

19 Interview with Rose Ntshoko

Steff Rohrbach

Rose Ntshoko is the daughter of the South-African/Swiss jazz drummer Makaya Ntshoko. This interview was conducted on 2 May 2024 at her home in Riehen on the outskirts of Basel. Her father died in Basel just under four months later, on 27 August 2024.

Steff Rohrbach: *Rose, when and where were you born?*

Rose Ntshoko: In 1965, but the fact that I was born in Charlottenburg in Berlin is more or less a coincidence, because my father was on tour there, and my mother had gone with him.

SR: *On tour with Dollar Brand?*

RN: I don't know, but it could have been, because we then went to Copenhagen and Sweden – and that had to do with Dollar. It was also a time when my mother was often annoyed because we hardly ever made any money. Sometimes she even had to look for potatoes out in the countryside to try and help us get by. Of course, that was the worst time. Our salvation came when a family in Berlin took us in.¹ My mother helped them with the housework and we were given board and lodging in return. My parents didn't get married until after I was born, so my surname was officially Gyger. And because my mother was single, I had to be given a legal guardian – that was the case in Berlin at that time. My parents had to get married so that they could leave Germany with me, though there were additional difficulties because my father didn't have any proper papers back then ...

SR: *He was probably stateless, like other South Africans who were abroad at the time.*

RN: I recently found a certified copy, dated 9 August 1965, of an old passport that had been issued by the Department of Home Affairs in Pretoria, presumably for the tour of England with Dollar Brand.

SR: *... that doesn't seem likely, since Dollar seems to have come to Switzerland directly from South Africa. But the musical King Kong was exported to London in 1961. It was apparently on tour in South Africa for around two years before that, sweeping through the country like a storm.*

¹ According to Ursula Ntshoko-Gyger's biography, the family of three lived in Berlin/Charlottenburg in 1965 c/o Giese on Westfälische Strasse 41, then in 1965/66 in Copenhagen, Sweden and Zurich, from 1966 to 1970 on the Gartenstrasse in Binningen c/o the Dörrig family, then from 1971 to 1978 at Holeerain 24 in Binningen, from 1979 to 1981 in Basel at Burgfelderstrasse 30, and from 1981 to 1988 at Thiersteinallee 73, also in Basel. Binningen is de facto a suburb of the city of Basel.

Makaya told me that King Kong, which had an almost entirely Black cast, had been invited to London thanks to its great success in South Africa, and that this was the only reason why they had been given passports in the first place.

RN: I think a lawyer in Berlin then wangled things a bit with my parents' papers so that they could get married. When they later divorced, my mother asked me what I'd prefer: whether she should keep the name Ntshoko, or go back to being called Gyger, as she was before the marriage. Since I was already called "Ntshoko", it would have seemed strange to be called Rose Gyger suddenly. Later, I wouldn't have cared about it. But today, as the last Ntshoko in Switzerland, I'm actually proud of my surname.



Figure 19.1. Makaya Ntshoko and Rose in Charlottenburg, Berlin, 1965. Courtesy of Rose Ntshoko.

SR: *You came to Switzerland after Copenhagen and Sweden – but when was that?*

RN: It wasn't long after, maybe a year, maybe two, I don't know exactly. I can check it up using photos: We were still in Sweden in 1966, but then there's a picture that was taken in Binningen near Basel. So we were back in Switzerland after about a year. We lived on the Gartenstrasse in Binningen, in a very cosy little two-room house ...

SR: ... *you remember that?*

RN: Yes, because we stayed there for a few years, roughly until I started primary school. I remember the owners of the house, and the pretty little garden where my mother said to the local priest: "Look, if I want to talk to God, I can sit here in the garden and don't have to come

to church". These are memories that have stayed with me – including trips to Mariastein.² My father was around for quite a while back then. But it wasn't a good time for my parents. Fortunately, we had nice neighbours, and Binningen became my real home. I enjoyed a good upbringing in an idyllic place with a village atmosphere, where people looked out for each other.

SR: *When did your parents get divorced?*

SN: That was in 1977.

SR: *So your mother stayed with Makaya for quite a long time, which suggests that they had good times too.*

RN: I'm sure there were, but she had a really tough time.

SR: *Did you do an apprenticeship?*

RN: No – my last year at school was bad. I was tired of it and got a teacher I didn't like at all. She acted like an army officer's wife and tormented me. I turned off and "went bad". When her mother died, I listed extra professions in my career studies class like "undertaker" and "corpse washer". She threw me out. But because she didn't want to give me any marks or issue me with a leaving certificate, the school authorities got involved. They included the sister of the researcher Elisabeth Kübler-Ross,³ with whom I'm sure you're familiar. She intervened and wanted to get to know me, despite my teacher cursing me, and invited me to her home for coffee and cake. She was very sweet and wanted to know what had happened. I told her my version.



Figure 19.2. Makaya Ntshoko and Rose in Binningen, 1969. Courtesy of Rose Ntshoko.

² A Catholic monastery some eight miles from Binningen.

³ Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1926–2004), a Swiss-born American psychiatrist famous for her model of the "five stages of grief".

SR: *That must have been in around 1981/82?*

RN: I was 16 or 17. I had a nice afternoon, and I was given a report card based on my most recent grades, which weren't too bad. But I didn't know what I wanted to do after school. Earning some money was the obvious choice, so I worked in a jeans shop in Steinenvorstadt.⁴ One day, someone came in, saw me and asked: "Hi Pumpi, where are you?"

SR: *Pumpi?*⁵

RN: My boss said that just wasn't on – though up until then, everyone had called me that. My mother called me "Pumpeli". My name, given to me by my father, is actually "Mbumbulwana", which was my grandmother's first name. But of course nobody could pronounce it, so it became "Mbumbi". But on my ID card my name is "Rose", which is the name my mother had wanted for me. My boss called me Rosie, and I later finally decided on Rose ... Anyway, after my time as a shop assistant, I spent four years in administration in the graphics department of the Coop newspaper. Then I went to commercial college in the evenings, but gave up after about six months and afterwards worked for four years in personnel administration at the department store chain ABM – doing bookkeeping, cashing up and everything. I really enjoyed it, except for having to work on Saturdays after going out on a Friday evening. I later completed commercial college after all, doing an intensive course for a year, full-time. My mother advised me to go to a job placement office and I took her advice. "What would you like to do?" a lady asked me. "Something like you!", I replied – and that's how it turned out for a few years. First I was busy placing jobseekers in manual and technical professions, then afterwards in commercial jobs. Eventually, I set up my own business, finding permanent jobs for commercial and technical staff and managers.

Slowly, however, my health got in the way. I was also dating someone for a long time, a long-distance lorry driver, and he wanted to emigrate to Canada. I would have been up for it, but I suggested that we should first go there on holiday and have a look around. One day, however, he disappeared off to Calgary to work illegally, which I only found out about through his employer. But just like in Switzerland, after three months they checked on him and he had to come back. I had heard about that and knew that he was working as a long-distance lorry driver again, so I waited at the customs post for him for days, even through the night, it was quite crazy. I eventually found him there. We got together again, but something was broken for good.

My flat was too big and too expensive, and my health wasn't good. I had severe back pain, and besides being self-employed, I was also working as a caretaker and part-time in a cannabis shop. In short, it was all getting too much. During a holiday in Greece I developed an eye infection, but I didn't want to go to the doctor there. Back in Switzerland, an antibiotic had to be injected directly into my eye and it became clear that something was wrong with my body. After a long time, they finally found out that I had Crohn's disease – all of this came on at almost the same time. I had to stop working. My doctor then wanted to certify me as 50-percent fit for work again and I had to go to the job placement office because I wanted to

⁴ A shopping and entertainment street in Basel where several cinemas used to be located.

⁵ In Swiss-German, "Pumpi" is a generic schoolyard insult.

sign in for the other 50 percent. I was referred to the disability forum, where I was sent to a rheumatologist, and I also had a paralysed shoulder. All of this went on for seven years, and social services also got involved.

I was lucky that there was a bakery opposite my flat that was run by a Tamil couple who always asked me for advice in administrative matters. I used to draw up order and delivery notes for them and helped them more and more, working too much again and showing everything to their daughter, who was supposed to take over these tasks. Then came my back operation, I had problems walking, and then I had to get a new flat because living on the fourth floor without a lift was no longer an option. I found a very basic, affordable, ground-floor flat with a backyard on the Inselstrasse that was fit to be redecorated. We stayed there for seven years, then our tenancy contract was cancelled and the house was sold off to speculators. It was really difficult to find a new flat, but I was lucky and had really good help from a property manager. I've been here in Riehen for ten years now, and have been able to reorganise things and catch up on what I'd previously rather neglected.

SR: *Have you been musically active?*

RN: Well, I used to be in various youth bands and choirs. Later, I responded to an advert from Chester Gill when he was looking for people for the musical *Godspell* in Basel. After that, I also took part in his musical *The Picture*, which went on stage in 2000. We actually hoped to continue on a professional basis, but that fell through because of the money. I wanted to organise my professional life in such a way that I'd have been able to take part. Instead, I joined a blues rock group and also sang in the Chester Gill Memorial Choir – which I've joined again. In 2007 I founded the "Voicetale mixed choir Basel", of which I became the chairperson. Music is actually my world, and it's helped me through the biggest crises.

SR: *Did Makaya tell you anything about South Africa, perhaps about how he grew up?*

RN: He always kept it secret and didn't tell me much about it ... I don't think he was able to talk about it.

SR: *... not even how he came to the drums?*

RN: Not even about that – and he didn't want me to go to South Africa either. He was very much against it, and didn't like it at all when he heard that I was going to go anyway. It's only now that he's beginning to realise that it was actually a good thing that I went.

SR: *Do you know anything about his parents and grandparents?*

RN: His father, my grandfather, mended bicycles and played the church organ. My grandmother was just "Mama". An aunt showed me the township where the family used to live, also the site of their house, though it's no longer there.

SR: *When were you in Cape Town?*

RN: I was there in 2012 with my partner, plus a girlfriend of mine and her husband. I kept

hearing from my father that you weren't allowed to sit on a bench as a Black person under apartheid. So it was negative stuff, which is why for a long time I wasn't particularly interested in the country. That trip came about as follows. I was looking for a subject for a tattoo, something that would be appropriate to me and my roots. I went on holiday to Crete, as I had done many times before. There I met a stewardess who raved about South Africa, just like a colleague of mine. She said she went to South Africa every year, on her own, and even as a single woman she never had any problems. And she told me how beautiful it was in Cape Town. That convinced me. My doctor also recommended the trip, and I had a good friend who ran a hotel in Cape Town. We rented a campervan for three weeks and also stayed in bed and breakfast places on the way so we could also have a shower. I'd organised everything from here. We planned the route all the way down the country, but couldn't do everything because of the weather. But Hermanus is so beautiful – and that was where I heard whales singing for the first time in my life. Hermanus is very clean – but that also means that a lot of white people live there, which also has its disadvantages. I didn't find Stellenbosch pleasant at all – the beautiful white church, everything well maintained, and our landlady at the bed-and-breakfast place wanted us out of our room at ten o'clock sharp. She only had religious (almost sect-like) programmes running on her TV, and she couldn't believe that I, a Black woman, had organised our whole trip. On our first weekend, we went to a gospel service in Cape Town, but to my utter astonishment everyone there was white.



Figure 19.3. Rose and Makaya Ntshoko at the latter's 75th birthday event at the Bird's Eye jazz club in Basel, 2014. Courtesy of Rose Ntshoko.

SR: *Then you met one of Makaya's sisters?*

RN: One of them, yes. Both aunts live in the township, and a female cousin of mine accompanied us there. I had made contact via Facebook. My aunts had once sent me a postcard when I was a small child, and I'd always kept it. At first we didn't want to go "people watching" in the township, but my cousin, who knew her way around, said we absolutely had to go there.

SR: *How many siblings does Makaya have?*

RN: Nine. My father grew up in the township of Langa, a neighbourhood of Cape Town, and one of my cousins took us to the Langa Methodist Church. That's where things got really exciting. The "sisters" there were dressed in red and played music with a kind of "slapping cushion".⁶ They were so impressed to meet Makaya Ntshoko's daughter, who was also the grandchild of their former organist. And the organ is actually still there in that Methodist church. You can't quite get to it, because it's kind of packed away on account of being broken, and there's probably not enough money to renovate it. It made me very emotional, and even the music on the street immediately brought tears to my eyes, it touched something deep inside me. The people there still believe in the ancestors. My father once advised me that if I had problems, I just had to talk to my grandmother and she'd help me. That seemed a bit difficult to me, as I'd never met her. But then my aunt took me by the hand and walked with me through the township, showing me everything including the cemetery and my grandparents' grave. There I experienced the ritual of calling the ancestors. I had come this far, they said, and that it was important that I should be protected. My aunt gave me a herb in a jar, which turned out to be sage when I got back home to Switzerland and opened it. It was a very impressive, beautiful experience.

SR: *Have you been in contact with your relatives since then?*

RN: Yes, with the one cousin or another. We write to each other sometimes. A male cousin of mine has also got in touch; he too is a drummer.

Apollo (Anthoney) Fikile is another cousin. He visited here once. He's a really dedicated musician and an actor and stayed with my father for a while. There's another cousin I like, Thuso Sebape. I have a wonderful video with him and my aunt who used to be a singing teacher. Neither of us knew that we would meet up that day. I was already crying, and when she heard I was outside the door, she came out crying too – and we fell into each other's arms. It wasn't until we were back home in Basel that I received this wonderful video "Saphela ..." from Thuso – you can also see it on YouTube.⁷

SR: *So you don't know how Makaya got into the drums? He was already close to music through his father, who played the church organ.*

⁶ This is a custom found especially in the coloured churches of the Western Cape, where members of the congregation clap on leather cushions to create a percussive accompaniment to their singing. See Marie Jorritsma: *Sonic Spaces of the Karoo*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011, 48–49.

⁷ See www.youtube.com/watch?v=BAqIHyy1dOU (accessed November 2024).



Figure 19.4. Rose and Makaya Ntshoko at the Senevita retirement home in Basel in 2015. Courtesy of Rose Ntshoko.

RN: That's an interesting question – I'll have to ask him ...

SR: *Maybe in his old age he might be a little more receptive and would open up to you. You might still learn a few things from him ...*

RN: ... that's true, but unfortunately we rarely had the kind of close father-daughter relationship that we should have had. I would have loved to learn the drums from him. I had a few lessons with him, and he even gave me a Mapex drum set once. But I had to sell it due to lack of space and money. I regret that very much today. I'll also never forget how he once helped me to understand the Etta James song "Damn Your Eyes" better and to sing it more truthfully.

SR: *But you did have contact with him, didn't you?*

RN: Once or twice a year, on my birthday and at Christmas or thereabouts. But otherwise hardly ever. I also had half-siblings, and I'd have liked to get to know them too.

SR: *Makaya had other children?*

RN: Yes, two. After the divorce from my mother, he soon had a new relationship that resulted in a boy and a girl, Saba and Makaya. But, not surprisingly, they had the same conflicts as we did with my father. I would have loved to have been the big sister of my two half-siblings – but we didn't get the chance.

SR: *Makaya also boxed. Did he tell you about it?*

RN: An acquaintance once told me that my father was also known in boxing. I did some research on the Internet and found a report on him from the boxing club in Basel ...

SR: *... so he also boxed in Switzerland?*

RN: Yes, I think he was a flyweight champion once, though I don't know whether that was in

South Africa or Switzerland. In any case, he was visiting somewhere in connection with boxing and they recognised him.⁸ He also did aikido – yes, he was tough! It's also evident now. He's not doing "physio", he's in training! [After his recent hospital stay] he was able to recover within a short time, also thanks to his ambition. He wants to cycle again, that's his big goal. A nurse jokingly said: "probably with training wheels" – but no, no, not at all!

SR: *Makaya once belonged to the house rhythm section in Copenhagen, in Berlin and in Munich's "Domicile"⁹ together with the Swiss bassist Isla Eckinger...*

RN: ... the name rings a bell. But like many of the things he experienced, I have no idea about that. It must have been after the divorce. By the way: I still have to sift through and organise all my father's documents. He collected everything, and there's still a lot of his e-mail correspondence. It's a shame that I don't have access to his laptop. Maybe I'll find the right one among my father's many passwords – or get help from a specialist.

SR: ... *did Makaya really learn to work with electronic messages?*

RN: Yes, for a while he had an expensive device, but had to have it repaired many times and it was always the device's fault ... It was nice, though he was in an old people's home in between and that didn't suit him at all. He took his notebook along with him, but it wasn't working any more. That was one reason for him to get out of the home several times. Another time it was because he had to have his mobile phone repaired. Whenever a nurse came into the room, he seemed very busy on his laptop, saying he had to write back to his manager and that everyone was always contacting him and looking for him – though he didn't even have his password any more...

⁸ See www.swissboxing.ch/de/news/15 about an exhibition of boxing photographs at a private boxing museum in Basel: "Numerous guests from all over Switzerland came to honour the museum ... Among them were the Bernese legends Hans-Rudolf Bauder, Fritz König, Peter Häfeli and his wife, the former South African lightweight champion and professional drummer Makaya Ntshoko and many others ..." (accessed November 2024).

⁹ Makaya was the house drummer at the "Montmartre" club in Copenhagen in the 1960s, at the "Domicile" in Munich and at the "Jazz Jamboree" in Berlin in the 1970s.

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