

3 Asaph Makote Mohlala: “I had to Fight my Way Back”

Asaph Makote Mohlala and I first met personally in 2014 at the inaugural meeting of *Mayibuye Südafrika Community e.V.*, an association of South Africans living in Berlin, to which Thabo Thindi had invited me.²⁸⁵ Among its members are several former exiles who lived in the GDR and participated in Thindi’s interview series *Exile Faces*. Hence, before meeting Mohlala there in person, I had watched his documentary interview, conducted at the HKW. Mohlala had impressed me because of the haunting way in which he had recounted his life story—he obviously had something to tell. Together with his physical appearance, I got the impression of him being a sensitive person who must have gone through some difficult times. Imagining him in any affirmative way being part of today’s East Germany—a space also known as the ‘brown East’ due to right-wing extremist trends there (Heft 2018)—seemed hardly possible.

I conducted two interviews with him, first in October 2015 and then in February 2016, both in his apartment in Berlin-Weißensee, a district in the city’s former Eastern part (fig. 23). The second interview became necessary because, even though the first one was more than six hours long, Mohlala only spoke very little about his life in the GDR and the later reunified Germany. Instead, he always returned to his life in Africa, insisting on a full account of everything that seemed important to him, with time considerations not allowing him to go deeper into that later period of his life. After our long talk on the first day we both felt exhausted, and his appearance and some of his behaviour during our long conversation had given me the impression that he was, in general, not doing too well physically.

Neglecting the later period of his life suggests that, for Mohlala, coming to the GDR in 1984 was the climax of his life—an abrupt change that gave his exile a peaceful place where he could settle down and start a family, even though as we will see it would take another effort to return and make a permanent home out of it. What he experienced in East Germany was clearly no match, to his mind, for what he had experienced before in Southern Africa. Indeed, his life offers intriguing insights into what it could mean to be an exiled “Soweto kid”—one of those young South Africans who left the country in 1976 in the aftermath of the Soweto uprising—and Mohlala was of course aware of this distinctive feature of his life. At the end of our first interview—he rightly called it a “mixed masala,” like an Indian spice mix—he picked up some papers from a chair, having put them there

285 <https://www.mayibuye.de/> (accessed 2 October 2023).

specially for our meeting but now seeming a little insecure about showing them to me or not. He finally chose not to do so. It was the unfinished manuscript of his autobiography, as he eventually told me. He also said that writing was very difficult for him, and he did not know if it was good enough to be read or even if he would ever complete it. So the below account is what I have created out of the “mixed masala” of our two interviews. In chronological order, I begin with what Mohlala told me about his life in South Africa. From there, I follow the different stages of his exile in Tanzania, the Soviet Union, and Angola, before coming to his exile in the GDR. To give the reader a fuller taste of this slice of history, I have added some new ingredients to the mix, such as interview snippets from other South African exiles as well as background information on relevant events and institutions.



Fig. 23: Asaph Makote Mohlala, Berlin-Weißensee, February 2016 (permission granted from A. Mohlala).

3.1 A Fatherless Child: From Alexandra Township to a Safe House in Dar es Salaam

In 1976, the year of the Soweto uprising, the 21-year-old Mohlala was attending a boarding school in the South African countryside. The school was almost 500 kilometers away from Johannesburg’s Alexandra Township, an urban area inhabited

almost exclusively by Blacks, where he had been born in 1954. It was only during his summer vacation that he was able to witness the material damage caused by the uprising, including the burned-out shops and remnants of tires which had been set on fire in the streets. Before this event, his life story points towards a different, more intimate struggle—that of a child given away by his young, overburdened and single mother, who would never reveal to her child the father's name. Instead, Mohlala was adopted into the family of his grandfather, who was originally from the Mpumalanga province in the Northeastern part of South Africa where they speak Northern Sotho; incidentally, two other African languages Mohlala grew up with were Southern Sotho and Zulu. To the detriment of his school performance, he soon had to assist his stepmother in the household work—"a boy who had to do the girl's work at home," as he put it, thereby illuminating some of the gender structures back then as well as a certain kind of 'feminization' he underwent as an adopted son. While care work would earn him a living in later life, it seems that he saw only the negative in this kind of socialization when it comes to his childhood and teenage years.

From early on, Mohlala internalized that it might be better not to attract too much attention to himself. Contrary to his older half-brother,²⁸⁶ who had already been sentenced to a term of suspension because of his political activities, Mohlala stayed away from politics until the brother eventually introduced him to a political circle and his escape was organized, presumably by the ANC. The German-Jewish author Georges-Arthur Goldschmidt writes that "exile also consists of some very brief, impalpable, ordinary moments. One closes a door or jumps into a car, for example. Seen from the outside, it is an inconspicuous, minuscule occurrence, after which everything is irretrievably over" (2020: 5, own translation). In Mohlala's narrative, this specific moment almost fades to negligibility as well, although it contained the prospect of something new that could make life better than before. In spite of a warning that a police raid on the political circle Mohlala had entered was only a question of time, his going into exile reads more like another step on the way to personal emancipation: first, his grandfather sending him to the boarding school as a way to free him from the grip of his stepmother and, second, his rather casual decision to participate in an organized escape from South Africa to get rid of apartheid:

At that time, someone advised the group of which my brother was a member: 'You guys are sitting on a hot seat, it's better for you all to scram.' How can we do that? 'Okay, I'll organize

²⁸⁶ Mohlala spoke explicitly of his "half-brother" only at the beginning of our interview, whereas for most of the rest of it he simply referred to him as his "brother." I follow this logic too.

it. When we meet, this is the number of persons who are leaving, not more.’ I say: I’ll come with you, but next week I have to go back to boarding school. But then I took my clothes, suitcase, not much, a few things for the few weeks when I had been at home. Okay, I must go back, but I go to this meeting and listen first. There were two small minibuses from VW, and we were all taken—all except one or two because there was no more space.²⁸⁷

Mohlala and his brother were taken abroad at the same time, which had raised a discussion beforehand because, for reasons of social responsibility, the ones who organized the flight had at first rejected taking the two oldest sons of a family away. These doubts notwithstanding, Mohlala followed his brother and crossed the border to Swaziland, where his group stayed for several weeks. The trip continued to Mozambique and, from there, with the help of Frelimo and Mohlala for the first time ever traveling by plane, to Tanzania.

According to the instructors’ names that Mohlala remembers, he must have spent his time there in Mkhumbane, a safe house of the ANC in Dar es Salaam (Houston 2013: 62).²⁸⁸ The newcomers had to decide whether they wanted to continue school or join *uMkhonto we Sizwe* (Spear of the Nation, abbreviated MK), the ANC’s armed wing.²⁸⁹ Mohlala, who had already repeated two years at South African schools, opted for the military. Part of the daily program included much political education, tactical training and sports; as he remembers: “We really enjoyed it. It was nice!” When one of their instructors told them about how members of the ANC were committing acts of sabotage against South Africa’s infrastructure, such as damaging power poles, they immediately wanted to put their training into practice. The instructor tried to slow down their cockiness by teaching them, instead, about their own historical background. Mohlala’s account still reveals some of the impatience he and his cohorts felt: “Comrades, you must take time’. Okay, alright, we’ll take our time. It’s fine, no problem. Well, then we were taught about the history of the African National Congress, its membership of the 1950s, 1960s. Now we were in the 1970s, products of Soweto, the Soweto uprising.” Visits to the Soviet Union and the GDR’s embassies in Tanzania soon followed, watching documentaries about the Great Patriotic War on the one hand and the GDR’s achievements on the other. Yet, what Mohlala remembers best is the finger food that was served to the young cadres on both occasions. After having spent roughly four months in Swaziland, Mozambique and Tanzania—accompanied by his brother—Mohlala would celebrate his 22nd birthday in the Soviet Union.

²⁸⁷ Mohlala and I spoke a mixture of German and English; I have translated the German parts I am quoting from into English.

²⁸⁸ Mohlala mentions Marc Shope and Elias Mahlase, aka ‘Banda’ (see Houston 2013: 62).

²⁸⁹ The MK was formed in 1961, when the ANC and the SACP were banned by the South African government and had to work underground.

3.2 Military Training in the Soviet Union

Our flight was nice and good. And you know, in the plane, it was nice. And these nice ladies who were serving us . . . this was a thing that one would have never expected to experience to be served by a white lady with a smile. It was an afternoon plane, but we arrived the next morning in Moscow. In Moscow, we were taken to an apartment with a bus driven by a soldier. Stop over in Moscow was a short one; then we got a connecting flight to Simferopol. Ja, this was good. But we were medically checked again and put into quarantine for one week.

Mohlala's remembrance of his first stay in the Soviet Union, between 1976 and 1977, starts with this gendered perception of a young, Black South African male. Having grown up under apartheid, it was hard for him to believe that white women—here, the female stewardesses in a Soviet aircraft on way to Moscow—could be friendly and caring towards him. The camp where Mohlala would be trained for six months, however, was not on the Soviet mainland but on the Crimean Peninsula, in Perevalnoye. Mohlala referred to the camp only as 'Simferopol', the next large city near the airport, so I use this denomination, too. According to Vladimir Shubin, this camp had been created particularly for the training of liberation movements, and "good use was made of the Second World War experience of the Crimean guerrillas, who had operated in mountains, forest and bush—in other words, in terrain not very different from Southern Africa" (Shubin 2009: 157). Helder Fonseca, who dedicates several pages of his study *The Military Training of Angolan Guerrillas in Socialist Countries* to the experiences of Africans who were trained in Simferopol before Mohlala arrived there, adds that the camp was constructed in the mid-1960s at the beginning of the Brezhnev era (Fonseca 2019: 116–122, here 117). Compared to similar training facilities in Odessa and Moscow, as Fonseca writes, one particularity of the Simferopol camp was that the trainees there were more isolated from the general population. They stayed inside the camp for the whole week, were escorted when they left it on weekends, and alcohol was generally prohibited. Fonseca further claims that, contrary to the racism African civilians at times experienced in the Soviet Union, "in the testimonies of military trainees there are no visible tensions relating to 'skin colour' in interactions both with the military and civil Soviet societies" (Fonseca 2019: 120–121).²⁹⁰

Mohlala's oral testimony confirms Fonseca's analysis and adds to the predominantly positive picture painted by Africans who had been trained there be-

²⁹⁰ Fonseca relied on written sources, such as interrogation reports of captured guerrillas from the Portuguese, Rhodesian and South African security forces as well as captured memos or published personal narratives.

fore. He participated in a six-month course in artillery during which he learned military tactics and how to handle a rocket launcher. The brother, together with his girlfriend, had been sent to the same camp a little later with another group. While the brother's girlfriend was taught in communication, the brother was trained as an engineer and learned how to detect and deactivate landmines or body traps. Additionally, all of them attended Russian language courses. What slightly contradicts Shubin's remarks quoted above is that the military training took place during winter. Consequently, dressed in thick clothes, under climatic conditions rather unlikely for Southern Africa, they practiced walking up- and downhill in fields full of snow. Another ironic moment Mohlala recalled is how they watched on TV the match Soviet Union vs. Canada of the 1977 Ice Hockey World Championships together with some of the Soviet officials. He and the other South Africans were backing the Canadians—“so we sat quiet” while their favorite team got a caning by the team of their Soviet hosts. Such differences notwithstanding, Mohlala's narrative leaves no doubt that, for him, the military training course in the Crimea was an exciting experience.

3.3 From the Crimea to Angolan Camp Life: Civil War and South African Aggression, becoming a Paramedic, and the Limits of Scandinavian Support

Up to this point, and despite all of its serious and dramatic aspects, Mohlala's narrative sounded relatively harmless to me, fostered by his physical appearance as a small, sensitive-looking family man in his 60s who had been wearing glasses since his time at the boarding school and was now sitting in front of me in his living room in Weißensee. Although he had brought up the Soweto uprising and his participation in military training, experiences of racist oppression and real danger did not appear to me to be the guiding principles of his life story so far. Rather, they seemed to me more implicit elements, placed in the shadows by his earliest memories of being an unwanted and adopted child. What he told me next would change this impression.

According to Mohlala, when the six-month course in the Soviet Union was coming to an end, Tanzania did not want to take back military-trained members of the ANC anymore; his party was surprised by this and in search of a new host country for them. Though I have not been able to find any verification that Tanzania took such a decision in 1976–77—the country did so, however, in 1969 (Shubin 2008: 78; Burton 2019: 52)—the relationship between Tanzania and the ANC had been strained, and Mohlala's stay in the Crimea coincided with the ANC's resolu-

tion to redeploy the MK to a more welcoming country.²⁹¹ The crucial point is that it would bring Mohlala and his comrades into the midst of a war-torn region. As he recalled, “we were offered a place to stay in Angola. But Agostinho Neto said, ‘People, you can come, but you will have to defend yourself. Because we are in war.’”²⁹² Indeed, though Angola was the country from which “more cadres were infiltrated back into South Africa than ever before,” as Maren Saeboe writes, “most trained combatants would fight in Angola rather than in their homeland” (2002: 192).

This new change of location in Mohlala’s life is revealing insofar as German research on Africans in the GDR, when referring to migrants’ countries of origin, often uncritically adopts terminology from GDR sources and writes in a rather euphemistic or reductionist way of ‘the young nation states’, as if all African countries were already independent when the GDR started its involvement there, and without really taking into account what happened in those countries that actually were so. The history of Angola (but also of Mozambique), one of the countries from which labor migrants, students and exiles departed to the GDR, is particularly striking here. Angola’s independence from Portugal in 1975, already the result of an armed struggle, led to a decades-long civil war that was crucially intensified through South Africa’s attempts to prevent the consolidation of African socialist regimes in the region as well as to put down the independence struggle of Namibia, bordering Angola in the South and occupied by South Africa since the defeat of the Germans at the end of World War I. Thus, the country Mohlala would be brought to from the Crimea was an international conflict zone where, at its height, thousands of Cuban soldiers fought together with the ruling MPLA to push back the South African army as well as the MPLA’s Angolan opponents, with atrocities committed on all sides, including the MPLA, and the two superpowers as well as China being directly or indirectly involved.²⁹³

291 Maren Saeboe and Vladimir Shubin argue that the move to Angola corresponded with the ANC’s good relations with the MPLA and its search for a more reliable host country and training ground for the MK while Angola, contrary to Mozambique, had more to win than to lose by hosting the MK, because it had already been attacked by South Africa (Saeboe 2002: 49–55; Shubin 2008: 115–123). For the ANC’s strained relations with Tanzania, see also Ellis/Sechaba 1992: 53–54.

292 Agostinho Neto was the first president of Angola and leader of the MPLA. The two competing Angolan parties opposing the MPLA were the UNITA (*União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola*), headed by Jonas Savimbi and later supported by South Africa, and the FNLA (*Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola*), headed by Holden Roberto and supported by the USA and Zaire, among others. UNITA was the main movement the MK came into combat with (Saeboe 2002: 192).

293 I am thinking here especially of the MPLA’s politically motivated purges of 1977, with the number of victims estimated at between 30,000 and 80,000 deaths, according to Peter Meyns

Understandably, Mohlala's perspective on this conflict leaves no room for ambiguities. Angola's governing party, confronting the same enemy as the ANC, offered him and his comrades in exile a place to stay. He thus seems to have misunderstood my question regarding whether it was not in the interest of Neto that, with the MK's involvement, there would be another armed movement on the ground capable of defending itself against the MPLA's enemies; instead, he emphasized that "it was not in our interest, the ANC and its military wing."²⁹⁴ His narrative continued with the ANC's challenge to make Angola the main base for the MK, his return to the Soviet Union in 1979 for another six-month course to become a paramedic, and the general support given to the MK by the socialist countries. The exile army that takes shape in Mohlala's account depended not only on its Angolan host but also on the support provided by countries such as the Soviet Union, the GDR, Czechoslovakia or Cuba. For instance, he mentioned a plane from the GDR being sent to Luanda every week, providing them with dried soup and tracksuits, and that the MK had to build up its own medical care system. Meanwhile, Hungary or Yugoslavia had offered to fly some of the more serious cases out to their own countries, examining them beforehand through their embassy personnel in Angola. All this required an infrastructure in exile, and Mohlala, now a paramedic, was a part of it in one of the MK's northern camps. He also recounted that the MK was under attack several times, with the convoys carrying supplies from Luanda to the camps being at particularly high risk. Moreover, his narrative included a vivid description of how the South African air force attacked camp Nova Katengue in 1979 (Saeboe 2002: 81–83). When he told me how they treated the casualties from these attacks, he surprised me with his local knowledge of the GDR:

They had to take the injured to the military hospital in Luanda. And then some were seen by the doctors there, but one had to be taken here to the GDR, to be treated here. In Luanda, there was no . . . okay, they have operated and done their best, but the treatment was not really adequate. So, one of the injured had to come here. And then, after being treated, the GDR also gave him scholarships to go to school here. So, after he was okay, he went to school. He was treated in the GDR in a place called Bad Berka. Before he went to Bad Berka, he was in the *Kreiskrankenhaus* [district hospital] in Quedlinburg, where they tried to fix this and that and then, the day after, was sent to recuperate at Bad Berka. Then he got a scholarship and studied medicine. Now, he is a general in the national army of South Africa.

(2017), who further argues that the MPLA could only consolidate its power and become Angola's ruling party through the military support of Cuba. However, Meyns also acknowledges the outstanding complexity of Angola's political situation at the advent of independence.

²⁹⁴ Saeboe as well as Shubin suggest that, even though the MK was too small to be of real military help for Angola, there were nevertheless considerations similar to the question I raised with Mohlala.

The geographical leaps within such an extract become more meaningful if we consider the interview's content, as I have summarized it so far, as a whole. Beginning in Alexandra, one of South Africa's notorious townships, it led us to Dar es Salaam—in the mid-1970s still an important hub for the ANC—and then to the Crimea—a region not many European contemporaries would have linked in a positive way to anticolonial struggles of the South. Returning to the African continent, it delved into the Angolan war zone and the MK camps, sustained by an international solidarity network, so that we could then follow his injured comrade from Luanda to East German towns so small and provincial that even most Germans would have problems finding them on a map. Within Mohlala's narrative, these sites are all interconnected through South Africa's struggle for liberation. Only later, when he told me that in 1982 he was sent for a three-month course in primary health care in Denmark at the invitation of the Norwegian and Danish Red Cross, did his narrative briefly move beyond this Southern Africa–Eastern bloc scheme to include a Western country. But, even then, he would point to the particularities of support from the Scandinavian countries, such as the condition that their material assistance should never be used for military purposes. The courses the Scandinavians offered had to be strictly civilian in character, and Mohlala added that the Scandinavians were good at monitoring the uses their material assistance was put to.

Imagining that the relatively peaceful and sated way of life Mohlala saw in Denmark must have contrasted sharply with his life in Angola, I asked him if he had not thought about a way to stay in Scandinavia, which he clearly denied. His explanation of why he attended the Scandinavian course followed the strict logic of military orders and discipline while, moreover, illuminating the difficult conditions in the MK camp he was working in. For instance, he told me how his medical superior, who had to leave the camp for a while, handed a fragmentary notebook over to him, leaving Mohlala with the task of educating himself before going to Denmark:

'Bango, let me show you my book here of all what I have written, what I have noted and so on.' So I was given a certain learning by doing [task]. But health is sensitive. So, learning by doing? No. He said, 'Bango, I also had it that way, learning by doing. So, if you can't recall what I have presented to you with the staff, then here is this book. When you have time, just go through how I treated malaria [. . .]'. I said okay, I'll see. And the chapter I needed to tell me [what to do] tomorrow in the morning, when he will not be there? He will be gone. Tomorrow morning? What? The chapter was not there.

The shortage of qualified personnel and improvised structure of the camp's health sector forced Mohlala to steadily improve his medical skills, and the brief course in Denmark was only of minor significance compared to what would be awaiting him in the GDR, as we will see. He gave me several examples of the med-

ical work he was doing in the camp. Malaria was the most common disease, but he also assisted in obstetrics. Once he helped an Angolan delivering her baby—they also treated civilians asking for help—and the mother was so happy that she named her newborn child similarly to the pseudonym he used as an MK operative. In a tragic case, a baby sick with malaria died in his hands while he tried in vain to find a functioning vein. It is in the context of this scene that, retrospectively, he justified his first move to the GDR in 1984 with the need to gain more professional knowledge. But, while he was telling me this, he also seemed to be aware that his permanent stay in Germany, enabled by marrying an East German, complicates this justification:

So I could not even put in a drip, an infusion, because all the veins were collapsed. Tried on the head, tried somewhere on the leg . . . no, doesn't work. So, I said let me just—and now the course in the GDR was also to pick me up, because . . . I hadn't [originally] wanted that. But you know, somehow, somewhere one meets somebody. I said, if this one could be my partner, that would be good.

3.4 Medical Training in the GDR: The Dorothea Erxleben School in Quedlinburg

3.4.1 The School's Training Program for Foreigners and its Discussion in Science

Today, there are only two countries left south of the Sahara that are still served by a German airline, Namibia and South Africa. This decline of connectivity is part of what Ali Mazrui once mourned as Africa's “dis-globalizing experience” after the end of the Cold War (1999: 7). Back in 1984, Mohlala, together with several other exiled comrades who had been allocated a stipend from the GDR, were able to board an East German Interflug plane and fly nonstop from Luanda to East Berlin, where two East Germans and one South African welcomed them at Schönefeld airport. Their fellow exile, who also served as a translator, then accompanied them to Quedlinburg—a small, rural town with less than 30,000 inhabitants, around 200 km away from Berlin and located north of the Harz mountains, a low range in what was re-established as the federal state of Saxony-Anhalt after reunification. A newspaper article from the GDR, published in 1987, spotlighted the Dorothea Erxleben School, where Mohlala did his training, explaining how the school had been exclusively training foreign cadres for 25 years by then—in total, 1,650 women and men from 60 African, Asian, and Latin American countries had successfully completed vocational training of three years there—gaining knowledge in twenty-eight subjects, such as nursing, anatomy, physiology,

nutrition science, infection theory, and pathology.²⁹⁵ In 1987, 18 members of SWAPO and the ANC were attending the school, as the article further notes, and Mohlala—as the article does not say—was one of them. While the school's main focus was nurse training, medical-assistant training had been re-established in 1985, after a longer break. Its aim was to prepare healthcare professionals to give medical care in remote areas of the Global South, ready to work autonomously under conditions that would strongly differ from those in Europe.

The East German writer Stefan Wolter authored a monograph covering the twentieth century history of the hospital of which the Dorothea Erxleben School was a part (2007). Though containing only a few pages on the training of foreigners, his book offers a rare post-reunification view from Germany on the subject (2007: 265–268). According to Wolter, the first students came from Mali and arrived at the school—a newly established subunit of a longer-existing nursing school—in September 1961, followed the next year by a group of ten more foreign students whose origin he does not further specify. For 1964–65, he writes of 35 women from Nigeria, Guinea, Cuba, Tanzania and Zanzibar who were all trained as nurses. The curricula for the German and foreign students was basically the same, only that the latter were additionally taught in tropical medicine and attended a one-year course in German language beforehand. In 1966, the school gained a nationwide reputation as the GDR's central institution for teaching German for medical professions. From this time on, a large proportion of those who came to the GDR to do medical training or study medicine but lacked the necessary language skills learned German in Quedlinburg. In the mid-1970s, the level of medical training was increased through extension of the program from 2.5 to 3 years (plus one-year language preparation, if needed) as well as offering more highly qualified teachers. Wolter further mentions two important changes within the medical school's directorate: its first director, Margarete Haberdank, was replaced in 1962 by Hans Kranold, followed in 1971 by Friedrich Kolbe, who had worked abroad before and was thus experienced in working with foreigners.

Wolter illustrates this section of his book with two pictures, the first showing a Black female student in the hospital's children's ward, dressed as a nurse and smiling at three white children who are playing at a table; the second showing five Black students, one of them male, sitting at a table with learning materials in a classroom situation. Two of the female students, very young and with headscarves, look a little stressed, while the faces of the other three express careful

295 "In der DDR zur medizinischen Fachausbildung. Aus 60 Entwicklungsländern studierten Kader in Quedlinburg." *Neues Deutschland*, 12 August 1987, vol. 42, issue 188, p. 2. The school was named after the first female medical doctor from Germany: Dorothea Erxleben (1715–1762).

attention. Wolter writes empathically about the topic, acknowledging that “the hospital provided valuable medical aid to poorer countries” and that “in some places in the world, there will be people who fondly remember their training in Quedlinburg” (2007: 267, own translation). Considering only the information about the training of foreign students which his book provides, I see no reason for Wolter to draw any negative conclusions from this period except that real integration into the existing society was hardly possible (2007: 267–268). Nevertheless, he dismisses an official statement as mere political propaganda only because it claimed in 1981 that,

as a result of the growing trust which the young nation states have in our worker’s solidarity, many governments from Asia, Africa and Latin America are asking our state to train urgently needed medical cadres. [. . .] To this day, the school and the hospital have fulfilled a deeply humanitarian and politically valuable task in the spirit of proletarian internationalism. (2007: 267, own translation)

Moreover, relying solely on oral sources from the German side, he adds that at least one case of suicide occurred and criticizes that the school also trained “officially prohibited feldshers for conflict areas” (ibid., own translation).²⁹⁶

Wolter looks at the hospital in Quedlinburg through the prism of its twentieth-century history, thereby adopting a decidedly local and institutional perspective in which the training of foreigners seems only a marginal issue. Before I turn this perspective upside down and look at the same subject through the prism of Mohlala’s exile narrative, I want to discuss how Young-sun Hong, a historian who works in the US but grew up under South Korea’s West-aligned military dictatorship, looks at the subject through a decidedly transnational perspective: the prism of “the humanitarian, development, and medical aid programs of the two German states for the newly independent countries of Asia and Africa” (Hong 2015).²⁹⁷

²⁹⁶ The International Labour Organization lists a feldsher (*Feldscher*) among the paramedical practitioners (see ILO, International Standard Classification of Occupations 2008 (ISCO-08): Structure, group definitions and correspondence tables, Geneva 2012, p. 131 https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/ilo-bookstore/order-online/books/WCMS_172572/lang-en/index.htm (accessed 2 October 2023)). I cannot say whether an internationally binding agreement existed concerning the prohibition of feldshers training which the GDR had signed (or not).

²⁹⁷ In a chapter about the GDR’s engagement in Zanzibar’s medical sector, Hong mentions the gynecologist Ruth Radvanyi as one of the East Germans who were temporarily working in Zanzibar, adding that she is the daughter of novelist Anna Seghers and economist Johann Lorenz Schmidt (2015: 308). What Hong does not mention, however, is that the whole family was Jewish and exiled in France and Mexico during the 1930s and 1940s; I come back to an analogy between one of Seghers’ exile novels and Mohlala’s narrative later.

Like Wolter, Hong could not locate the Dorothea Erxleben School's archives and did not conduct any interviews with former students (Wolter 2007: 268; Hong 2015: 378). Instead, she relies exclusively on files from the 1960s and 1970s about the medical training of foreign students in the GDR which she found in the German Federal Archive and the Political Archive of the Foreign Ministry, arguing that "the voluminous correspondence, complaints, and petitions [. . .] provide an opportunity to study how East German officials and citizens interacted with these foreigners" (Hong 2015: 201). Hence, the students' own voices are dominated by the more numerous writings from East German officials about them and appear only through scattered documents. Though the small number of examples she relies on do not qualify as a representative study, they suggest that the changes in the medical school's directorate and the upgrading of the level of medical training given in the mid-1970s as well as the re-establishment of medical-assistant training in the mid-1980s had their reasons. Hong's study does not, however, mention any of these changes.

While acknowledging that the hospital's history as a nursing school anticipated the GDR's training of foreigners there, Hong speculates about Quedlinburg's "relative isolation" (*ibid.*) as the main reason for the GDR to make it a training center for foreign students, suggesting that the city's small size and remote location facilitated "the virtual ghettoization of non-European students" (*ibid.*). Hong's assumption, however biased, is not completely unfounded: in 1966, the director of a medical school in Potsdam asked the GDR's Health Ministry to transfer four male Zanzibari graduates from Potsdam to Quedlinburg before their return to Zanzibar so that they "would have fewer opportunities to socialize with German women" (Hong 2015: 207). Nonetheless, this does not say anything about whether similar considerations had influenced the GDR's original decision to make Quedlinburg a center for the training of foreign students; moreover, as Hong quotes from earlier correspondence between East German officials, the training of the first group of foreign students in Quedlinburg was already said to have resulted in romantic relationships between Malinese men and German women, including pregnancies (*ibid.*).

Hong writes of about 450 students from "the nonaligned countries of the Third World"²⁹⁸ who completed training in the GDR's medical sector between 1961 and 1973, most of them studying in Quedlinburg (2015: 201). What she discovered about

²⁹⁸ Similarly with the previously quoted "newly independent countries of Asia and Africa," I quote this phrasing from Hong to highlight its generalizing tone, as gathering all of the students' sending countries under this umbrella term neglects Southern Africa's late decolonization and, therefore, obscures the fact that students such as Mohlala were sent by exiled liberation movements.

the activities of the first group of arrivals sounds disappointing. Though the Malinese students had had work experience from French colonial hospitals, in Quedlinburg they "were required to clean rooms and make beds for several months as an ostensible part of their basic training" (2015: 204). Unfortunately, Hong does not mention whether German nursing students were also assigned with such tasks or not. Another problem at this early stage of the program's establishment was that the East Germans had no expertise in tropical medicine. A letter from an East German official from 1962 reveals an awareness of these problems (*ibid.*), yet assigning rather unqualified work to foreign students instead of instructing them in more demanding tasks right from the start was repeated during the first half of the 1960s with students from Niger and Cuba (Hong 2015: 205–206).

Hong concludes from these examples that "the absence of a clear program for meeting their needs, together with the housekeeping tasks and basic patient care into which they were shunted, quickly alienated these visitors" (2015: 206) and that racial prejudice "most often manifested itself in the conviction that Africans had to be taught the basic virtues of work, discipline, and order before they could hope to acquire skills or technical knowledge of any kind" (2015: 206–207). In spite of these critical conclusions, there are some cases in which Hong thematizes the training in Quedlinburg in a more neutral or positive way as well. For instance, in 1960 a sixteen-year-old Malinese woman came to the GDR. At first, she had to perform unskilled labor as a nurse's aide in a Berlin hospital, but after some East German officials found out about this unsatisfactory situation, she was sent to Quedlinburg and successfully completed her basic training there. Nonetheless, problems on her career path did recur after she began to study midwifery in Leipzig—this time through a head teacher who wrote a very negative evaluation in an exceedingly disrespectful tone (2015: 208).

A similar case of particular interest here is that of a seventeen-year-old South African named Cora. Hong does not give any information about how and from where exactly she came to the GDR; all that she writes in this regard is that the teenager arrived in 1969, already pregnant, to study nursing. Against the GDR authorities' advice, she initially wanted to abort but ultimately gave birth to a daughter, and the government provided her with all available welfare benefits. In 1970, she "resumed her training in a German-only class in Quedlinburg and two-and-a-half years later she received her state nursing certificate" (2015: 212), after which she wanted to become a nursing instructor. As in the case of the young Malinese woman, Quedlinburg appears here as a successfully completed stage on an adolescent's career path. In line with this logic, and despite the fact that the authorities considered her social behavior to be inappropriate and doubted her suitability for teaching, the young woman was finally allowed to study in Potsdam. It was only after her South African mentor decided that she

should abandon her studies and, together with her little daughter, leave the GDR for Zambia because of a politically unreliable African boyfriend that the SED's ZK ordered her to leave the country in 1977. This points towards the ambiguous role which political organizations from their sending country could play in a foreign student's life. Moreover, that the two were sent to Zambia because of a South African mentor's decision suggests that she was an exiled ANC member, like Mohlala, as Zambia was one of the ANC's main host countries. The close relationship between the GDR and the ANC would also explain why the East German authorities showed so much paternalism with regard to her pregnancy and patience with her recalcitrant behavior or—in Hong's words—why the ZK “sought to make Cora into an example of the power of the socialist state to remold the character of this obstinate young woman and bring her around to a proper understanding of her social obligations” (ibid.). Hong contextualizes the case by employing Konrad Jarasch's argument about the GDR as a welfare dictatorship of care and coercion (2015: 210); yet the reasons why the seventeen-year-old Cora could not accomplish her wish to abort remain as unclear as the circumstances which had brought her to the GDR.²⁹⁹

From my perspective, the broader picture which Hong creates of Quedlinburg and the training of Third World students in the GDR's medical sector is generally rather depressing. Although she quotes some East German officials who seemed seriously concerned about the medical students' well-being and education, Hong's account leaves no room for the possibility of improvements being brought about by the training programs, let alone the possibility that the GDR could be seen as an emancipatory space for Africans. Quite to the contrary, her section's final remarks about the beginning of labor migration from Algeria and the GDR's economic problems evoke an even more dystopian picture of the late 1970s and the 1980s, when “young people from the Third World [. . .] were increasingly seen as a source of cheap labor, rather than as comrades in arms” (2015: 214). Further, her tendency to deny the GDR's solidarity policies any emancipatory effects culminates in her study's epilogue, where she warns “against romanticizing East German rhetoric of anti-imperialist solidarity” (2015: 320).³⁰⁰

²⁹⁹ The GDR's abortion law was liberalized in 1972, only a few years after Cora's arrival.

³⁰⁰ Hong sees such a trend in the popular-science writing of Hans-Georg Schleicher (2019). Schleicher was the GDR's ambassador to Zimbabwe in the 1980s and, thus, in close contact with Southern African freedom fighters and politicians; it is mainly Schleicher and his wife's publications that have enabled post-1990 German knowledge production regarding the GDR's support for African liberation movements. Together with Ulf Engel, a West German professor for African studies, Schleicher also co-authored a highly nuanced analysis of the two Germany's Africa poli-

Hong’s concluding arguments and overall approach to the GDR remind me of a problem which Marcia Schenck (2018) has addressed regarding post-unification literature on labor migration to the GDR. As a result of research methods which draw primarily on archival sources, non-German actors often appear in the literature “merely as silhouettes” (2018: 4), as “victims of state exploitation” (ibid.) whose experiences are filtered through the interests of the GDR institutions which originally generated and collected the archived documents. Schenck, to my mind rightfully, proposes oral history interviews to counterbalance this tendency. Consequently, we can now ask the following: How did Mohlala, who came from a conflict area to the GDR seven years after Cora and her daughter’s departure, look back on his medical training in Quedlinburg—not speaking from some distant part of the world, as both Wolter and Hong’s accounts suggest, but while living in Weißensee, right in the German capital?

3.4.2 How Mohlala Remembers his Stay at Quedlinburg

Two things Mohlala immediately recalled were the luxury of the residential house and the school’s internationalism. The relative luxury of their accommodations—two persons shared each apartment, with a living room, a sleeping room and a kitchen, although toilets and showers were shared by each floor—has even been acknowledged by South Africans who were studying in other parts of the GDR and visited the Quedlinburg trainees from time to time. Concerning the school’s internationalism, Mohlala remembered Namibians, Palestinians, Afghans and Nicaraguans who lived and studied with them in Quedlinburg. He spoke with pride about the high level of teaching offered and how he, one of the best students in the language course, successfully mastered it all. He recalled the friendly competition between those South Africans who learned German in Quedlinburg and those who learned it at the better known Herder-Institut in Leipzig—not a serious competition but motivating enough so that each group would try to trump the other with their newly achieved language skills.³⁰¹

In an interview that Ilona Schleicher conducted in 2011 with two other ANC exiles who had lived in the GDR—Bert Seraje and Bartolomew La Guma—Seraje, who came to the GDR via Zambia as late as September 1988, made a critical statement

cies (1998). Hong neither problematizes the anti-communist and Eurocentric bias in Germany’s post-reunification discourse – against which Schleicher’s text must be read – nor does she pay sufficient attention to the particularities of Southern African decolonization and the role which the GDR’s support for liberation movements played therein.

301 On the Herder-Institut, see Gramkow 2010.

about a former teacher at the Herder-Institut in 1988. According to Seraje, he had to tell this teacher that she should stop treating them as if they were ignorant, underaged children who only need to be taught something, an attitude which reminded him of how they were treated by the apartheid regime (Schleicher 2012: 103). Significantly, Seraje had already talked about this incident twenty years before in another interview, conducted by Hilda Bernstein during a period when the violent racism which accompanied the GDR's dissolution was particularly strong and put Seraje under daily threat of physical assault. Against this backdrop, Seraje's earlier account not only reads even more intensely but also reveals the teacher's initial reaction:

The teachers will think that we don't know a thing, ja. We just came to be fed with information but from outside, we can't give them anything that they can learn from, na? And that also put me into clashing with my teachers. And at one stage, I told one of my teachers, you behave just like the whites in South Africa [. . .]. She cried and I said, no . . . in any case, that is what I got from you, man [meaning the female teacher]. Any case, after that the whole situation was nice [. . .] but that was also the climax for me here, because I couldn't stand it any more. I could have slapped her or so, but I thought no, any case that is the best I could do. To tell her, no you behave just like these people. (Bernstein/Seraje: 93)³⁰²

In the more recent interview by Schleicher, however, Seraje further said that the Herder-Institut subsequently wrote a complaint to the ANC's representative office in East Berlin so that he first thought he must leave the country, but nothing happened. Notwithstanding, he repeated that with the exception of this one teacher everything else in Leipzig had been all right.

With this in my mind, I asked Mohlala about his teachers in Quedlinburg. He responded that, in general, they had been friendly but were very strict about homework. He then recalled a little quarrel which his language class—South Africans from the ANC and Namibians from SWAPO, men and women—had with one of their teachers. The latter, a young woman, once called it a *Schweinerei* (rascality, literally 'swinishness') when several of the students came to class without having done their homework. The students argued with the teacher that it was inappropriate for her to use such a word because she was younger than all of them—perhaps surprisingly signaling that they were offended by her lack of respect for reasons of age rather than ethnicity—and they continued to discuss the topic when the class was over. Thus, infantilizing students does not necessarily point towards an assumption of rac-

302 Bert Seraje Interview, conducted between 1989 and 1991 by Hilda Bernstein in Berlin. MCA 7-1683, Hilda Bernstein Collection, The Mayibuye Center, University of the Western Cape, South Africa. Bert Seraje and Sacks Stuurman, who was also interviewed by Thabo Thindi for *Exile Faces* (see p. 72, n. 76), are the same person. Bert Seraje was the code name given to Stuurman as a member of MK.

ism on the teacher’s part. In this respect, what Seraje recalled about his teacher in Leipzig seems to me of another, more negative, quality than what Mohlala recalled about his teacher in Quedlinburg. Furthermore, Seraje mentioned another relevant aspect: South African exiles came to the GDR as seasoned activists. They had not only taken up the struggle against the apartheid regime but also undergone political education in Africa that was critical by nature right from the start (Schleicher 2012: 107). Once in the GDR, I would add, they could then be confronted with young, white teachers who had never left their small country and had done little in the way of engaging critically with their racist stereotypes. Hence, the only thing which Mohlala remembered as a problem, particularly during his first year in Quedlinburg, was that he and his comrades spoke only German in class whereas, in their spare time, they kept speaking English and other South African languages, as there were no Germans residing with them at the boarding school. In the end, this made learning German a more difficult task.

Mohlala’s South African group consisted of seven men and three women. The canteen did not offer food in the evenings or Sundays, meaning that those who shared a flat had to cook for themselves if they did not want to go to a restaurant. Here again, the benefits of his upbringing become evident as, contrary to his roommate, Mohlala knew how to prepare a tasty meal. When the roommate—the two had already met in the Angolan camps but knew each other only superficially—turned out to have “no courage when it came to cooking,” Mohlala stopped sharing his meals with him.

But the roommate then started dating one of the South African women so that she would cook for him. For a while, the couple shared a room together, even though this was officially prohibited. It was only later that a stricter control system was established, consisting of three East German women and two men, who, as the students found out after a while, were all part of Quedlinburg’s local police force, with one of them sleeping at the residential home. Contrary to the residential home’s usual staff, this new control team was very strict. It kept an eye on (heterosexual) couples and made sure that rooms were only shared by persons of the same sex. The establishment of a new control team suggests that, by then, the residential home’s staff had tolerated the students’ subversion of the rules to some extent but that, eventually, the authorities responded to enforce the GDR’s general rules.

3.4.2.1 Self-determined Trips: Interactions between South African and Namibian Exiles

Mohlala mentioned that he and the other South African apprentices in Quedlinburg received a monthly stipend of 600 East German marks. If his memory served him right here, this would mean an unusually high sum for a monthly stipend; for instance, C.B., another ANC exile who studied at the same time at Potsdam University, recalled only receiving some pocket money of at most 250 marks per

month.³⁰³ In any case, a more interesting thing Mohlala spoke about was a document which allowed them to travel independently by train, though only twice a month. The trick the ANC exiles used to travel more often than that illuminates not only the mechanisms applied by the GDR to monitor their mobility—though the police escort described below could as well have been a measure to protect the exiles from racist encounters with GDR citizens or even have been requested by the ANC itself³⁰⁴—but also some of the differences between liberation movements in exile or, hierarchies of the displaced:

When we traveled, we had a document that was stamped when we bought a ticket. And when we traveled by train there was also the *Volkspolizei* accompanying us. Most of the time they were also carrying out controls. ‘Ah, there are our friends again’, that’s how they called us.

But they were friendly?

They also were friendly, yes. ‘Yes, friend, where are you going? Ah, to Berlin. Do you have a ticket? Does he have this document from school? Yes. Show it. This is good, have a nice trip’. But when the document was stamped two times, our options to take the train were gone. Then we tried something else.

What?

From SWAPO. We had our student cards.

The SWAPO members always stayed in the residential home on the weekends, and you took their student cards to travel to Berlin?

Yes, with these documents.

Didn’t the SWAPO members also like going to Berlin?

No, let’s put it like this: they were really restrained. And not only that; they really saved their money in order to buy things before returning to Africa.

And your people didn’t think like that?

There were no limitations with regard to their luggage. And their representative office supported them; if they had extra luggage, they could bring it to the office where it would be registered under their name and sent to Africa.

³⁰³ Interview between the author and C.B., Berlin, 4 June 2016.

³⁰⁴ Another reason for the police presence on the train could simply have been Quedlinburg’s proximity to the West German border.

It means that they could really buy a lot of things.

Yes, they could . . . [but] for us it was 20 kg and that’s it.

Ah, more strict.

Bringing extra luggage to the office so that it would be sent abroad . . . no, that wasn’t possible. Then we said okay, they don’t take the train, maybe one visited another in a month, but most of the time they stayed in the boarding school. And there were no names on the documents.

In another interview which I had conducted previously with Bartolomew La Guma—a civilian member of the ANC—La Guma had already mentioned to me that SWAPO members were more like soldiers, that their movement was more strict and militarily disciplined than the ANC, which was more liberal, as he called it. Because of Namibia’s harsher sociopolitical and economic realities compared to South Africa, SWAPO could thus be understood as the more subaltern group, even in exile in the GDR, where these different backgrounds translated into the more frugal lifestyle of its members. Instead of traveling around more than necessary, its members rather prepared for life in a liberated but still relatively poor Namibia. Meanwhile, ANC members—even those from its military wing, such as Mohlala—exhibited a more easygoing lifestyle and habitus in the GDR. Moreover, that SWAPO facilitated members buying East German consumer goods points to Jonathan Zatin’s older argument about economic scarcity and distributional conflicts as an additional source of xenophobia and racism in the GDR (2007).

Mohlala’s account of the ANC exiles’ interaction with members of SWAPO raised my interest in possible contact he and his comrades in Quedlinburg might have had with other groups of Africans who lived in the GDR. For instance, the *Schule der Freundschaft* (School of Friendship), a boarding school for young Mozambicans, was situated in Staßfurt, only 45 kilometres away from Quedlinburg (e.g. Schuch 2013; Müller 2014).³⁰⁵ But Mohlala spoke only of contact with the Namibians from his school. In this context, he started to reflect upon the lives of Namibians who came to the GDR at a young age and had to leave the country because of German reunification (Kenna 1999; Engombe 2004), or the Black East German Lahya Aukongo, whose Namibian mother had been injured during a South African attack on a refugee camp in Angola and flown to the GDR, where

³⁰⁵ For an account of a former student who later returned to the GDR as a labor migrant, see Miguel 2020. The rigid measures applied by the East German and Mozambican authorities to restrict student movement made it hardly likely that the Mozambicans in Staßfurt and the South Africans in Quedlinburg could have met each other by chance.

she gave birth to her daughter (Aukongo 2009). This demonstrates his concern for the fate of other Africans and Black Germans whose biographies are connected to the GDR. The lives of these Namibians, he said, must have been very hard because of what happened to them back in Namibia or—in the case of Aukongo—in Berlin after reunification, with the resurgent racism that it unleashed.

He then recalled that some of his Namibian schoolmates in Quedlinburg traveled to a hotel in Oberhof, visiting two female SWAPO members who were training as cooks there. A small town in the Thuringian Forest, Oberhof was one of the most prominent locations for winter sports in the GDR. Many middle-aged white East Germans I know still refer to skiing in Oberhof as a typical way in which they spent their Winter vacations when they were young—or even continue to spend their vacations there. Just like the Baltic Sea, Oberhof could rightfully be listed among the GDR's popular *lieux de mémoire*, as conceptualized and compiled by Martin Sabrow (2009). However, similarly to the way that Sabrow's otherwise inspiring volume lacks any serious consideration of the GDR's internationalism, I cannot imagine any of these East Germans associating their former holiday resort with having been a training post for Africans, let alone connecting it with the liberation struggle of a country that had once been a German colony. It is only Mohlala's marginalized knowledge which enables me to do so here.³⁰⁶

3.4.2.2 Romantic Relationships: Encounters between the ANC and the Free German Youth

In January 1988, the beginning of his last year of medical training, Mohlala met his future wife. It happened during an ANC meeting in Potsdam. Each January, June, and August, the party organized large, official meetings in the GDR; to finance them, the students had to pay a small fee every month as well as to cover their individual costs for food and accommodation.³⁰⁷ “The program started on

³⁰⁶ There are of course a few studies pointing to Oberhof as a training ground for Namibians. For instance, Zatlin included in his study on xenophobia in the GDR a photograph from 1981 depicting a Namibian couple's wedding in Oberhof, with its original caption mentioning Oberhof as the place where they were temporarily living and studying (2007: 713). However, Zatlin mistakenly considered Namibians in the GDR only as labor migrants and ignored the country's liberation struggle.

³⁰⁷ It is unclear to me if there really were three meetings every year, as other ANC exiles speak of only one annual meeting (e.g. Schleicher 2012: 106). Nonetheless, according to Mohlala, the meetings were organized every January 8, the ANC's founding day in 1912, celebrated in Potsdam; on June 16, the day the Soweto uprising erupted in 1976, celebrated in Magdeburg; and on August 9, National Women's Day, celebrated in Berlin. National Women's Day honors the so-called Women's March in South Africa in 1956, during which more than 20,000 women protested against the Urban Areas Act (or Pass Laws), introduced by the apartheid regime to facilitate racial segregation.

the evening with a lot of speeches, about three hours, then the disco started with eating and drinking until 10 pm,” Mohlala summarized such a meeting rather pragmatically. Far from being isolated events, these gatherings were often attended by members of the FDJ—and just as the South African hosts were of mixed gender, so were their East German guests. The young East German woman he fell in love with was born in Weißensee, studied polygraphy—a profession based in the fields of graphics and printing, comparable to media designer—in Leipzig, and had her own apartment in Berlin.

From that point on, Mohlala took the train to Berlin every weekend to visit his girlfriend. At his residential home in Quedlinburg, people of different sexes were not allowed to stay in the same room overnight. Visitors had to sign a document and show their passport to a gatekeeper, meaning that his girlfriend would have had to sleep in a separate guest room. These regulations notwithstanding, Mohlala told me of more encounters between the students in Quedlinburg and East Germans, also between the sexes. Ballenstedt, a nearby town about half the size of Quedlinburg, had an engineering school for forestry. As a West German, I automatically associated forestry with being a male profession; hence my surprise that Mohlala spoke only of the young women who attended that school. Thanks to its more progressive gender policies, the GDR had a higher percentage of female foresters than the FRG.³⁰⁸ These encounters began with weekly or monthly visits of students from both schools, again organized by the FDJ. Out of these official meetings, individual visits emerged. The Germans traveled back to their family homes at most every second weekend, leaving plenty of time for visiting each other in the residential dorms, although the control teams took care that visitors left by 7 pm.

3.4.2.3 Disunity in Exile: Classism and Intellectual Snobbery among ANC Members

Mohlala took the above-mentioned ANC gatherings as his point of departure to reflect a little more upon how the ANC members interacted with each other in East German exile. In his eyes, there was no real unity. Instead, small groups formed according to the places where they lived in the GDR or the professions in which they were trained, and there were also tensions between civilian and military ANC members. The staff from the ANC’s office in East Berlin would sit together with the stipendiaries from the University of Economics (HfÖ): on one side the ones from Potsdam and Magdeburg, and on the other side the ones from

³⁰⁸ See e.g. Hummel, Andreas: “Geschlechter: Försterinnen setzen Marke.” *Nordwest Zeitung*, 7 February 2017, https://www.nwzonline.de/wirtschaft/foersterinnen-setzen-marke_a_31,2,1431803268.html (accessed 2 October 2023).

Quedlinburg. Mohlala particularly disliked comments such as ‘You are soldiers [and only apprentices], we are students’; ‘we are better off’ or, ‘can you imagine that, after our return to South Africa, we will work somewhere in an office and you won’t?’ He and his comrades from MK countered such provocations by responding that they did not care, that they were disciplined army members:

‘It’s okay, why not? We are in the army doing our duty, and politically as well as mentally we are better than you. You just *look* like better people.’ [. . .] Yes, this was really . . . well, bad that some were saying, ‘Ah, those . . .’ And then, when the members of the board were elected, this was also one of those things . . . but some comrades commented on it, because after the meetings there was criticism and self-criticism . . . Yeah, and then unity was conjured up: ‘Comrades, we are one. We are ANC members. Okay, there are those who are in the army, but we are all comrades, okay?’ Yeah, okay. We are all comrades, fine, no problem. But then, the board members—students and no apprentices. ‘We are not apprentices, we are students!’ Then it became a little better. I was elected as a secretary among the principals, but there were some who didn’t think I could manage to do this among these students who were elected onto the board. But I did it, it was alright, no problem. That’s how it used to be back then.

That Mohlala recalled such intellectual snobbery and classism among ANC exiles in the GDR sounds ironic at first glance, given the host country’s self-image as a workers’ and peasants’ state as well as the ANC’s ideological proximity to socialist ideals, not to speak of its close alliance with the SACP. Mohlala’s specific socialization most likely played an additional role here—growing up as an adopted child made him sensitive to social hierarchies beyond the color line. If it was true, however, another question is whether this classism shown by his comrades was more a result of the GDR’s migration policies, which entailed a logical differentiation between students or trainees in civic or military professions or, rather, of their earlier socialization in apartheid South Africa. Access to university was restricted in the GDR and, thus, considered a privilege even for East Germans, but the financial attraction of academic jobs was rather limited, compared to skilled work in industrial production, as there was no huge wage gap between academic and non-academic professions, as tends to exist in capitalist countries (e.g. Hockerts 1994: 530). Moreover, considering the ANC exiles among my sample who had attended university during their stay in the GDR, the main difference between their lives as students and Mohlala’s life as an apprentice seems to be that his school was exclusively for foreigners, meaning that the former had more regular contact with East Germans. Mohlala nevertheless dated an East German and traveled independently to visit her in Berlin, suggesting that, in his particular case, this difference was not of much importance. Hence, it appears that it was not so much the exiles’ actual living conditions in the GDR that were the key determinant here but, rather, their former experiences with South Africa’s racial capitalism and

their expectations of what would await them in a liberated post-apartheid state. The university students might have expected more comfortable jobs with higher income because, unlike Mohlala, they would likely take over jobs normally done by racially privileged, better-off whites.

Mohlala’s own explanation similarly points back to South Africa but sounds a little different: “We [South Africans] are sick. To really trust someone . . . well, who is this? In the families it’s like this as well.” In his opinion, growing up Black under apartheid often meant living in large families marked by internal migration, with children from different parents speaking different languages, as in his own case. Such conditions made it difficult to build up real trust among each other, and this mistrust and envy accompanied them into exile. This resonates with Mphahlele’s remark about those internal South African migrants—“exiles,” in Mphahlele’s words—of the generation of Mohlala’s grandfather, who were urban dwellers forced “to establish a kind of permanence in areas where they were denied a sense of place” (Mphahlele 1982: 41).³⁰⁹ This denial, in turn, not only continued in the kind of exile Africans like Mohlala later experienced but even intensified there because, “to avoid being in permanent exile,” as Tague argues with regard to Mozambicans, “one had to have a purpose (and to be serving the liberation movement through that purpose)” (Tague 2018: 142), keeping alive the idea of returning to their country of origin.³¹⁰ Tague rightfully claims that this sense of purpose was often linked to pursuing educational achievements. How, then, to avoid stagnation—or avoid a relapse into the previous stage of exile, with its ominous reverberations of permanence—when an apprenticeship abroad was coming to an end?

3.4.2.4 Farewell to the GDR: Starting a Family while Being Prevented from Settling Down

Obtaining a new scholarship and proceeding with one’s education was one way for an exile to remain longer in the GDR, if only for a given time, while marrying an East German was another. In Mohlala’s account of how he had to leave the GDR in 1988, these two options overlapped but ultimately ended with the impossibility of achieving either one of them. Interestingly, Mohlala considered as the main obstacle to his remaining in the GDR not the country’s migration policies but the lack of engagement of his own political organization, the ANC:

³⁰⁹ See p. 37 for full quote.

³¹⁰ See p. 20 for full quote.

I had problems, already at the end of '87, because my girlfriend was pregnant and it was a bad time—my last year of apprenticeship, and I had to go. Okay, so I'm going to the chief representative in the office and trying to talk to him. He says: 'Comrade . . . is it your future wife?' I say: Yes, I want to marry. 'But you're in the army. You were ordered by the ANC to study and to return, and to execute the ANC's assignment.' I say: Yes, but this kind of opportunity exists in the ANC. There are comrades here who got married and stayed. Why doesn't it work for me? 'Comrade, those in the headquarters in Lusaka don't allow the apprentices here to marry. But we will solve your problem. I'll write a letter to the headquarters.'

The letter, as Mohlala continued, was never written, and his problem remained unsolved. Hence, it suggests that some of the superiors raised false hopes among their subordinates, be it because of their own limited agency in exile or because they did not really want to help. Mohlala said that the ANC's chief commander visited them in Quedlinburg at the end of their apprenticeship, telling them that they had attained a sufficient amount of basic knowledge so that there might be a chance for them to study medicine at an East German university. Since many of them had attended school in South Africa only briefly, he encouraged them to seize this opportunity. According to Mohlala's account, however, the ANC actually was not in a position to raise such hopes among its cadre who had just graduated as medical assistants from the Dorothea Erxleben School. Quite to the contrary, the prospect for new scholarships must have been rather small, given that Mohlala spoke of only one member of his group who was finally allowed to stay in the GDR to study. Again, however, his narrative becomes a bit confusing here. The majority of his group, he said, was allowed to participate in extra training for about three months before leaving the GDR, whereas he was among those who were not even considered candidates for this brief extra training, the exact nature of which he did not mention. Instead, he was told that his medical services were urgently needed in Angola because of UNITA's ongoing attacks. Yet, this alleged urgency was contradicted by the planned date of his return flight, which would only have taken place after his comrades' additional training had ended. A comrade who would leave the country on the same plane as Mohlala informed him about the exact day of their departure. Despite the bureaucratic inconsistency, this did leave him with three months of spare time, a period that he spent together with his girlfriend and their newborn child in Berlin.

Beside his own difficulties in starting a family and settling down, Mohlala spoke about two cases of pregnancies among ANC members. One was the girlfriend of his roommate in Quedlinburg, who gave birth to a child in the GDR, suggesting that the ANC (and the GDR) tolerated pregnancies of ANC members if they occurred during their training in Germany. Mohlala did not say whether it was possible for the young mother to complete her apprenticeship, but at least she was allowed to continue her temporary stay. The second instance was a comrade who, as in the

case of Cora in Hong’s example, was already pregnant when she came to the GDR. For her, however, staying was not an option. The only decision left to her was whether to return to a camp in Tanzania or Angola, the latter also being the conflict area Mohlala departed towards with a heavy heart in October 1988.

3.5 “Nobody Needed Me When I Got Back”: Return to Angolan Exile, the Namibia Agreement, and Camps on the Move

Mohlala’s return to Angola coincided with a particularly difficult period for the ANC. It was the time of the Namibia Agreement, when South Africa had finally signed the United Nations Security Council’s resolution 435 to end its state of war with Angola (Saeboe 2002: 186–189, Shubin 2008: 267–278; Saunders 2019: 352).³¹¹ The resolution had already been adopted in 1978, but South Africa, backed by the Western powers’ refusal to put any serious pressure on the apartheid state, had rejected signing it until 1988; anti-communism and SWAPO’s socialist orientation had served as an excuse here. As all South African and Cuban troops had to withdraw from Angola and South West Africa, the agreement paved the way for Namibia’s independence in 1990. But it also meant the withdrawal of the MK, consisting of a large number of exiles who—unlike the South African and Cuban soldiers—had no home country to return to, because the apartheid regime was still in power. Hence, Mohlala returned to a camp structure in Angola that was on the move, as he remembered: “People were preparing, some commanders and some units leaving for Mbarara.” A glance at a map gave me an idea of the distance he was actually talking about. A district in the southwestern part of Uganda, Mbarara was more than 3,000 kilometers away from Luanda as well as from Alexandra, the township where he had grown up. Saeboe writes that moving MK cadres from Angola to Uganda could be seen as tantamount to a worsening of their already difficult living conditions: “Upon arrival in Uganda the events that had taken place in Angola were repeated. The cadres were left in the bush to build dwellings. For some of them Uganda became a two-year bush camp with even worse conditions than in Angola” (2002: 190).

Mohlala’s narrative connects this situation of dissolving structures and uncertainties with his efforts to return to the GDR and reunite with his newly established family. Another historical event built into this part of the interview—one that allowed the ANC to see the light at the end of the tunnel and makes the MK’s

311 Saunders also stresses that South Africa’s occupation of Namibia’s main port continued until 1994 (2019: 354).

retreat appear as just one step back before moving two steps forward—is the release of Mandela in February 1990 and his subsequent visit to Zambia. The same month, the apartheid regime also lifted the ban on the ANC, the SACP and other important anti-apartheid groups such as the Pan African Congress. At a narrative level, these events seem to justify Mohlala’s growing detachment from the African continent and the ANC’s military structures, of which he had previously been a part.

“Nobody needed me when I got back” summarizes best what he told me about this period. It begins right at the Luanda airport where he and his comrade arrived. The ANC functionary there, responsible for receiving incoming cadre, was surprised by their arrival, given that no one had informed him about their return. To make the absurdity complete, at one point even the commander in chief, who had visited them in Quedlinburg and is drawn here by Mohlala as a benevolent, fatherlike figure, appeared and wondered why the two were not continuing their studies in East Germany. Looking for a meaningful job, Mohlala then started to assist in the clinic of the ANC’s transit camp: “I didn’t just want to sit and do nothing, [only] because I’m coming back from a school in the GDR and nobody knows about it. So, let me try to work in the clinic and help.” The way he recalled his practical work there provides more information about this specific camp and the people he cared for:

My job was to be called or get a list with the names of people who had to undergo medical check-ups and preparation, who had to be brought to a vaccination center. Some of them needed to be brought to a hospital for further examination. I was the one who did this job, bringing these people to the hospitals for vaccination or getting some lab results. For those who were going to Europe, a clinical picture had to be made. What about HIV? Are any tests necessary?³¹² And I brought them there. So I knew that they are going to this place, they are going to that place; they are going to the GDR, they are going to the Soviet Union. And there were those who were in poor health: we had some victims from the Angolan civil war. There was a period when the GDR and the Soviet Union were sending us experts or military trainers, arguing that they needed to save time and money. For further training, and to train future experts, we could send some people to the GDR and the Soviet Union. So, there were those who were prepared for the GDR or the Soviet Union.

Though all of these cadres were using pseudonyms, those who were going to be trained in the GDR in military combat work were more reserved and conspirative, he recalled; after their return, they did not report much and behaved like highly specialized military experts—not arrogant, but a little snooty. In Mohlala’s opinion, they even looked with a slight condescension at those who were trained in the Soviet Union. The latter would, he explained, lack discipline and one would

312 On the role of HIV, see Folland 2019.

not want to be trained by them. The returnees stayed only very briefly in Angola until they were quietly incorporated into the South African underground via Mozambique. Mohlala emphasized that the military trainees from the GDR were a kind of elite, an image further cultivated through their use of the German term *Genossen* instead of comrades.

3.5.1 Rereading Anna Seghers in Africa: In Transit to the GDR

While making these observations during his work in the camp in Angola—a transitory space by definition—Mohlala kept in touch with his girlfriend, mainly via letters, and did his best to find a way back to the GDR. In this context, an analogy emerges between his narrative and Anna Seghers’ novel *Transit*, a classic of German exile literature. Seghers, who later became a prominent intellectual in the GDR, wrote it in the early 1940s while in Mexican exile. Her semi-biographical novel narrates in a tragicomic way the grueling situation of refugees in Marseille, trying to escape the advancing German troops via the sea route to the Americas but trapped in a constant waiting state or limbo. To board a ship and reach a safe haven, Seghers’ refugees needed at least two different travel documents, such as a boarding card for the right vessel and a visa from the country a passenger sought to enter. Obtaining the visa often took so long that the only vessel available had already left; meanwhile, waiting for the next appropriate vessel often took so long that the visa, valid only for a given time, would have already expired. This vicious circle resulted in often grotesque scenes in the consulates’ waiting rooms in Marseille. In Mohlala’s narrative, it generated similar though less dramatic scenes at the ANC offices in Zambia, Angola and East Berlin—less dramatic in the sense that, as opposed to Seghers’ refugees, Mohlala’s life was not threatened by advancing troops.

Just like Seghers’ refugees, in Angola Mohlala needed more than one document to get out of the transitory space he was trapped in—a permission letter from the ANC to leave for the GDR and a flight ticket. Achieving both was complicated. First, Mohlala was fortunate to get an assignment to go to Zambia, where he attended a conference of the health department of the ANC and also witnessed a visit by Mandela. This gave him the chance to see a chief representative of the ANC, who was stationed in Angola but also attended the conference, as well as his brother, who was in Zambia at the time, too. Meanwhile, Mohlala’s girlfriend in Berlin had already sent a letter to this representative in which she expressed her will to marry Mohlala. Additionally, she put constant pressure on the ANC office in Berlin by asking if any news about his return had arrived. Mohlala, still in Zambia, even succeeded in buying a one-way ticket to Berlin with the help of a

comrade's East German wife, who worked at Interflug. The problem was that the ticket, just like the visas in Seghers' novel, was of limited validity and expired before he could organize the permission letter.

Now short of money, Mohlala talked to the representative about his problem. His answer evokes again the dilemma of Seghers' refugees, while illustrating once more the role of Scandinavian countries in the ANC's solidarity network: "Man, it's not a problem. Sweden has popped out pocket money for the health workers in Luanda. So, you're part of that. I will take a little bit and buy you a ticket to Berlin. But first you must get your permission here." In the military headquarters, Mohlala's commander was positive about his request. But when Mohlala went to the ANC office, he was told that—contrary to what the representative had just said about the Swedish money—"the ANC doesn't finance personal problems." It was only after he assured the ANC functionary that his brother was willing to buy him a flight ticket that the functionary finally agreed. The way Mohlala remembered the letter's receipt still reveals what it must have meant to him back then:

My letter arrived in Luanda in a diplomatic bag, so somebody from the residence had brought it to the transit camp. 'Hey, comrade Bango, here is a letter.' I opened the letter. Ja, permits me to leave for Berlin, GDR. So [a second] ticket was bought. The other one, which I had bought myself through this lady, had expired. I said okay, I will keep it as a souvenir. I will show it to my girlfriend and say this is what I did. I had tried to come, but things never worked out until these letters arrived.

3.6 Return to a Socialist Country in Full Capitalist Transition: Marriage and Job Search in East Berlin Aided by Almuth Berger

Mohlala came back to the GDR in April 1990. It had taken him 18 months to achieve this, and the baby he had had to leave behind in 1988 was now a toddler of almost two years. But, just as the ANC's exile structures in Angola were being disbanded in 1989, so were the GDR's national structures in 1990. And just like the South African exiles in Angola, who were facing an uncertain future, so were the East Germans, who were revolting against a communist regime which was one of the closest allies of the ANC. It was, thus, a paradoxical and confusing political situation Mohlala was returning to. Fortunately, he arrived during that brief historical moment of reformist spirit between the end of 1989—when the communist regime gave in to public pressure, commenced negotiations with the opposition and, in March 1990, was voted out in the GDR's first and last democratic elections—and October 1990,

when the GDR joined the FRG and ceased to exist as a nation state. He was even more lucky that, only a few weeks after his return, in May 1990, he was able to marry his girlfriend—who knows if it would have been that easy after reunification?

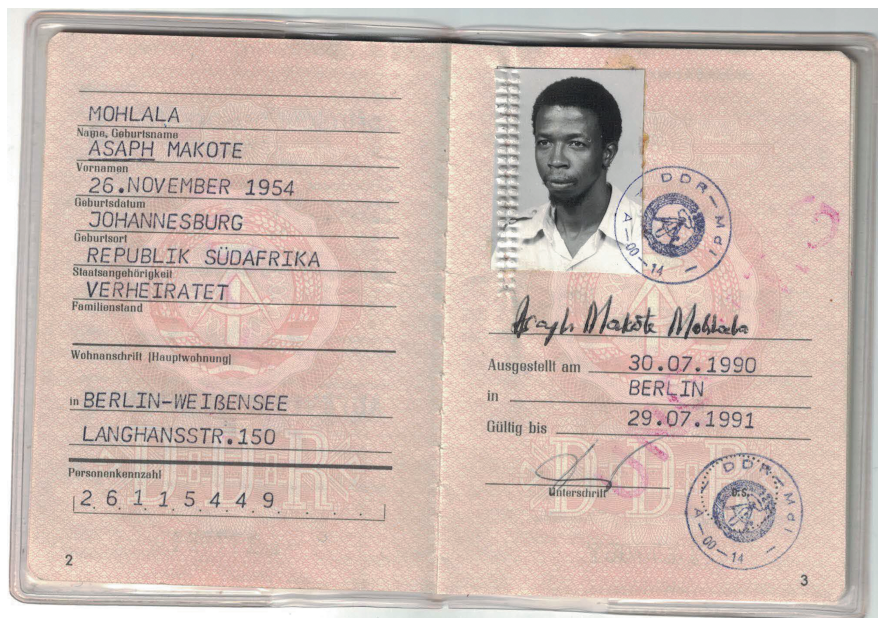


Fig. 24: Mohlala's *Fremdenpass* (GDR passport for foreigners, permission granted from A. Mohlala).

Mohlala still lacked a South African passport and had only an identification certificate from Zambia. His marriage provided him with a *Fremdenpass* and a residence permit for three years (fig. 24). The next task was to find a job. Given the social atmosphere of the time, with its rapidly increasing and virulent racism, I wondered what his experience was like during his search for a job. Mohlala surprised me by mentioning Almuth Berger, a prominent East German figure of the transition and post-reunification period, and the support she gave him. Berger is a Protestant theologian who participated in the late GDR's opposition and reform movements, raising political awareness about the precarious situation of and discrimination against foreigners; she had already started working with Mozambican labor migrants and confronting the increasing racism of the late GDR.³¹³ In 1990, the two last

³¹³ Berger also published on these topics as well (e.g. Berger 2011). For a biographical entry on Berger in a “Who Is Who” of the GDR, see Müller-Enbergs et al. 2010.

governments of the GDR appointed her as commissioner for foreigners, a position she held again, on a lower level, in the federal state of Brandenburg after reunification. The role that Berger played in Mohlala's search for his first job in Germany demonstrates the importance of her engagement but also the limits which social reality placed on it.

Mohlala had heard about Berger while he was applying for jobs and, thereafter, got into contact with her. She helped him by asking the chief physician from the *Königin-Elisabeth-Krankenhaus*, a hospital in East Berlin, if there was a suitable vacancy for him.³¹⁴ Then Mohlala successfully applied there for a job and began to work as a nurse in the internal medicine department. From what he told me, however, it is difficult to discern the exact reasons why his contract was not renewed after his first year. He said that the working atmosphere was really disagreeable and that he was mobbed by some of the nurses, because he did not have the same qualifications as them but received the same wage. At the end, the hospital's administration pointed to the restructuring process the hospital had undergone following reunification—it merged with another hospital—arguing that there were already too many integration measures of other personnel taking place. The only job they offered him at that point was disinfecting hospital beds. Although bureaucratic minds might view Mohlala's initial employment as generous or unjustified in terms of his formal qualifications, bed disinfection was the negation of everything he had learned and done so far professionally. That he subsequently found a job in a nursing home and worked in the eldercare sector for almost twenty years further indicates that it must have been other than professional reasons why his job contract was not renewed, given the two professions' many similarities. Even though he spoke only positively about the later job, working in eldercare was a step back, not only in terms of income but also of status and responsibilities. Moreover, Mohlala saying he was mobbed out of his first job reminded me of what C.B. had told me about a turning point in his own professional career.

3.6.1 Racist Workplace Experiences during Another ANC Exile

C.B. came to the GDR in 1982, when he was 25 years old. After attending an obligatory 6-month language course, he began an apprenticeship as an agricultural machinist. After half of it was over, he realized that it was not the right profession

³¹⁴ The hospital, situated in Berlin-Lichtenberg, changed its name in 1992 into *Evangelisches Krankenhaus Königin Elisabeth Herzberge*.

for him and that he would rather build, instead, upon his time in Tanzanian exile, where he had worked as an educator for children in the ANC’s Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College (SOMAFCO).³¹⁵ The GDR (and the ANC) fulfilled his wish, enabling him in the second half of the 1980s to study at Potsdam to become a primary school teacher. The only problem was that his internship took place during reunification, and when the children aged 6 to 10 that he had been previously teaching without any problems suddenly became more aggressive and started to insult him with racist remarks, he decided to quit his studies. Based on the assumption that Mohlala’s career as a hospital nurse might have ended at least partly for the same reasons as C.B.’s career as a teacher, I wonder what has been lost due to all the racism which accompanied German reunification: in C.B.’s case, a committed teacher who would have been the perfect role model of the kind that Germany’s post-migrant society so badly needs in its urban public schools; in Mohlala’s case, an experienced nurse who was used to working resourcefully under conditions as difficult as those in the ANC’s Angolan camps.

3.6.2 A Satisfying Job: Working in a Nursing Home in East Berlin

Mohlala’s remembrance of his second job in the nursing home, also situated in Weißensee and with him as the only Black there, is marked by the friendly relationships he maintained with some of the inhabitants and how much they liked him and his children, who sometimes visited their father at work. He told me of just two troublesome points. During the first ten years of working there, he was treated by some of his colleagues from “the old guard” as a standby worker, whose shift could be changed overnight. He did not articulate the possibility that he was treated like this for racist reasons; and, even if this would have been the case, it changed for the better after the older colleagues retired. As he explained, “after my tenth year of working there it really became nice.” The only other stressful moment he remembered was when the era of digitalization began, and he had to practice computerized (patient) record-keeping at home to keep up with. Beside these two points, however, what he told me about his work in the eldercare facility sounded to me like a very positive and fulfilling stage of his professional life—a successful career that had wondrously brought him from the

³¹⁵ SOMAFCO was an educational institution of the ANC in Tanzania, consisting of primary and secondary schools as well as a day-care center, established with the support of a large variety of foreign donors from all around the world. Its objective was to educate young exiles following the Soweto uprising as well as children of exiles (e.g. Morrow et al 2004).

medical section in the ANC's exile camps to a nursing home in Berlin Weißensee. It only ended a little too early, when he was in his mid-50s, because of an illness.

3.6.3 “For Me, It Was Really a Pity” or What does David Hasselhoff have to do with the ANC's Freedom Charter?

Despite this generally positive assessment of his work experience in reunified Germany, considering Mohlala's life until October 1990, it comes as no surprise that in his narrative the accession of the GDR to the FRG turned out to be disappointing:

For me, it was really a pity. But now, when the Germans, most from the East, were the ones who were looking for . . . like this song, *Looking for Freedom*. People were looking for this, you know, in a society you cannot do good and you cannot do right. There will always be this question of ‘good things are not done for us’ and this and that. But if people are ever really fair with themselves, we have seen these difficulties before that in another system—systems are different—you find yourself facing hard times.

In a way not unusual in Germany, to highlight a certain East German naivety during reunification, Mohlala refers here to the US-American actor and singer David Hasselhoff's famous live performance of the pop song *Looking for Freedom*.³¹⁶ Furthermore, he connects the growing frustration that many East Germans expressed regarding certain aspects of their country's capitalist transformation—including economic hardships and structural domination by West Germans—with the disappointment he was already feeling in 1990, when the majority of the East German electorate voted for the GDR's rapid accession to the FRG. He subsequently drew a comparison between his new and his old country by switching to the transition process undergone by South Africa,³¹⁷ with its ongoing economic problems and corruption, thereby creating a link between the “freedom” in Hasselhoff's song and “freedom” as defined by the ANC in 1955. In this vein, Mohlala reminded me that, in 2015, the year of our interview, the South African government was celebrating the 60th anniversary of the Freedom Charter, during which president Zuma—confronted with corruption allegations himself—emphasized

³¹⁶ Hasselhoff's live performance of the song in Berlin in front of a huge crowd after the opening of the wall in 1989 made it a popular anthem of German reunification, and the song is often used as a means to criticize negative aspects of this transformation.

³¹⁷ The comparison he makes between the East German and South African transition process is interesting because, contrary to Klaas Kunst (see p. 54, n. 49), Mohlala knows from personal experience about the historical links between the GDR and the ANC.

that the economic situation and the sharing of the country’s wealth still needs to be improved. Mohlala’s implicit message was clear: while life in reunified Germany brought some hardships for Easterners, their living conditions have still been much better than in South Africa, where the ANC, against the backdrop of the Soviet Union’s collapse and being put under pressure during the negotiated transition, committed itself to neoliberal capitalism in the 1990s (e.g. Habib/Padayachee 2000). “But now okay, I’m here. People have not learned how to see the outside world. I mean here, in East Germany, the people have not learned to see what is happening in life, what should be done or what should not be done.” This is an interesting statement insofar as Mohlala, though rather implicitly, turns his exile experience into a specific form of knowledge which helps him to deal with the ambiguous situation he has been confronted with since reunification.

3.7 Racism

At this point, I asked Mohlala about racist experiences, and he confirmed that, at least in this respect, former West Berlin is the much more relaxed place for him. While his African friends in the former Western part “are never looking at time,” he does: when he goes to a meeting of their *Verein* (association) Mayibuye, for example, the latest he would be out is until 9 pm. In contrast to Blacks who live in the city’s West, Mohlala feels uncomfortable when he returns to his home neighborhood too late and, for reasons of safety, uses his car when it is dark. These security measures are the price he has to pay to continue living in Weißensee, a formerly Eastern district. Partridge compares such mobility restrictions put upon Blacks, PoC or asylum claimants in East Germany since 1990—as well as many migrant workers’ forced return to their countries of origin—with the mobility or travel restrictions put upon East Germans before 1990, with the important difference that the latter restrictions “did not expose the less mobile subjects to imminent violence, as is now the case” (2009: 350).

Nevertheless, Weißensee has long become Mohlala’s home. He even joked in a typically Berlin way about the reactions of those living in other parts of the city when he tells them where he lives. “Many people say: ‘Weißensee, ja?’ I say hey, it’s a trip when you go there. Ja, it’s a trip. It’s a long ride, or distance [from more centrally located areas in Berlin]. But otherwise . . . so many years I’ve stayed here, so I haven’t been terribly troubled.” The only racism in the GDR he explicitly remembered as such began around 1988, when he started to visit his girlfriend in Berlin and regularly had to change the train for a tram at the railway station in Berlin-Lichtenberg, a district which soon turned into a racist hot-spot: “At that time it was starting, the writing on the walls here, *Ausländer raus* [foreigners

out] . . . it didn't fare me well to see such a thing. Or a shout: '*Ausländer raus!*' Or [imitating monkey sounds] 'Huhu, Huhu, Huhu'. What's all about this?" For Mohlala, the East German people really did change, and he still has no explanation for it. The only answer left to him is to be careful: "This is how I've tried to train myself, to see a thing that is not so easy, ja? It's not so easy."

3.8 Citizenship and Belonging

Against the backdrop of the GDR's close relationship with the ANC and the FRG's close relationship with the apartheid regime, it seems worthwhile to look more closely at how Mohlala brings up the question of citizenship and belonging in his narrative. To begin with, in 1976, when he went into exile and left the country without legal permission, he had no passport at all: "I was a schoolboy and, at that age and as a Black [person], I was not liable to have a passport without a reason."³¹⁸ In 1984, when he entered the GDR for the first time, he had a provisional travel certificate from Angola with a visa for the GDR, which expired after the end of his medical training in 1988 and his return to Angola. In 1990, when he entered the GDR the second time, he had a new travel certificate, this time from Zambia but, again, with a visa issued by the East German embassy in Angola. Marrying a citizen of the GDR in May 1990 provided him with a residence permit for three years, a time span reduced to only a year (July 1991) following German reunification, because "the new laws were now those of the Federal Republic of Germany." The German *Ausländerbehörde* (Immigration Authority), notorious for its often arbitrary practices with regard to status assignments and recognition of documents, demanded a second document confirming his identity beside his marriage certificate but rejected his Zambian travel document because it had already expired. The conundrums of Seghers' *Transit* narrative arise once again here. Consequently, Mohlala had to get his travel certificate renewed by the Zambian embassy. However, because of the political changes that had been taking place at the same time in South Africa, Mohlala was actually able to apply for a passport and, thus, citizenship from his home country via the South African embassy. Yet again, however, he needed another identity certificate for this bureaucratic act:

318 For South Africa's emigration policy during apartheid and its restrictive handling of passports or travel documents, see e.g. Shapiro 2016; for the apartheid-era Pass Laws, see e.g. Savage 1986. Until 1986, Africans from the age of 16 had to carry identity passes under threat of arrest; this internal passport system was implemented to restrict and control the Black populations' movement within the country. For reflection on South Africa's "denationalized" citizenship in the context of the anti-apartheid struggle and exile, see Klug 2000.

this time, an affidavit from his South African relatives. Moreover, exiles such as Mohlala or C.B., who were members of the MK and had been militarily trained, needed to fill out an application for (temporary) immunity, for they were considered as some sort of terrorists. Mohlala recalled in a particularly humorous way how he was finally invited to an interview at the embassy so that the responsible employee could assure himself about Mohlala's true South Africanness:

So, he took me into his office: 'Hi Mac, would you mind joining me for tea?' Yes, it's okay. 'With milk and sugar?' I said: You know, I've been in exile for so long, and the question of milk in my tea I have just done away with, but I drink it with sugar. And I don't want it strong, I want it weak. 'Would you like to have some biscuits?' Ja, I'll have some. 'Aha.' He really wanted to know who I am . . . okay, I played the game. 'Ek is'n Bure . . . but a nice Bure' [in an Afrikaner dialect: I'm a Boer . . . but a nice Boer.] Ah, that's good, that's great. 'Do you go to church?' No, I'm not a church goer. I left church some years back. 'Ah. Do you like Jesus?' Jesus? I don't know him. 'Aha, that's good. Do you know what, Mac? We will write a declaration that you are a South African. I have already noted you are a South African when you wanted your tea weak and without milk.' That was the point! I'm a South African [laughing]!³¹⁹

At the end of the 1990s, Mohlala—now in possession of a permanent residence permit from the FRG—asked at the Berlin civil registry service how to obtain German citizenship. He was told that he could apply for it but that he would also have to give up his South African citizenship, because both countries did not support dual citizenship. So he kept his South African citizenship. At the time of our conversation, however, one of his daughters had informed him that the South African side had changed its stance and that dual citizenship was now possible in certain cases. Mohlala then told me about his regular travels to South Africa and the annoying procedures he always has to undergo at the airports. Whereas the South Africans protract his entry because of the airport personnel's confusion about his permanent residence in Germany and his wife passing through different controls (for EU citizens), the Germans make his re-entry an unpleasant experience because of his Blackness:

Female immigration officers are more friendly than male ones, but recently this became better. Passports are now being checked in the first European airport that you enter, which means London, Paris, or Amsterdam. This has made my entry to Germany much more relaxed. Only customs is still giving me problems. I inform them about my wife and she says: 'That's my husband. Now what?' Then they let me go.

³¹⁹ Before Mohlala told this story to me, he had already told it to Thabo Thindi (*Exile Faces*, video interview Asaph Makote Mohlala, min. 27:00–28:00). Both versions are basically the same but differ in details, so I combined them here.

Hearing this, I could not but wonder why he holds on to his South African citizenship. One reason is because it serves as a bond between him and his relatives:

The thing is there are some traditions or the understanding of kinship. So, among South Africans, there is generally no understanding [of me giving up my South African citizenship]. If I would say: Okay, I'm now a citizen of Germany, a Black German, then my South African relatives would ask me, 'How can that be?' It's like 'You're moving away from us'. They'd interpret it as if I'm turning away from them. Only, I'm a . . . Black South African now. But Mohlala—you're coming from Mohlala, you keep your surname or family name, but . . . this means Black Mohlala. For my part, I'm not like that, but at some point it clicks. I still have a faith. I also can't explain that.

3.9 Visiting South Africans, Being a Black German, and Other Economic Issues

Following this insight into his diasporic identity, he told me about a trip he and his wife had taken during their last visit to South Africa, when his uncle led them to the burial ground of his ancestors. Nowadays a privately owned plantation where a white South African plants mango trees, the Mohlala's had been displaced from there long ago. It took his relatives a long time until "the Boer"—Mohlala uses this term exclusively—allowed them to search for the grave and place a tombstone on top of it. Initially, "the Boer" was unfriendly and aggressive but, in the meantime, facilitated by government policies that included a payment of compensation, he became more friendly even though he only speaks Afrikaans with them.

"It's nice being there . . . but when I'm out, I'm now a Black German," is how Mohlala summed up his travels to South Africa. Curiously, he repeatedly used the German declension for "Black German" in its feminine form (*eine schwarze Deutsche*), perhaps because he hears it so often from his daughters. His children and wife are also the main reason why he wants to be buried in Germany, another theme difficult to talk about with his South African kin. It is, therefore, important to him to familiarize his African relatives with his German family. His efforts towards maintaining family contact internationally even prompted one of his distant brothers and sister-in-law to visit them in Weißensee two times. Thanks to the double income Mohlala and his wife had back then, they were able to cover the costs for the flight tickets. A more unpleasant matter was the economic calculus imposed on these family reunions by the German state in the form of an official affidavit of financial support that their African guests needed for a Schengen (EU) visa that Mohlala and his wife had to sign at a German public authority.

Regarding economic issues, it is worth mentioning that having been a part of the organized South African exile system could bring small financial benefits as

well, but receiving them demands a South African bank account. Most of the South African exiles I interviewed mentioned having such an account—a financial arrangement which additionally binds them to their country of origin. Whereas Mohlala only told me about his demobilization from the military's medical sector—a procedure that brought him some ZAR 20,000 (around \$ 6,500 in the early 1990s), "a very lousy sum of money," of which he had to 'lend' a part to the functionary who gave it to him—C.B. and Jeannette Selby said that they still receive a small pension from the South African state. In this regard, post-apartheid South Africa seems to be acknowledging those who had been banished from its territory, participated in the struggle, and later decided not to resettle there again (figs. 25–28).



Fig. 25: The ANC in exile in the GDR: second and third sitting in the front row (l.-r.) are Arnold and Jeannette Selby, sixth and seventh are Oliver Tambo (on a visit to the GDR) and Anthony Mongalo, who served as the ANC's ambassador in the GDR at the time. The picture was taken in the 1980s at the ANC's mission in Pankow, East Berlin, by Eric Singh. This and the following three pictures from the 1980s were given to me by Stanford Moagi (permission granted); Asaph Mohlala is not in these pictures.



Figs. 26–28: Exiled ANC members together with a Palestinian student and their German teacher at a lake; together with other foreign students and East Germans at a skittles evening in Wernigerode; group picture showing them together with other foreign students and their German teachers. All pictures were taken during the same excursion in Wernigerode (permission granted from S. Moagi).

3.10 Conclusion

Mohlala's life story as a member of the ANC's armed wing, the MK, can be seen as an example of an African exile's biography in which the GDR appears to really be the stronghold of international solidarity that it claimed to be: a socialist space on the borders of Western Europe where, after years of privation, a Black South African of humble background could learn a civilian profession, start a family, return to the country, and settle down. But Mohlala's biography also reveals how much effort it took to reach this state. The kind of political exile he was involved in as well as the GDR's corresponding migration policies were not really meant for a permanent stay, so who knows what would have happened to him if the German reunification and the fall of South African apartheid had not taken place. Furthermore, his life story illustrates some of the ANC's inner workings as well as the organization's global connections from the perspective of a relatively low-ranking member. Meanwhile, his experiences also illuminate the MK's precarious position within Southern Africa and the role which the Eastern bloc played in supporting it, with Mohlala traveling from South Africa to Tanzania, the Soviet Union, Angola, Denmark and Zambia, making his way to the GDR, with war-torn Angola as the postcolonial space he repeatedly had to return to before eventually making the GDR and, later, a reunified Germany his home.

On the other hand, Mohlala's memories of Quedlinburg, where the GDR had established one of its centers for the training of foreign students in the medical sector, can enrich and challenge existing scholarly accounts. What becomes obvious from Mohlala's account, for instance, is the important role which his political organization, the ANC, played for its members being trained in the GDR. Although Mohlala's memories also point towards some interesting differences between the ANC and SWAPO regarding their respective member's behavior in exile, his membership in the ANC offered him a relatively safe space within the GDR—never free of tensions or ambiguities and disciplinary by definition but, nevertheless, a space in which it was possible for him to meet his East German wife through interaction between the ANC and the FDJ. Read together with Young-sun Hong's findings about the training of foreign students in Quedlinburg during the 1960s and 1970s, Mohlala's biography also demonstrates that, throughout the whole training program's existence, it was possible for African men to establish romantic relationships with East German women. However, the question remains of how to reconcile Mohlala's memories with some of Hong's more critical findings. First, beside relying exclusively on archival sources, Hong covers only the period before the 1980s. It is, thus, likely that her account misses the improvements in the medical training program that occurred, which seem to have led to a higher level of contentment for the students. Second, as a member of the ANC, Mohlala

benefitted from the close relationship between his political organization and the GDR and was able to build on a social network that facilitated his stay there, a dimension which Hong's account does not include.

Ultimately, however, Mohlala's narrative does reveal a certain tendency to downplay the GDR's authoritarian characteristics. For instance, when he talked about the difficulties he and his comrades faced to practice German with native German speakers in their leisure time, he did not question the GDR's practice of separating them from their German peers. The same holds for the restrictions put upon their ability to travel by train or that there was no official body on the East German side—at least none he knew about—which might have helped him to stay with his German girlfriend and newborn child in Berlin, instead of being sent back to Angola by the MK. Yet, by and large, all of this changes little or nothing in the apparently positive impact which the GDR had on his life in exile, which would also seem to explain Mohlala's critical view of the GDR's demise and the ensuing German reunification.

Though my interest in African exile began much earlier, I only learned about Mohlala through watching his interview in *Exile Faces* in 2014, at a time of increasing German media interest in migration from Africa to Europe. Building on a statement made by Thabo Thindi—one of the creators of *Exile Faces*—in the following epilogue I reintroduce Mahoma Mwaungulu and Jeannette Selby—the South African exile whom Jana Simon portrayed as the grandmother of Felix S.—and reconnect to my introductory chapter by reflecting on the self-ascriptions of African exiles and the inherent tensions between the figure of the exile and that of the refugee.