passes for African women.<sup>34</sup> However, the struggle against the pass laws was not a matter for African women only. It formed part of the struggle for liberation.<sup>35</sup> About twenty thousand women took part in the march. They arrived in ANC blouses, traditional dresses, colourful saris, business suits with fancy hats, and they came in the name of the women of South Africa to show their discontent with the pass system.<sup>36</sup> Although the march was illegal, the women moved to the Union Buildings in pairs. Officials refused to have an audience with the women, but thousands of petitions were left on the steps of the building.<sup>37</sup> The courage displayed by these women deserves honour and remembrance for generations to come:<sup>38</sup>

Women are not afraid of suffering for the sake of their children and their homes. Women would not face a future, imprisoned in the pass laws. Women would fight for the right to live and move freely as human beings.<sup>39</sup>

The Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) was an anti-Apartheid activist movement that emerged in South Africa in the mid-1960s. The central ideas of the movement were the encouragement of self-confidence among black people, the severing of all ties with whites and the grouping of all oppressed people of colour under the term "blacks".<sup>40</sup> The BCM did not place great emphasis on women, although it was acknowledged that equality of women was a necessary component of liberation.<sup>41</sup> Women's organisations have

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32 Anon., "Black Sash", Available at: [www.sahistory.org.za/pages/governance-projects/liberation-struggle/organisations.htm](http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/governance-projects/liberation-struggle/organisations.htm), as accessed on 9 February 2010.

33 Anon., "Old comrade revisits Pretoria in celebration of Women's day", *Sunday Independent*, 29 July 2006, p. 11.

34 J Schadeberg, *Nelson Mandela and the rise of the ANC* (Parklands, Jonathan Ball, Donker, 1990), p. 7.

35 Anon., "Women, work and the pass laws", *Leader*, 30 August 2002, p. 6.

36 D Stewart, L Ngoyi, *They fought for freedom* (Cape Town, Maskew Miller Longman, 1996), p. 36.

37 EHD Russel, *Lives of courage, women for a new South Africa*, (Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, New York, 1989), p. 210.

38 Anon., "Girls urged to remember the struggle", *Daily Dispatch*, 11 August 2003, p. 2.

39 Anon., "Black Consciousness Movement", Available at: [www.africanhistory.about.com/od/apartheid/a/WomensAntiPass.htm](http://www.africanhistory.about.com/od/apartheid/a/WomensAntiPass.htm), as accessed on 9 February 2010.

40 BJ Liebenberg & SB Spies, *South Africa in the 20th century*, p. 458.

41 Anon., "Debt to women who inspired", *Business Day*, 18 July 2003, p. 9.

always operated within the framework of the political resistance movements, because of the women's clear understanding that the reforms they needed were dependent upon the restructuring of the state itself.<sup>42</sup>

### **The contribution of South African women to the “struggle”: A walk through time**

Many women participated and contributed through resistance movements during the so-called “struggle” of the Apartheid years in South Africa. To identify women who participated in the resistance movements in South Africa is an extremely broad topic, because there were many women who contributed to the struggle. Many are well-known activists who played a significant role in resistance movements, but many of them are unknown and their participation unrecognised.

There was also a myriad of “small people” who were much involved and without whose dedication to the struggle the result might have been different. In the study, it sometimes became a demanding task to gather information, as primary sources to serve as references are scarce. The ultimate focus is on the extraordinary experiences and role of Erna de Villiers (Buber), an ordinary white woman and teacher from the Vaal Triangle.

The role of several well-known and less known women in the struggle against Apartheid is discussed to accentuate the difference they made in “unschackling” Apartheid. Therefore, reference is made to the role and contribution of women such as Charlotte Maxeke, Dorothy Nyembe, Lillian Ngoyi and Helen Zille who indeed played a significant role during the Apartheid years and made a considerable contribution to South African society.

Women played a decisive role, not only in the emancipation of women, but also in the battle against injustice to and prejudice against their gender and race. Although Apartheid had a negative impact on women in general, their resistance created an effective combined effort, and many of them became real icons. Often their stories are woven into the narratives of anti-Apartheid male leaders.<sup>43</sup> It could be said that, without their individual contributions, the struggle would have been deprived of catalysts.

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42 Anon., “Women and the struggle”, *Leader*, 9 August 2002, p. 7.

43 Anon., “Forgotten heroes of the Struggle”, *Cape Argus*, 9 August 2007, p. 11.

From 1960 to 1994, women in South Africa were divided into separate groups because of the Apartheid system. However, South African women of all races, like many other women around the world, took their positions in the family, politics, the economy and the broader society.<sup>44</sup>

African women suffered primarily because they were black. Their disabilities, whether due to social custom, cultural indoctrination or legal barriers, could not be separated from the overall system of Apartheid. However, women would continue to overlook discrimination against them and dedicate themselves to the liberation of their people. Most women were absent from the organs of decision making in politics, in the economy and in the armed forces.<sup>45</sup> Women often made equal cash contributions to the household and at times even greater than men did, yet they were all too often ignored when it came to major issues.<sup>46</sup>

Charlotte Maxeke (born in the district of Ramokgopa near Fort Beaufort on 7 April 1874),<sup>47</sup> was one of the first black women who made an effort to act against discriminatory measures against women in South Africa.<sup>48</sup> She was a brave person who was prepared to fight for justice and the liberation of her own people. She grew up in the African Methodist Episcopal Church and became a good singer in their choir. Because of her extraordinary talents as a singer, she had an opportunity to travel to Europe. When she returned home, the political situation had greatly changed. The government was regulating and restricting the movement of blacks to urban areas, thus ensuring a continued supply of labour to white farmers in rural areas. Black men were attracted and drawn to urban areas to earn money for a better life. Many women, because they could not cope with the demands of taking charge of the family on their own, followed their husbands to urban areas, where they were arrested for staying in areas in which they were not permitted to reside. In a well-calculated effort to fight all this, Charlotte Maxeke engaged women across the country to oppose this entire legislative affront. She masterminded the formation of the Black Women's League, which was referred to as the most tangible result of the 1913 campaigns.<sup>49</sup> In 1918, she led a deputation of women to the office of the Prime Minister, Louis Botha, to question the extension of passes to

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44 Anon., "The day the women spoke", *Sunday Tribune*, 6 August 2006, p. 3.

45 H Bernstein, *For their triumph and for their tears, women in apartheid South Africa* (London, International Defence and Aid fund for South Africa, 1985), (available at: <http://www.anc.org.za/books/triumphs.html>).

46 F Meer, *Women in the apartheid society* (available at: <http://www.org.za/ancdocs/history/misc/fatima.html>).

47 Anon., "Charlotte Maxeke: A pioneer for women's rights", *Pretoria News*, 24 June 2005, p. 3.

48 Anon., "Forgotten heroes of the Struggle", *Cape Argus*, 9 August 2007, p. 11.

49 C Walker, *Women and resistance in South Africa*, (Cape Town, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1991, p. 32.

women. Her approach was holistic and not demonstrative only. She outlined the difficulties in the lives of women who found themselves trying to sustain family life and being driven to a life of destitution and criminality because of unfair laws made by the white government. She died in 1939, but her spirit became a great asset to the liberation struggle that would be fought in the country in the years that followed.<sup>50</sup>

Dorothy Nyembe was another leading activist who was tirelessly committed to the liberation of her people.<sup>51</sup> She was born in the district of Dundee in KwaZulu-Natal on 31 December 1931. She was educated at missionary schools and passed grade eleven. She joined the ANC in 1952, a few years after the 1948 elections when the policy of Apartheid was implemented.

The decision of the government in 1930 to pass legislation enfranchising white women came as a personal insult to her, and she experienced the environment as hostile and biased against black women like herself. Because of this law, protests were sparked all over the country, even among white women who, in solidarity with black women, were determined to protest. Some even campaigned from inside Parliament.<sup>52</sup> Having just joined the ANC, she participated as a volunteer in the defiance campaign in Durban. She was imprisoned twice due to campaign-related activities. During the early 1950s, she not only took part but also occupied the front trenches of the resistance campaigns.

The Defiance Campaign worked for the abolition of unjust Apartheid programmes. In June 1952, the movement broadened its support base and began with several actions against Apartheid regulations.<sup>53</sup> Nyembe also participated in the establishment of the ANC Women's League in Cato Manor. She became one of the leading figures in the rural areas during 1956. She refused to give up or surrender and therefore played a decisive role in KwaZulu-Natal. She was a leading figure during the so-called "beer hall boycotts", leading a contingent of Natal women to the Union Buildings in Pretoria on 9 August 1956 to protest against the extension of passes to women.<sup>54</sup> She was one of 156 activists who were arrested and charged with high treason. These charges were later withdrawn. Her rise to prominence

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50 F Meli, *South Africa belongs to us: A history of the ANC* (Harare, Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1989), p. 93.

51 Anon., "Roll of honour: Women political prisoners", *Witness*, 31 August 2009, p. 9.

52 C Walker, *Women in resistance in South Africa*, p. 143.

53 H Giliomee & B Mbenga, *New history of South Africa*, p. 327.

54 Anon., "Old comrade revisits Pretoria in celebration of Women's day", *Sunday Independent*, 29 July 2006, p. 11.



continued. In 1959, she was elected as the president of the ANC Women's League in Natal. She played an active role in the potato boycott and voiced her dismay audibly against the use and treatment of prisoners as labourers on potato farms. When the ANC was outlawed in 1962, she joined Umkhonto we Sizwe, which was founded in 1961. She worked closely with people who later became well known in South African politics, namely Chief Luthuli, Moses Mabhida, Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and Oliver Tambo. In 1963, she was arrested for promoting the aims of Umkhonto we Sizwe and was imprisoned for three years. When she was released in 1966, she was restricted to the magisterial district of Durban. She was not allowed to address any gathering or engage in any political activities. She continued serving the underground structures and was arrested again with ten others under the Suppression of Communism Act. She was found guilty of harbouring M Kumba, a political activist of the ANC.<sup>55</sup>

Mamma D, as Dorothy became popularly known, continued the struggle in prison. She went on a hunger strike a few times and tried to improve the lives of prisoners who were incarcerated because of their political views. After her release in 1984, she indicated that she had not been allowed to study while she had been in prison.<sup>56</sup> She was denied access to any newspaper, and some of the letters she received were confiscated because they were written in a language that the authorities could not comprehend.<sup>57</sup> On the day of her death, a day after the great heroines in the struggle movement had been honoured, people compared it to the heart of a lioness that had stopped beating. She was awarded the Soviet Union Friendship Award as well as the Luthuli Prize for commitment and dedication to the liberation struggle. During her life, she was prominent for motivating political prisoners and detainees incarcerated in South African jails and for being sentenced to the longest single term handed down to a woman for political activism. To her followers, her death left a deep void that would be difficult to fill. Dorothy Nyembe did not simply lament her position but sought to change the world around her.

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55 T Karis & GM Carter, *From protest to challenge: A documentary history of African politics in South Africa, 1882 – 1964* (Stanford, Calif, Hoover Institution Press, 1977), p. 275.

56 EHD Russel, *Lives of courage...*, p. 27.

57 H Bernstein, *For their triumph and for their tears...*, p. 101.

Lillian Ngoyi was born in Pretoria on 25 September 1911.<sup>58</sup> They were extremely poor, and she grew up with hardship and in poverty. They were true Christians and believed in the power of prayer and the providence of God. Her father was a sickly retrenched mineworker who died when she was still young. Her mother did odd jobs for white people around Pretoria to provide for her family of six. She was introduced to the cruelty of Apartheid at a young age. She had to deliver some washing to the home of her mother's white employer. She took her younger brother with her, but the employer refused to allow him into her house. She could not understand why an African child was not allowed into the woman's home. She noticed a dog being allowed in the house.<sup>59</sup> Later, she explained that that experience affected the rest of her life. After completing grade seven, she had to start working to help feed her family. At first, she wanted to enrol for a teacher's training course, but had to settle for a job as a trainee nurse at the City Deep Hospital in Johannesburg.<sup>60</sup> While working there, she met her husband and soon afterwards gave birth to a daughter whom she called Edith. Her husband died five years after their marriage. Because of Apartheid laws, her family had to leave Pretoria and relocate to Orlando West in Soweto. The shelter in which she, her daughter and her parents lived was in one of the worst slums in Soweto. The small, one-room shack had a tin roof that was held down by large stones. There were neither windows, nor a chimney or lights in the shack. At the end of the row of shacks, they had one tap that served about thirty families.<sup>61</sup>

Life in Soweto was difficult. Lillian knew that, as a widow and a mother, she had to do something to improve her circumstances. Eventually, with the help of a friend, she got a job as a seamstress. In the late 1940s, a union was formed for workers in the field of her work, called the Garment Workers' Union. Solly Sachs, the founder, was also the first general secretary. In 1952, Lillian became a member of the Garment Workers' Union and was soon elected to its executive committee. The union offered workers protection from exploitation.<sup>62</sup> Lillian made a great effort to recruit fellow workers to join the union. When Solly Sacks was arrested for communist-related actions, Lillian and her daughter, Edith, took part in a protest against the government. Edith was beaten during the protest.

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58 D Stewart & L Ngoyi, *They fought for freedom*, p. 1.

59 H Bernstein, *For their triumph and for their tears...*, p. 65.

60 D Stewart & L Ngoyi, *They fought for freedom*, p. 1.

61 D Stewart & L Ngoyi, *They fought for freedom*, p. 6.

62 D Stewart & L Ngoyi, *They fought for freedom*, p. 8.

Lillian started reading newspapers and was fascinated by the way in which people committed to the ANC and its activities. She was inspired by the spirit of volunteers and joined the ANC in 1950. Soon afterwards, she was arrested because she had used the facilities that were reserved for white people in a post office.<sup>63</sup> She was then presented with the opportunity to pose a challenge to the heinousness of Apartheid. Her energy and her gift as a public speaker won her rapid recognition in the organisation.<sup>64</sup> Within a year, she was elected to the national executive committee.<sup>65</sup> When the Federation of South African Women was formed, she became the vice-president and later the president.<sup>66</sup> Lillian was also involved in church-related organisations. She became more and more convinced that the government would be fully aware of the commitment of women to the struggle only if they adopted a more aggressive and militant approach. In 1954, she slipped out of the country to Switzerland to attend a world conference on women. She learned much at the conference and took the opportunity to visit several socialist countries.<sup>67</sup>

When the government announced its intentions to pass legislation to extend the pass laws to women, she saw it as a great challenge and launched a march with several women, among them Helen Joseph and Dorothy Sihlangu, to resist the legislation.<sup>68</sup> More than 20 000 women took part in this march on 9 August 1956.<sup>69</sup> This was to be one of the greatest marches ever staged.<sup>70</sup> Women arrived in trains, in buses, by car and on foot to gather in the amphitheatre at the Union Buildings.<sup>71</sup> Notwithstanding notices of no admission to the Prime Minister's offices, the women marched into the building and left a pile of petition forms bearing more than a hundred thousand signatures.<sup>72</sup>

Lillian was effective in her work. She declared herself an enemy of the State and Apartheid. She had an extraordinary character. She was ambitious, intellectually brilliant and was a remarkable orator. Her many speeches were characterised by excellent rhetoric and accurate use of poetic language. She is still remembered today for the excellent speeches she made when she was the

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63 Anon., "Lillian Ngoyi", Available at: [www.sahistory.org.za/ngoyi](http://www.sahistory.org.za/ngoyi), as accessed on 20 January 2010.

64 EHD Russel, *Lives of courage...*, p. 101.

65 MJ Daymond, et al, *Women writing Africa. The Southern region*, (Feminist Press, New York, 2003), p. 240.

66 D Stewart & L Ngoyi, *They fought for freedom*, p. 12.

67 Anon., "Lillian Ngoyi", Available at: [www.durban.gov.za/durban/government/renaming/bios/lillian\\_bram](http://www.durban.gov.za/durban/government/renaming/bios/lillian_bram), as accessed on 3 May 2010.

68 MJ Daymond, et al, *Women writing Africa. The Southern region*, p. 240.

69 Anon., "Women defy oppressive laws", *Sowetan*, 10 August 2004, p. 19.

70 Anon., "Old comrade revisits Pretoria in celebration of Women's day", *Sunday Independent*, 29 July 2006, p. 11.

71 H Bernstein, *For their triumph and for their tears...*, p. 89.

72 F Meli, *South Africa belongs to us...*, pp. 132, 133.

president of FSAW. Her exceptional frankness and down-to-earth approach made her a great asset to this organisation. She was one of the ANC leaders who were charged with treason against the State during the period 1956 to 1960. Although she was placed under house arrest on many occasions, Lillian never gave up. On one occasion, she spoke to a journalist after one set of restrictions had expired and a new set had not yet been imposed, saying that she would not be intimidated by the restrictions against her and that she was looking forward to the day when her children would share in the wealth of “our lovely South Africa”.<sup>73</sup> She was not able to see this happen. Lillian died in 1980.<sup>74</sup> Lillian’s funeral service was held in a packed hall of the Methodist Church in Orlando East, Soweto. People from all over the world came to pay homage to her. She was much against the discrimination, unfairness and exploitation of people, and her contribution lay in her disregard for her own needs and in safeguarding other people. Her weakness was that she was highly emotional, but her strength lay in the fact that she admitted it, that she could be disciplined and submitted to cold logic.

Not only black but also white women such as Di Bishop, Paula Hathorn, Audrey Coleman, Anne Mayne, Sheena Duncan and Hettie V<sup>75</sup> participated in resistance movements during the struggle against Apartheid.

Helen Zille, a prominent journalist and anti-Apartheid activist, protested with other women against government atrocities during the Apartheid years. When she was a political correspondent for the *Rand Daily Mail*, she uncovered the true story behind the death of the Black Consciousness Movement leader, Steve Biko, in 1977. She proved that his death had been due to police brutality, and not due to natural causes as the government had claimed. In the 1980s, Zille became a member of several anti-Apartheid organisations such as the Black Sash, the Open Society Foundation and the Independent Media Diversity Trust.<sup>76</sup>

Zille was deeply involved in the Black Sash. The Black Sash was a non-violent, white women’s resistance organisation founded by six women in South Africa in 1955. They were Jean Sinclair, Ruth Foley, Jean Bosazza, Helen Newton Thompson, Tercia Pybus and Elizabeth Maclaren.<sup>77</sup> Zille

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73 H Bernstein, *For their triumph and for their tears...*, p. 113.

74 Anon., “Lillian Ngoyi”, (Available at: [www.anchistory/50 years of struggle](http://www.anchistory/50 years of struggle), as accessed on 6 April 2010).

75 EHD Russel, *Lives of courage...*, pp. 79-80; 153; 213; 227; 312.

76 Anon., “Helen Zille”, (Available at: [www.sahistory.org.za/pages/people/bios/zille\\_h.htm](http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/people/bios/zille_h.htm), as accessed on 9 February 2010).

77 Anon., “The women who haunted apartheid’s masters”, *Cape Argus*, 17 May 2005, p. 14.

served on the regional and national executives of the Black Sash and was vice-chairperson of the End Conscription Campaign. This Campaign was an anti-Apartheid organisation allied to the United Democratic Front and composed of conscientious objectors and their supporters in the Western Cape and in South Africa.<sup>78</sup> During this time, she was arrested for being in a “group area” without a permit, and received a suspended prison sentence. Zille and her husband later offered their home as a safe house for political activists during the state of emergency in 1986, and she was temporarily forced into hiding with their two-year-old son. Since childhood, Zille had also been actively involved in the South Africa Beyond Apartheid Project and the Cape Town Peace Committee. She later gathered evidence for the Goldstone Commission, which investigated attempts to destabilise the Western Cape before the elections.

In the 1990s, Helen Zille joined the Democratic Party and served as the party’s technical advisor. She was elected as MEC for Education in 1999 and was invited by the Democratic Party to draw up a draft policy for education in the Western Cape. By 2010, she acted as the opposition leader in South Africa.<sup>79</sup>

All these prominent woman leaders in the struggle against Apartheid inspired other woman in South Africa to raise their voices in the communities they represented. In this regard Erna de Villiers (Buber) in the former Vaal Triangle industrial area, is a very typical example that deserves a closer look.

### **Erna de Villiers (Buber), a woman for freedom in the Vaal Triangle**

The Vaal Triangle is part of the industrial heartland of South Africa.<sup>80</sup> Because of the large numbers of black people in the Vaal Triangle, an industrial environment, this area played a most important role in the struggle. In this regard, the Sharpeville massacre is well recorded in reports and publications.

Three black townships, Sebokeng, Evaton and Small Farms, about 40 minutes southwest of Johannesburg, form the heart of the Vaal Triangle. In late 1984, the townships of Bophelong, Boipatong, Sharpeville, Sebokeng and

78 Anon., “Helen Zille”, (Available at: [www.http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/Helen\\_Zille](http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/Helen_Zille), as accessed on 9 February 2010).

79 Anon., “Helen Zille”, (Available at: [www.http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/Helen\\_Zille](http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/Helen_Zille), accessed on 9 February 2010).

80 P Noonan, *They're burning the churches* (Bellevue, South Africa, Jacana Publishers, 2003), p. 14.

Evaton imploded and exploded, with far-reaching consequences for South Africa.<sup>81</sup> On 3 September 1984, the streets were crowded with protesters. Circumstances in the Vaal Triangle were marked by murder and mayhem. Crowds roamed the streets and stoned symbols of power and privilege. Police moved in and fired tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse the crowds. New skirmishes broke out. Angered by sharp rent increases and shut out of the new tricameral Parliament, residents of the Vaal Triangle held a general strike.<sup>82</sup> In 1992, a massacre at Boipatong stalled the delicate negotiations for a new South Africa for at least six months.<sup>83</sup>

Erna de Villiers's involvement can be attributed to many factors. The story of Erna de Villiers (Buber) serves as an example of the contributions of white women in the struggle. Their combined contribution and efforts made a considerable difference to the lives of the oppressed.



**Photograph: Erna de Villiers (Buber)**

Erna de Villiers (Buber) was an art teacher in Vereeniging, a medium-sized city in the Vaal Triangle, in the 1980s. At first, her contribution was modest, but eventually became so significant that it cannot be overlooked. She is typical of many hundreds of other women who played similar roles.

Erna's background and the way she became politically aware had a powerful influence on her impressions of black people. As she came into greater contact with black people and discovered through her experiences that her prejudices were not based on fact, she started contributing to the resistance movement.

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81 P Noonan, *They're burning the churches*, p. 11.

82 S Mufson, *Fighting years, black resistance and the struggle for a new South Africa* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1990), p. 7.

83 P Noonan, *They're burning the churches*, p. 14.

In the structures of the faith community in the Vaal Triangle, the churches played an important role. They had to sow seeds of transformation in society and perform day-to-day duties such as counselling, healing, hospital ministry, baptisms and marriages. However, this changed during the peak of Apartheid. Christian fellowship, solidarity and calling redefined itself at the time and adopted new forms of assistance. The churches suddenly leaped to the fore, organising and participating in political funerals, regular attendance at inter-church clergy meetings, community meetings, sermons aimed at progressive opinion makers and conservative Christians alike, private meetings with political strategists and community leaders, exasperating the State by secretly and publicly making church property available for anti-Apartheid meetings, protests, etc. This activity of the churches raised consciousness of the role of the church in the black community to a level hitherto unheard of. The churches, which were strategically located throughout the Vaal Triangle townships, became accepted centres of opposition politics.<sup>84</sup>

Organisations such as the South African Christian Leadership Assembly (SACLA)<sup>85</sup> and Koinonia,<sup>86</sup> a fellowship organisation with the integral aim of bringing people of different races together, are discussed further on. These organisations had an important influence on many people and “directed” them towards doing something active about the struggle; rather than sympathising with the “oppressed”, but without actively protesting against it. They also had a positive and formative influence on Erna. She contributed significantly to rectify the inferiority of black education, and at a meeting held for teachers in Vereeniging, she spoke to FW de Klerk on the position of blacks in schools.<sup>87</sup>

### ***Erna de Villiers (Buber): A biography of memories***

Erna Buber was born in Pretoria and hailed from a middle-class Afrikaner background. Her parents were members of the Afrikaner National Party, which came to power in 1948. Her father became the first Afrikaner to be appointed in a diplomatic post overseas. He was sent to the South African

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84 P Noonan, *They're burning the churches*, p. 228.

85 Anon., “SACLA”, (Available at: [www.google.co.za/sacla](http://www.google.co.za/sacla); [www.sacla.za.net](http://www.sacla.za.net), as accessed on 18 December 2009).

86 Anon., “Koinonia”, (Available at: <http://books.google.co.za/Koinonia+Nico+Smith&source=web>, as accessed on 10 February 2010).

87 Personal interview, E de Villiers (Buber)/PL Möller (Researcher), Vereeniging, 8 April 2008. (The interview with Erna is not transcribed but is available on tape and deposited at the library of the Northwest University, Vaal Triangle Campus).

Embassy in Washington, DC, in 1950. In the late 50s, her father became the Commercial Commissioner in Stockholm, Sweden, where she attended an international school from 1956 to 1959. She recalls that 153 children in the school represented about 90 different nationalities. She claims that she grew up in a milieu different from children in South Africa. One of her best friends came from the Belgian Congo. Erna was thirteen years old when they returned and first encountered the ideology of Apartheid. Her memories are important because they show that, although she was not quite politically aware, she was starting to evaluate situations from a young age.

On their return from Europe, the family stayed at a hotel in Cape Town. She made friends with a waiter, whom she called "Oom (Uncle)". She asked him where he lived. He said he could show her because he lived at the back of the hotel. As a young girl, Erna was puzzled about his quarters and experienced extreme feelings of guilt, as it was not proper for a white girl to be in the company of a black man, let alone be in his quarters. From this episode, Erna, a girl of five, realised that something strange was going on and that it had something to do with race.

Another episode influenced Erna when her family was stationed in Stockholm. Erna went to a diplomatic school, where she made friends with the Ethiopian ambassador's daughter. 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 her friend's family did not agree with its policies. Therefore, her friend could not come because the ambassador could not support South Africa's politics and so could not let his daughter go to a South African's party.<sup>88</sup>

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

At art school in Johannesburg, Erna came into contact with the Progressive Party through people who supported it. The Progressive Party was a liberal South African party that opposed the ruling National Party's policies of Apartheid. Between 1961 and 1974, at this time Eve Suzman was the only woman to be a Member of Parliament. Her party proposed a non-racial

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<sup>88</sup> Personal interview, E de Villiers (Buber)/PL Möller (Researcher), Vereeniging, 8 April 2008.



qualified vote and constitutional protection of minorities.<sup>89</sup> In 1975, it was renamed the Progressive Reformed Party, and then became the Progressive Federal Party in 1977.<sup>90</sup>

One of the aims of the Progressive Party was to promote the growth of a black middle class. Erna thought the party was “communist” because it was pro-black, but when she came into contact with blacks, her attitude changed.<sup>91</sup>

An organisation that played a significant role in Erna’s participation in the struggle was the said SACLA.<sup>92</sup> Erna’s personal thoughts and participation in resistance to the Apartheid system were influenced profoundly after attending the SACLA.

### ***Other triggers the changing of minds***

#### **South African Christian Leadership Assembly (SACLA)**

In 1979, the first truly interracial nationwide gatherings of Christians ever in South Africa took place. Probably the most notable was SACLA, which saw 15 000 church leaders come together in Pretoria during the height of the Apartheid era.<sup>93</sup> An evangelical organisation called African Enterprise had organised a huge meeting of South African Christian leaders of all ethnic backgrounds, an emotional occasion with blacks, whites and coloureds reaffirming their commitment to one another as Christians.<sup>94</sup> SACLA was a major turning point in the lives of white and black people, because many whites started re-evaluating their impressions of black people. Through SACLA, people of different races could form friendships. They then started making an effort to bring people of different races together with the ultimate purpose of people changing their negative attitudes towards one another.<sup>95</sup>

Later, she explained that she could never be the same after that meeting. She met black graduate students who had obviously studied at universities. This

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89 H Giliomee & B Mbenga, *New History of South Africa*, p. 259.

90 TRH Davenport, *South Africa: A modern history*, p. 388.

91 Personal interview, E de Villiers (Buber)/PL Möller (Researcher), Vereeniging, 8 April 2008.

92 Anon., “SACLA”, (Available at: [www.sacla.za.net/public\\_html/2whatissacla.htm](http://www.sacla.za.net/public_html/2whatissacla.htm), as accessed on 9 February 2010).

93 Anon., “SACLA”, (Available at: [www.urbana.org/wtoday.witnesses](http://www.urbana.org/wtoday.witnesses), as accessed on 21 December 2009).

94 R Saintonge, *Outside the gate: The story of Nico Smith* (Great Britain, Spire, 1989), p. 198.

95 RL Abel, 1995, *Politics by other means: Law in the struggle against apartheid, 1980-1994* (Johannesburg, WITS Centre of Legal Studies, 1998), p. 89.

was a far cry from her former ideas that black people were not that intelligent and could only learn like parrots. They were not only well educated, but she could also probably speak to them like friends. Through SACLA, Erna formed friendships with people of different races. She discovered that she had been totally blind in her opinion of black people and would henceforth endeavour to create situations where whites could meet blacks with the ultimate purpose of changing their negative attitudes towards one another. Erna also joined organisations such as Koinonia to contribute in bringing people of different races together.<sup>96</sup>

### **Joining the Koinonia initiatives**

Nico Smith, a white minister of religion and academic from Pretoria, was in close contact with the young black people of Pretoria, Johannesburg and the Vaal Triangle. He was outspoken against Apartheid.<sup>97</sup> In time, they grew 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.<sup>98</sup> About 400 000 blacks lived in the 60 000 homes in Mamelodi. Few homes had electricity or telephones.<sup>99</sup>

In May 1987, Piet Mabuza, a long-time evangelist from Mamelodi, said the following about Smith, “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.”<sup>100</sup>

Nico Smith was the leader of an organisation called Koinonia. The integral aim was to bring people of different races together.<sup>101</sup> Koinonia (meaning fellowship) is a word used to express the spirit of generous sharing as opposed

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96 Personal interview, E de Villiers (Buber)/PL Möller (Researcher), Vereeniging, 8 April 2008.

97 Anon., “Vaal Triangle”, (Available at: [www.polity.org.za/polity/govdocs/commissions/1998/trc/4chap3.htm](http://www.polity.org.za/polity/govdocs/commissions/1998/trc/4chap3.htm), as accessed 13 July 2009).

98 Anon., “Weekend at camp open white eyes”, *The Star*, 22 September 1992, p. 8.

99 Anon., “Mamelodi”, Available at: [www.query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.htm](http://www.query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.htm); Mamelodi Journal; Behold the Dream! South Africa without racism, JD Battersby, Special to the *New York Times* (Published, 21 March 1988, as accessed on 9 July 2009).

100 Anon., “Mamelodi”, Available at: [www.query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.htm](http://www.query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.htm); Mamelodi Journal; Behold the Dream! South Africa without racism, JD Battersby, Special to the *New York Times* (March 21, 1988).

101 Anon., “Tembisa open its homes to its white neighbours”, *Sowetan*, 4 April 1990, p. 4.

to the spirit of selfish getting.<sup>102</sup> The people of Koinonia performed a most basic act; they ate together. True communion is possible only when people regard one another as equals. This was one of the basic problems in South Africa: Horizontal relationships did not exist between whites and blacks.<sup>103</sup>

Nico Smith started by identifying seventeen people who were willing to participate in an experiment of reconciliation by sharing meals in their individual homes.<sup>104</sup> The seventeen people, equally divided between blacks and whites, participated, and this was where Koinonia was born. Within three years, it had spread nationwide and was to attract international attention.

The plan of Koinonia was that couples should be divided into groups of four, and that once a month they should take turns eating at one another's homes, alternating between the township and the white suburbs.<sup>105</sup> "For blacks, as well as whites, the first meal had been an emotional time."<sup>106</sup> Alexander and Gillian Venter moved in with the Mbethas for five days, and the encounter transcended the usual barriers of this rigidly segregated society. "It has been an important experience for us," said Mr Mbetha who worked as a messenger for a white dentist in Pretoria, about a 25-minute drive away. "We can see now that whites are just like every black man."<sup>107</sup>

The Koinonia movement in South Africa developed into a movement based on Christian principles and working for a non-racial, free, equal and just South Africa. All its activities were aimed at giving grassroots people the opportunity to share and experience the lives and situations of people of other races. Its aim was to prepare, equip and encourage South Africans to develop and practice a non-racial lifestyle. It was committed to make a practical contribution towards social transformation in a society that was based on the sinful distinction of people by race, class, economics and gender.<sup>108</sup> Erna associated with its focus and initiatives and contributed as far as it was possible in her field of expertise, namely education (see later in the section to follow).

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102 Anon., "Weird normality", *Frontline*, 28 February 1991, p. 10.

103 Hofmeyr; Kritzingler & Saayman, *Wit Afrikane? 'n Gesprek met Nico Smith* (Kapaad, Taurus, 1990), p. 138.

104 Anon., "Encounter group aims at improving relations", *New Nation*, 3–9 May 1991, p. 21.

105 Anon., "Koinonia South Africa", *CrossTimes*, December 1989 – January 1990, p. 63.

106 R Saintonge, *Outside the gate: The story of Nico Smith*, p. 206.

107 Available at: [www.query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.htm](http://www.query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.htm); Mamelodi Journal; Behold the Dream! South Africa without racism, JD Battersby, Special to the *New York Times*, (Published, March 21, 1988, as accessed on 9 July 2009).

108 Anon., Koinonia South Africa, *CrossTimes*, December 1989 – January 1990, p. 63.

In 1989, the Koinonia movement received the international Beyond War Award for its work in bridging the gap between whites and blacks.<sup>109</sup>

Erna and her husband joined Koinonia, where they arranged for Christian exchanges.<sup>110</sup> 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 ending. Ironically, Koinonia ceased to exist after the elections in 1994. The Koinonia movement 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 any longer. Many South Africans disagreed and felt that, if ever there was a time for such an organisation, it would be then! Through Koinonia, whites and blacks learnt to be friends across the racial barrier.<sup>111</sup> As mentioned earlier, Erna Buber also contributed significantly to rectify the inferiority of black education.

### **Education provision - the extra mile**

Until the National Party came into power, most African education was provided by the more than 4 500 Christian mission schools throughout the country.<sup>112</sup> The National Party was of the opinion that dangerous, liberal ideas were being fed by outsiders into the untrained minds of young black people at these schools. The NP government, with HF Verwoerd as Minister of Native Affairs, undertook to take control of the education of black children and to provide a new curriculum.<sup>113</sup>

The Bantu Education Act of 1953 brought all African schools under the control of the Department of Native Affairs, which phased out the independent missionary institutions that had previously been responsible for African education. The new imposed curriculum deliberately prepared learners for little more than manual labour.<sup>114</sup>

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

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109 Anon., Tembisa open its homes to its white neighbours, *Sowetan*, 4 April 1990, p. 4.

110 Personal interview, E de Villiers (Buber)/PL Möller (Researcher), Vereeniging, 8 April 2008.

111 Anon., "Weird normality", *Frontline*, 28 February 1991, p. 10.

112 J Pape, et al., *Making history* (Johannesburg, Heinemann Publishers Ltd, 1998), p. 313.

113 CFJ Muller, 500 years: *A history of South Africa*, p. 210.

114 N Worden, *The making of modern South Africa...*, p. 96.

instructions.<sup>115</sup> Children protesting against government policy to impose Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in secondary schools in the Transvaal in 1976 eventually led to the Soweto uprising that marked a turning point in South Africa's political development.<sup>116</sup> Verwoerd provoked particular hostility by saying that it did not serve any purpose to teach black children mathematics if they could not use it.<sup>117</sup>

One of the most important issues that black South Africans had to deal with was the education system whose aim, according to their interpretation of the Minister of Education's view, was to keep the Bantu child subservient: "The Bantu must be so educated that they did not want to become imitators, that they would want to remain essentially Bantu."<sup>118</sup>

The interpretation of many concerned people at the time was that the Apartheid government (Dr HF Verwoerd) had the following view of Bantu education:<sup>119</sup>

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 community 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 it cannot use 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 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 that in all respects was inferior to that provided for white children.<sup>120</sup>

There was widespread protest against the Bantu Education Act. Many believed that African education was now an official attempt by the government to produce a slave mentality in African children.<sup>121</sup>

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115 J Pape, et al., *Making history*, p. 313.

116 A Guelke, *Rethinking the rise and fall of apartheid...*, pp. 127-128.

117 H Giliomee & B Mbenga, *New history of South Africa*, p. 320.

118 P Delius, et. al., *Looking into the past* (Cape Town, Maskew Millar Longman Ltd, 1999), p. 300.

119 BJ Liebenberg & SB Spies, *South Africa in the 20th century*, 1994, p. 326.

120 TRH Davenport, *South Africa: A modern history*, p. 338.

121 BJ Liebenberg & SB Spies, *South Africa in the 20th century*, p. 326.

Erna took note of the perilous circumstances in black education and at first thought that it was a matter of not enough funds being available for blacks. This “sensitised” her conscience and politicised her.<sup>122</sup> Erna was a driving force in trying to give these children a better education through supplementary education. Figuratively speaking, one could say that Erna acted like a “detoxifying agent”.

On Saturdays, black children would go to Erna’s flat, where she would teach them. However, there was much protest against 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 above a café and continued to make contact with learners and friends in the townships. Erna would also organise other teachers to become involved in teaching black children, and therefore extend the subjects that were being taught.

Erna made a big effort in organising meetings and programmes for white and black learners around Christian activities.

In the late 70s, she attended weekly meetings at the Vereeniging Hospital as part of the Christian fellowship movement of the hospital, where she became involved with several black children who later went to her flat for lessons.

Her main aim was to get young people of different races together so they could realise that there was actually little difference between them. Erna joined the Hospital Christian Fellowship and took white learners to the weekly services at the black hospital. She arranged get-togethers between white SCA (Student Christian Association) and black SCM (Student Christian Movement) high school members at “neutral” venues like the Anglican Church hall in the white suburb of Drie Riviere, so that white parents would not get upset. Erna explained, “The history of the SCA is an interesting reflection of the invidious effect of Apartheid – the white English movement remained the SCA, the white Afrikaner movement became a separate organisation, the CSV, and a separate, black-only movement, the SCM, was constituted. I think that research will show that ‘brown’ and Indian Christian students had separate movements too, all springing from the original SCA of the UK.”

Bringing people of different races together remained a difficult mission. Erna’s mail was regularly opened and her phone tapped. She was once stopped while driving home from a visit to see friends in Soweto being body-searched.

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122 Personal interview, E de Villiers (Buber)/PL Möller (Researcher), Vereeniging, 8 April 2008.

The security police also came to the school because she was being investigated.

In times like this, Erna could have stopped “fighting”, because she had the responsibility of two young children of her own. At times, situations were becoming risky and even dangerous for her and her family. However, she never gave up.

In 1976, the Soweto riots erupted.<sup>123</sup> 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 learners were protesting for FREEDOM – education is a gateway to freedom. The events of that day were disastrous, and many of the learners must have resented the police as well as white people.<sup>124</sup>

Erna was active in trying to keep her friends calm and she continued spreading the concept of forgiveness. When she went to KwaZulu-Natal on holiday during the state of emergency in the eighties, she went to visit people in the rural areas in homes and churches.<sup>125</sup> At a school in Evaton, Erna addressed the entire school, where she spoke about the importance of forgiveness. According to Erna anger, tears, hatred and 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. She always tried to ameliorate this.

The older Erna is retired now (2010) and is still living in Vereeniging. She still helps young people and students with academic assignments and research, but nowadays her actions are more accepted and tolerated because of the changes South Africans were exposed to from the nineties.

## **Conclusion**

From this research, it is clear that “good” and “courageous” work is done not only by well-known people whose efforts are constantly published in autobiographies, newspapers and on television, but also by ordinary people like Erna de Villiers (Buber).

It was challenging for ordinary persons to make a difference because they did not have as much support as well-known people with followers had. People

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123 H Giliomee & B Mbenga, *New history of South Africa*, p. 362.

124 BJ Liebenberg & SB Spies, *South Africa in the 20th century*, p. 461.

125 Personal interview, E de Villiers (Buber)/PL Möller (Researcher), Vereeniging, 8 April 2008.

like Erna had to work to change the fixed attitudes of people in her active local environment. By supplementing the education of a few black learners, Erna gave them a chance to succeed later in life and to gain some sort of acceptance and freedom in society. By enabling individual white and black children to meet, she helped change attitudes – a drop in the ocean, but many such drops make up the ocean. No doubt, the 1994 miracle occurred through the contribution of many ordinary people.

If people like Erna had not joined 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 to 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 a considerable influence on the learners she taught in her flat and spoke to in KwaZulu-Natal and at schools such as those 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 address black people must have taken courage, but it must also have had an immense influence on the people she talked to. She did so because she felt she had to. Somehow, she had to apologise for the wrongs that white people had done to black people.

The countless ordinary people, like Erna, must be acknowledged because their contributions were paramount in changing the attitudes of not only whites, but also blacks. Certainly, her actions had a great ripple effect. Learning is an experience, and by interacting, Erna and many others learnt that people are just people; race is unimportant.