

Lucia Raadschelders: Dutch heroine who fought for SA freedom 1954-2018

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Lucia Raadschelders with Nelson

Mandela.

Lucia Raadschelders, who has died in Johannesburg at the age of 64, ran safe houses for the ANC in Swaziland and played a key role in Operation Vula, a top-secret Umkhonto we Sizwe mission to infiltrate leaders and weapons into SA and prepare the ground for a possible overthrow of the apartheid government.

The youngest of 10 children born to a baker in the Netherlands in June 1954, she trained as a teacher and lived in a squat in Amsterdam while working for the Dutch anti-apartheid movement from 1979 to 1986.

When Conny Braam, the chair of the Dutch anti-apartheid movement, asked her to run safe houses for the ANC underground in Swaziland, she jumped at the opportunity.

A marriage for anonymity

The first step was to get rid of her surname, which she thought was too recognisable. She approached her neighbour, a final-year medical student, who agreed to marry her so she could take his name. Armed with a new surname (Van der Meer), contact lenses, and a perm, she flew to Swaziland on a tourist visa in October 1986.

Her first task was to learn how to drive. The day she got her licence she was given her first mission for the ANC, which was to drive a car to a parking lot and leave it there with the keys hidden underneath it.

She rented a house in Mbabane and was soon sent the first of a number of ANC underground cadres who needed safe houses. She worked in a restaurant and an office by day and ran errands for the ANC at night and on weekends, mainly fetching comrades at the border when they crossed from SA.

Whenever her commander felt the security of a house had expired, every four months or so, she'd rent another.

When the 'Boers' found out

Fears about security proved all too real when her first ANC commander, Ebrahim Ismail Ebrahim, was abducted from his home by South African security forces three months after her arrival. He was taken to SA, found guilty of treason and sentenced to

20 years on Robben Island. He was released in 1991 and became deputy minister of international relations in 2009.

In June 1988, after cadres she'd sheltered were arrested in SA, she was warned that the "Boers" knew about her, and she flew back to the Netherlands.

In October 1988, Mac Maharaj's wife Zarina, who ran the communications system in Lusaka for Operation Vula, was involved in a serious accident. There was an urgent need for someone to take her place.

Braam recommended Raadschelders, who was then recruited by Ivan Pillay.

She was sent to London, where Tim Jenkin, who had developed the computer-based communications system Operation Vula used, taught her how it worked. She had never used a computer.

Then she flew to Lusaka to meet Pillay. He took her to a house in a township on the outskirts of the capital where she was the only white person. She stayed there pretty much round the clock for two-and-a-half years, sending and receiving the messages that were the lifeblood of Operation Vula.

Decryption technology

Encrypted messages came to her from Maharaj and later Nelson Mandela in SA via Jenkin in London. Jenkin would decode the messages he received, re-encipher them and send them to Raadschelders (then known only by her ANC codename, Mary van Zyl). Using special decryption technology she would decipher and print out the messages, which would be collected every day by Pillay and taken to Oliver Tambo and Joe Slovo.

After conferring with them, Pillay would prepare responses, which he'd take to Raadschelders. She would encipher them and send them to London, where they would be decoded, re-enciphered and sent to SA.

The messages contained vital information about who was going to be infiltrated into SA through the Vula network, when and how, and discussed the practical arrangements for whatever else was being planned.

Along with Tambo, Maharaj, Slovo and Pillay, Raadschelders knew more than anyone about what was happening in the underground movement in SA.

No social life

It was a desperately lonely and frugal time for her, though. She had practically no social life and no visitors apart from Pillay and occasionally Slovo.

Every now and then, Tambo would send one of his drivers to fetch her for a brief meeting in his office.

The rest of the time, she sat in a small room all day for 30 months, sending and receiving messages. She had no TV and subsisted on the meagre "pocket money" the ANC gave her and food parcels Pillay would drop off. For security concerns, she was not allowed to do her own shopping.

Vula was blown in June 1990 after two operatives were arrested in SA, tortured, killed and thrown in the Tugela River. Maharaj was arrested a month later.

Raadschelders continued relaying messages between the remaining operatives in SA and the leadership in Lusaka until mid-1991, when Vula was finally wrapped up.

After a brief stay in the Netherlands, she moved to SA in 1993, working for The Atlantic Philanthropies and as a photo archivist for the Nelson Mandela Foundation. Her marriage of convenience to her medical-student neighbour ended when he married someone else soon after she arrived in Swaziland. She never married again or had children.

A smoker who also had asbestosis, she was diagnosed with lung cancer two-and-a-half years ago.

Kids' 'consensual sex' rape fury

Authorities say they can't say if they know if parents in US agreed to have sex

A 12-year-old girl in the United States has been charged with rape after allegedly having sex with a 15-year-old boy, according to authorities. The girl's parents are accused of allowing the relationship to continue.



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Big 10 STORY

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FAN FANCA DRESS
 A young girl in a colorful costume with a mask, possibly at a festival or event.

Metro cops slammed over festival chaos

Metro police have been slammed for their handling of a festival, with critics saying they were overwhelmed and unprepared for the large crowds.

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BROWNS

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In spite of the party's...



Mendi Msimang, ANC member...

Mendi Msimang was a prominent figure in the ANC, known for his behind-the-scenes influence and leadership.

Msimang's role in the ANC was significant, particularly in the early years of the party's struggle for freedom.

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Lucka Raab holders: Dutch heroine who fought for SA freedom 1951-2018

Lucka Raab was a Dutch heroine who fought for South African freedom during the apartheid era.



Raab's contributions to the anti-apartheid struggle were significant and widely recognized.

Her legacy is remembered as a symbol of courage and resistance against oppression.