

The five ordinary but extraordinary women

Photos courtesy of National Archives

Priskila Tuhadeleni - harassed and beaten up

Priskila Tuhadeleni (born 1925) worked at the Finnish mission and met her husband, Eliaser Tuhadeleni there. He was 'obsessed with politics' and was detained often. For nine months (1965-6), Priskila looked after the first Swapo combatants at their homestead. They escaped a police raid and set up camp at Omugulugwoombashe.

When they were attacked on 26 August 1966, the fighters retreated. They retaliated by attacking the Oshikango border post but were eventually captured. Priskila sent her children to stay with different relatives but the police came and beat her up. She was six months' pregnant and she miscarried. She had to bring up her other children under constant police harassment and in poverty, while her husband was imprisoned on Robben Island.

Today, she looks after many young relatives and other children who are drawn by the history of this family, but it puts a severe strain on her meagre resources.



Lahja Ndawedha Iyambo - cannot forget the memory of suffering

Lahja Ndawedha Iyambo (born 1924) came from a political family. She raised her brothers after their mother died, including Yalombweleni Patrick 'Lungada' Iyambo, a Swapo combatant who returned in 1965.

That year, Meme Lahja's husband Thimoteus haMarkus died of malaria. She helped Lungada, but she and her family were questioned, beaten by the police and tortured; her brother Ushona was killed.

Lungada hid in the forest and Meme Lahja took him food each day, wrapped in a cloth tied under her loose dress. He crossed back into exile in 1974 but died soon after Independence.

Meme Lahja struggled to look after her family. She could not pay school fees for the children. She received no help, although Lungada is considered a national hero. 'We have made peace with the past,' she says, 'but we cannot forget the memory of our suffering ... [and] we still live in poverty.'





Justina Amwaalwa - gave birth in prison

Justina Amwaalwa (born 1931) worked in a mission kitchen and married Swapo organiser, Johannes Amwaalwa. While he was away on contract, Immanuel Shifidi arrived, needing somewhere to hide. Meme Justina looked after him. When he left, he gave a bag of bullets to her. He was betrayed, however, and captured. The police came to the homestead asking for the bullets.

Meme Justina and her husband were taken away by helicopter, and flown to Pretoria to be witnesses in the Terrorism Trial. She was pregnant and gave birth to a son while in prison. At the trial, she showed great skill in not giving away information about Swapo.

When they were released and returned home, the local headman did not support the Amwaalwas. They had to move to another area, where they continued to give support to Swapo combatants and where Meme Justina acquired the nickname 'Mother of Swapo'.



Drothea Nikodemus - in detention in Pretoria

Drothea Nikodemus (1927-2003) was a church youth leader and sister of Immanuel Shifidi, one of the first Swapo combatants. She provided food and shelter for Swapo fighters until the South African police raided her homestead and set it on fire. Meme Drothea was dragged away from her small children, one of whom was still being breastfed, and imprisoned.

She was subjected to a mock execution, held in solitary confinement, then chained and taken to Pretoria. When she was released over a year after her detention, she had to walk 30 km home; but her husband had taken another woman as his wife, and he rejected her. She struggled to survive thereafter. 'Now that the country is free and I am old, I have no security,' she told Namhila.



Aili Andreas litula – her inner spirit badly wounded

Aili Andreas litula (born 1940) was a primary school teacher. She married Ushona Eliaser Iyambo but saw little of him as he was a contract worker. She helped his brother Patrick Lungada Iyambo when he returned in 1965, giving him food and nursing him after an injury in battle.

In 1968, police and military attacked their homestead and burnt it down. They killed Ushona, believing him to be Lungada. Meme Aili returned to live with her parents but was harassed and interrogated by the police and became ill. Over time, she got better and married again.

'I consider myself lucky to have survived the tragedy,' she says, 'but my inner spirit was badly wounded. These wounds cut so deep that my inner spirit will take a lifetime to recover.'