

From the Outside Looking In
Building an Underground from Exile¹

Barry Gilder²

Sometimes, 30 years later, I still dream of Gaborone post office boxes. Serried rows of them. Military green, or a deep blue, or blood red. Spread out before me with beckoning keyholes. Or sometimes, in my dreams, just a few of them, rusted and scratched, built low down into rough rocks that I have to kneel on the hard ground to get to. And, in my hand, a huge bunch of keys, like a jailor's. And in my dream, moving from box to box, desperate and anxious, I just cannot get any of the keys dangling from the huge chain to fit any of the boxes. I can't remember the box numbers I'm supposed to service. And panic rises.

From 1985 to 1989 I served as head of the regional intelligence directorate of the African National Congress' (ANC) underground machinery in Botswana and as a member of the Regional Political Military Committee (RPMC), which was responsible for initiating, leading and coordinating the ANC's military, underground, political and intelligence work inside those parts of apartheid South Africa designated to the Botswana regional underground leadership – largely the western half of the country, with shared responsibility with other regional underground structures for the urban conglomeration around Johannesburg and Pretoria.

During this period, the ANC's highest decision-making body was its National Executive Committee, headquartered in Lusaka, Zambia, responsible for the overall leadership and coordination of the ANC's political, diplomatic, military, underground, administrative and welfare work of its vast exiled structures. Responsibility for directing the political, armed and underground struggles inside South Africa was delegated to the Political Military Committee (PMC), also headquartered in Lusaka. The PMC oversaw its regional equivalents in what we called the forward areas, the countries bordering South Africa – Botswana, Lesotho,

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² Barry Gilder is Manager Publications at the Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection (MISTRA) and also coordinates a project at the Institute to facilitate the collection and communication of narratives of the armed and underground struggles against apartheid. He is author of *Songs and Secrets: South Africa from Liberation to Governance*, (Jacana 2012, Hurst 2012). He is a Senior Visiting Fellow at the School of Governance at the University of the Witwatersrand.

Swaziland, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and – perhaps surprisingly – the UK, due to the large number of South Africans who travelled backwards and forwards to the old colonial capital.

The move of the ANC leadership and its myriad support structures into exile was unavoidable, with the banning of the movement in 1960, the turn to armed struggle in 1961, the intense repression that followed and the arrest and incarceration of many of its key leaders in the mid-60s.

So...what's the story with the post office boxes dream?

Rebuilding the ANC inside South Africa and prosecuting the armed, political and underground struggles from outside the country was not easy. We did not have sparsely populated mountainous or densely forested border areas to move through or hide in. The demography; the geography; the spatial, social and political structures and strictures of apartheid; as well as the pervasiveness, viciousness and strength of the apartheid security forces did not provide the option for the gradual development of liberated territory and the eventual encircling of the apartheid capital – something, I must add, that many of us dreamed about and wished for. But it was much harder than that.

We had two main approaches – infiltrating into the country militarily, politically and underground trained cadres, from amongst those who had left the country to join the ANC's armed wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), was the one, and bringing our supporters from inside the country for short visits into the neighbouring forward areas for training, briefing, debriefing and tasking was the other. In the case of the first approach, the cadres infiltrated into the country were largely sent to prosecute the armed struggle, although, in the latter half of the 80s, we sought to link these with political underground units inside the country.

In the case of the second approach the key challenge was communication³. How could we maintain contact with our underground cadres and units inside the country in order to ensure effective management and coordination of their work? The main means, of course, was through their visits to Botswana, but this was risky and could not be done too frequently. We had to apply (and in some cases, invent) stringent rules and methods of cross-border underground communication. All this in conditions in which the Botswana

³ Of course, communication was also a challenge with our military and other units infiltrated into the country, but the focus here is on the political underground.

Special Branch was constantly arresting our cadres and leadership and deporting us to Lusaka (only to have the ANC in Lusaka send us back again across the Zambezi in rubber dinghies) and the apartheid security forces were constantly spying on us and trying to bump us off.

Hence, the continuing dreams of post office boxes. We rented dozens and dozens of post office boxes at different post offices around Gaborone and neighbouring towns. These postal addresses would be used by our contacts to send innocent looking postcards, sometimes letters, that in many cases would be used to convey various types of signals, such as an impending visit to Botswana or signals of danger or the arrest of cadres and so on. In some cases we were more sophisticated – microfilmed political, intelligence or operational reports would be slid in between the layers of a postcard and posted to us. And, of course, our contacts inside the country would have similar clandestine postal addresses for reciprocal communication.

Thus, every few days, we would have to travel to various post offices around Gaborone with bunches of keys, trying not to arouse suspicion as we serviced six or more post boxes at each post office. Thus, the dreams...

We had other ways too. We would use couriers, otherwise innocent Batswana, who would travel into South Africa to pass on documents or communication to our contacts, or fetch reports from them, in many cases such communication hidden in apparent gifts – boxes of chocolates or biscuits or other delectables that had been carefully opened and resealed. And in a few cases we were even more inventive...

Indulge me the quote of an anecdote from my own book, *Songs and Secrets*:

It is a little after midnight. I am standing on the platform of the railway station in Gaborone. I am waiting for the midnight train from Jo'burg. I stand alone on the platform, hands in pockets, trying my best to look like one of the Botswana-based expatriates meeting an NGO colleague or friend coming from Johannesburg. I have a lot of time to practise this pose. The train is an hour late.

I know to be here because this week I saw the sign in the Johannesburg newspaper that arrives every morning at the Gaborone Book Shop. Brian has

arranged with one of his contacts in the newspaper for there to be a small typographical error in the weekly television schedule. When I see this I know that on a certain day this week I am to meet this train.

Eventually, with a forlorn whistle, the train rumbles in. As it slows to a chug and carriage by carriage pass me, I put on the expectant expression of someone waiting for a familiar face at one of the carriage windows. Actually, what I am looking for is a white chalk mark on one of the carriages. I find it and move inconspicuously along the platform with the carriage I want until the train stops.

I wait a few moments, looking up and down the platform, put on my 'where the hell is my visitor?' face, and after what I think is a suitable period of demonstrable frustration and concern, I board my chalk-marked carriage. I think of Brian at the other end of this train's journey. He had hit on this idea for a mobile DLB when taking this train once to meet me in Zimbabwe. I imagine him boarding this train at Park Station in Johannesburg, having a much more difficult time than I am having now trying to look purposefully innocent.

Now on the carriage, I walk down to the far end of the passageway, looking into all the compartments, until I come to the end of the carriage where a drinking-water dispenser is attached to the train bulkhead. I look around once more and stick my hand down the back of the dispenser bracket and pull out a crumpled Peter Stuyvesant packet and slip it into my pocket. I walk on down the inside of the train peering into compartments 'looking for' my lost visitor. And then, with a worried shrug and sigh, I disembark, take one more plaintive look up and down the platform and make my way back to the parking lot.

Once back home in the house in Extension 10 ... I open up the crumpled Peter Stuyvesant packet to find, as I knew I would, a tightly wrapped bundle of tiny pieces of negative film.⁴

Was all this subterfuge, risk and stress (including the subsequent 30 years of post box nightmares) worth it? Did the ANC's vast external underground machinery make any difference to the outcome of the struggle, to the end of apartheid? There are those today who argue – academically and otherwise – that the ANC in exile had little impact on developments inside the country and the subsequent ending of apartheid. Some of those who argue thus do so out of a present day disillusion with the ANC in government. Some are

⁴ Gilder, Barry. 2012. *Songs and Secrets: South Africa from Liberation to Governance*. London: Hurst and Company (pp 80-81)

from struggle day groupings (or descendants of these) who – from the far left or not-so-far left or downright right – were opposed at the time to the policies, politics, alliances and methodologies of what was broadly termed the Congress Movement. Those of us today who try (too few and too little) to tell our stories of struggle are accused of a noxious sin called ‘The Grand Narrative’. We are charged with the crime of exaggerating and mythologising our struggle and the role of the ANC and the armed and underground struggles in the downfall of apartheid.

Perhaps we do. But the truth is that there was sacrifice and commitment and idealism. There were people who spent long years in exile, who spent long years in prison, who died in battle inside and outside South Africa, or from malaria in Angola and Tanzania, who were tortured and assassinated, who took risks crossing borders with weapons, or crossing borders the other way into exile or to meet with us in Botswana and elsewhere, who sent highly secret and compromising reports sealed inside postcards or in cigarette packets on trains.

The other truth is that the ANC was always extremely honest, realistic and deeply analytical about its pursuit of the struggle. During a visit to the Fort Hare Archives last year to familiarise myself with their holdings, I came (surprisingly) across a document in one of the Lusaka boxes of the ANC collection titled simply ‘PMC Organisational Report’. Unfortunately it is not dated, but from the content I estimate it to be from around 1985. In a section titled ‘The 1980s: Assessment of the Present Situation’ under the heading ‘The underground’ the document refers to an assessment done by the then Revolutionary Council (the predecessor to the PMC) in September 1980. The document quotes some conclusions from that assessment:

- a) *That the level of our organisation at home is incapable of meeting the present political demands and requires immediate attention in order to develop and expand those machineries.*
- b) *That many individuals have been recruited at home but remain independent operatives.*
- c) ...

- d) *Therefore in terms of the above, leadership initiatives are primarily dependent on the forward-areas and allow very little scope for leadership at the local level inside the country.*
- e) *In so far as we depend on leadership initiatives to come from outside these have certain inbuilt limitations which will always limit our capacity to give day to day leadership on the ground.⁵*

At the time of the above assessment (in 1980), the document estimated the numerical strength of the ANC underground inside the country at '200 cadres'. A little later in the same section the PMC assesses the then present situation (c1985):

The task of creating the APC's⁶ has not been carried out. Under pressure of a whole set of objective and subjective conditions this task has been neglected and even though there is an awareness of the danger that events may outstrip us, we have not managed to put in a sustained and systematic effort in this regard. At present there are only two APC's in the country that can be said to have any viable existence...

...In practice therefore the forward area machineries remain the pivot of our work in developing the underground.⁷

The document goes on to say:

...Our political network⁸ is just about 500 cadres spread over 110 units with an average of 3 members per unit and 178 individual operatives...About 70% are male and 30% female...approximately 72% African, 12% Indian, 6% 'Coloured' and 10% white...

⁵ University of Fort Hare (UFH), National Heritage and Cultural Studies Centre (NAHECS), ANC Papers, Lusaka Collection, Box 126, Folder 245, *PMC Organisational Report*, undated

⁶ Area Political Committees. During the 1980s one of the key focuses of the ANC was to create these local underground political leadership structures inside the country and, later in the 80s, to create Area Political Military Committees to ensure coordination between armed and political underground activities.

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Note that the figures that follow only cover the underground political machinery and would exclude MK and intelligence cadres and units.

...These figures, if they err, err on the side of caution...⁹

In the ANC's typical self-critical style, perhaps the impression is given of a rather small and inadequate underground presence in the country. Given the nature of underground work, the risks and difficulties involved in the face of an all-pervasive enemy, and the important fact that these underground cadres and units were directly under the command and control (however difficult) of the external leadership of the ANC, 500 underground political cadres in over a hundred units is actually quite impressive.

What role these cadres and units played, and the impact they had, is the subject for other studies. This paper focuses on the outside looking in. But, for at least one illuminating insight from the inside looking out, a chapter by one of our panel convenors, Tshepo Moloi, in a forthcoming book¹⁰ gives a fascinating and informative account of how contact between political activists in the township of Thembisa north east of Johannesburg with the ANC's political machinery in Botswana (through Mongane Wally Serote, with whom I served for a time on the Botswana RPMC), dramatically radicalised the politics and forms of resistance in the township during the 1980s.

There are bigger questions and realities. The definition of the underground is one of these. Given the increasingly repressive nature of the apartheid state during the 80s, much of the anti-apartheid work of the still legal organisations – the trade unions, community and civic organisations, the churches, the United Democratic Front (UDF) etc. – was required to be done largely clandestinely, underground. Although much of this work might not have been done under the direct command and control of the ANC's external structures, most of these organisations were in support of the ANC and its programmes, and their work was broadly influenced by the ANC, by the ANC underground cadres in these organisations, and by their meetings with the external ANC leadership as the 80s drew to a close and the myriad meetings and negotiations initiatives moved us closer to the end of apartheid.

Our conduct of the underground struggle from the outside might not have gone precisely as we dreamed and strategised, but it was conducted – under difficult conditions – and there

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Moloi, Tshepo, 'The Botswana Connection: The Re-invigoration of Confrontational Politics in Thembisa Township, 1979-1990', in Arianna Lissoni and Antonio Pezzano, eds, *The ANC Between Home and Exile: Reflections on the Anti-Apartheid Struggle in Italy and Southern Africa* (Naples: L'Orientale, forthcoming)

can be no doubt that it was at the very least one of the key pillars of the finally successful struggle against apartheid.

Thank you. I hope this public 'confession' will bring an end to the post office box dreams.