

## **‘Stories That Find their Place’: Retelling the Protest at Brandfort, 1901-1949<sup>1</sup>**

'The historical roots [of a singular nationhood] are precisely the stories that find their place in a coherent structure that is capable of shaping all narratives that had been or will be told'.<sup>2</sup>

### **Introduction**

On 8 November 1901, a group of women inhabitants of Brandfort concentration camp, established by the British military in March 1901 during the course of the South African War, gathered to complain to the camp superintendent, Mr. Jacobs, about the meat ration, which they regarded as insufficient and of poor quality. When Mr. Jacobs informed them that, owing to wartime conditions, he was unable to procure better meat and instructed them to return to their tents, the protest apparently became overtly political, with the women involved waving the old Free State flag and singing the anthems of the Boer Republics. Violence of an unspecified kind broke out and the camp police were called to restrain the women. The leader of the protest in some accounts, Maria Magdalena Els (variously referred to as Mimmie/Minnie), along with another woman, Isabella Viviers, were both subsequently arrested and jailed for their part in the demonstration, with this reflected in official camp records.<sup>3</sup>

Maria Els herself subsequently wrote three separate accounts of the Brandfort protest, and the incident features in the testimonies of five other women who had been inhabitants of Brandfort camp. The focus here is not the ‘event itself’, which cannot now be recovered except in its archival or documentary forms, but on the subsequent re/telling of this incident, and on the politicised, (proto-) nationalist content and tone of the Brandfort protest testimonies. These testimonies repeated stories that, as Schleifman suggests (in a very different context) ‘found their place’ in an emergent framework of proto-nationalism, which depended in part on the construction of a shared past. If nationalism depends on the perception of a shared past and a common history, it is partly through the re/telling of such

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<sup>2</sup> N. Schleifman, ‘Moscow’s Victory Park: A Monumental Change’, *History and Memory*, 13, 2 (2001), 29.

<sup>3</sup> Springfontein Register of Residents, SRC 76, f. 327, Free State Archives Repository.

stories about this past that national unity is achieved. As Elizabeth Van Heyningen has argued, testimonies of the concentration camps of the South African war played a crucial role in shaping Afrikaner nationalist historiography, and 'In the wake of the huge mortality of over 25,000 people, mainly women and children, Afrikaners established a mythology of suffering that fed into emerging Afrikaner nationalism'.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, the South African War and especially its concentration camps, were central to the construction of a shared and useable Afrikaner past, a construction project in which women cultural entrepreneurs were centrally involved.<sup>5</sup>

In what follows, I trace the story of the Brandfort protest and its re/telling over time as indicative of a wider pattern across women's accounts of the war and camps: gradually, tales of the Brandfort protest became universalised and re/told well away from specificities of time and place, suggesting that story-telling and myth-making in a series of linked cultural-political contexts subsequently overlaid 'the events' themselves, eventually displacing and subsuming them. It was therefore women and their writings who were at the centre of Afrikaner nationalist myth-making in the aftermath of the South African War. This reiterates Helen Bradford's contention that, 'The Anglo-Boer war was the single most significant event fuelling not merely Afrikaner nationalism, but a regendered Afrikaner nationalism, transferring its weight from its (weak) male to its (strong) female leg'.<sup>6</sup> This recognition of the crucial role played by women in post-war Afrikaner proto-nationalism has not, however, received extensive scholarly attention. For example, Giliomee notes that at the time of the South African War Boer women were well known for their staunch Republicanism, and cites a comment made by a British visitor to South Africa during the war who remarked, "'It was the *vrouw* [woman] who kept the war going on so long. It was in her heart that patriotism flamed into an all-consuming heat, forgiving nothing and forgetting

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<sup>4</sup> E. Van Heyningen, 'Costly Mythologies: The Concentration Camps of the South African War in Afrikaner Historiography', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 34, 3 (2008), 496.

<sup>5</sup> See L. Stanley and H. Dampier, 'Cultural Entrepreneurs, Proto-Nationalism and Women's Testimony Writings: From the South African War 1899/1902 to 1948', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 33, 3 (2007), 501-519; H. Dampier, 'Re-reading as methodology: the case of Boer women's testimonies', *Qualitative Research* 8, 3 (2008), 367-377.

<sup>6</sup> H. Bradford, 'Regendering Afrikanerdom: The 1899-1902 Anglo-Boer War', in I. Blom, K. Hagemann and C. Hall, eds, *Gendered Nations: Nationalisms and Gender Order in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2000), 207.

nothing"<sup>7</sup>; however, Giliomee does not go on to explore the possible effects of this on the subsequent growth of Afrikaner (proto-) nationalism. Instead much of the historical scholarship on Afrikaner women has focused on the *volksmoeder* or 'mother of the nation' image of Afrikaner womanhood developed by Elsabé Brink and others, who stress that post-1902 Afrikaner women were seen and saw themselves primarily as suffering, stoical mothers.<sup>8</sup> The disruptive activities at the time of the war by some women in the camps, and the keenly politicised testimonies of the Brandfort protest from 1903 onwards, more than problematise the *volksmoeder* interpretation of women's role during this period.

### **Narrative, Story and Myth: The Brandfort Accounts**

Over the last thirty years there has been a burgeoning of interest in narrative as the fundamental way in which both individuals and groups make sense of life experience, and as key to the construction of both individual and collective identities, with this burgeoning interest often described as the 'narrative turn'. There has thus been an increasing realisation by both social scientists and historians that narrative is the primary means by which we make sense of the past, and is the principal way in which experience is organised in order to seem meaningful from the perspective of the present. Charlotte Linde argues that, for individuals, life stories are central to the 'creation of coherence', and that, 'In order to exist in the social world with a comfortable sense of being a good, socially proper, and stable person, an individual needs to have a coherent, acceptable, and constantly revised life story'.<sup>9</sup> By implication, in order for a collectivity – such as a nation – to exist and flourish, it too has to have a set of narratives which can be told and retold as part of a powerfully constitutive and 'constantly revised life story'. It is as just such a 'constantly revised life story', retold as part of the ongoing development of proto-nationalism post-1902 that I understand the Brandfort testimonies.

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<sup>7</sup> H. Giliomee *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People* (London: Hurst & Company, 2003), 256.

<sup>8</sup> E. Brink, 'Man-made women: Gender, Class and the Ideology of the Volksmoeder', in C. Walker, ed, *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1990), 273-92; L. Kruger, 'Gender, Community and Identity: Women and Afrikaner Nationalism in the *Volksmoeder* Discourse of *Die Boerevrou*, 1919-31' (M.A. Dissertation, University of Cape Town, 1991); M. Du Toit, 'The Domesticity of Afrikaner Nationalism: *Volksmoeders* and the ACVV, 1904-1929', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 29, 1 (2003), 155-176; L. Van der Watt, 'The comradely ideal and the *Volksmoeder* ideal: uncovering gender in the Voortrekker tapestry', *South African Historical Journal*, 39 (1998), 91-105.

<sup>9</sup> C. Linde, *Life Stories: The Creation of Coherence* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 3.

It might be argued that ‘narrative’ and ‘story’ are in effect equivalents, with time and the temporal ordering of events as central to both. David Carr suggests that 'story' is perhaps merely a more humble term for 'narrative', and stresses that, 'The two go together, in that narrative is our primary (though not our only) way of organizing our experience of time'.<sup>10</sup> Paul Ricoeur has challenged what he regards as the false distinction made between the structures of narrative in its simplest story-telling sense, and history, arguing that ‘our Western culture has produced a major dichotomy, that drawn between history and story, i.e., between narratives which claim to be true, empirically verifiable or falsifiable, and fictional stories which ignore the burden of corroboration by evidence’.<sup>11</sup> Against this Ricoeur insists that history and story 'share some common narrative structures whose temporal features in turn could easily be acknowledged', and that historians do not simply relate facts about the past but retell the past as stories told from a present perspective.<sup>12</sup> Ricoeur’s rejection of a fixed distinction between the structures of ‘history’ and ‘story’ is shared by scholars who are concerned with myths and their powerful historical influence. Certainly myths - and here I am particularly concerned with political myths - are often rooted in ‘reality’ and concern ‘actual’ past events, but they quickly move away from these with constant retelling as what Christopher Flood calls 'vehicles of ideological belief and supports for ideological arguments'.<sup>13</sup> As I will demonstrate, the Brandfort protest story is a good example of political myth in all these respects: it is presented as ‘factual history’ but is ideologically ‘marked’; it concerns themes of survival of defeat and the exploits of cultural heroines; it is predicated on ‘real events’ but almost immediately departs from these and makes mythologised meanings of them; and it raises questions about who ‘belongs’ in (proto-) nationalist terms.

Table: Chronology of Brandfort protest testimonies

<b>Date of Writing</b>	26 May	31 January	23 April 1917	1920	1938	1940	1944	1949
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<sup>10</sup> D. Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History* (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 4-5.

<sup>11</sup> P. Ricoeur, 'The Human Experience of Time and Narrative' in M.J. Valdés, ed, *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 103.

<sup>12</sup> Ricoeur, 'The Human Experience', 104.

<sup>13</sup> C. Flood, *Political Myth: A Theoretical Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 42.

	1903	1916						
<b>Author of Testimony</b>	Maria Els	Maria Els	Mrs. Johanna Le Roux	Mrs. Le Clus	Bettie Venter	Hendrina Rabie-Van der Merwe	Miemie Ras (neé Els)	Mrs. Lombard
<b>Date and Title of Publication</b>	1927 <i>War Without Glamour</i>	1917 <i>Vergeten?</i>	1925 <i>Stemme Uit Die Vrouekampe</i>	1920 <i>Lief en Leed</i>		1940 <i>Onthou! In Die Skaduwee Van Die Galg</i>		
<b>Date and Title of Re-publication</b>		1938 <i>Mag Ons Vergeet?</i>	1939 <i>Stemme Uit Die Verlede</i>					

Maria Els herself wrote three separate accounts of the Brandfort protest<sup>14</sup> and it features in the testimonies of five other women. The earliest known account of the protest by Maria Els appeared in Hobhouse's 1927 collection of women's testimonies *War Without Glamour*; although published in 1927 Els' account was apparently originally written 26 May 1903.<sup>15</sup> The first published version of Els' account appeared in Mrs. Neethling's 1917 *Vergeten?*, republished in 1938 as *Mag Ons Vergeet?*.<sup>16</sup> It is evident from a note from Els to Mrs Neethling, which appears at the end of Els' archived manuscript version of this account, that this version of her testimony was written on 31 January 1916.<sup>17</sup> Chronologically, the next account of the protest appeared in Mrs. Le Roux's testimony, dated 23 April 1917, which was published in Postma's *Stemme Uit Die Vrouekampe* in 1925, republished in 1939 as

<sup>14</sup> M. Els in E. Hobhouse, *War Without Glamour Women's War Experiences Written By Themselves, 1899-1902*, (Bloemfontein: Nasionale Pers Beperk, 1927), 141-142; M. Els in E. Neethling, *Mag Ons Vergeet?*, (Kaapstad: Nasionale Pers, Beperkt., 1938), 34-38; WM 4128/29: Mrs. Miemie Ras (nee Els), *Herinneringe*, War Museum of the Boer Republics.

<sup>15</sup> In the 'Preface' to *War Without Glamour* Hobhouse explains, 'since the middle of 1903 the manuscripts have all been in my possession', and Els' account itself is individually dated 26 May 1903.

<sup>16</sup> E. Neethling, (as 'The widow of H.L. Neethling'), *Vergeten?* (Kaapstad: De Nasionale Pers, Beperkt., 1917); E. Neethling, *Mag Ons Vergeet?* (Kaapstad: Nasionale Pers, Beperkt., 1938).

<sup>17</sup> The testimonies in Mrs. Neethling's *Vergeten?* were first published in 1917, having been collected in 1904 by Mr. Horak, at that time editor of *Die Transvaler* newspaper, and many of the original handwritten manuscripts of these testimonies are now archived (W19, Van Zyl Collection, National Archives). However, while Els' original testimony is archived amongst these, it is evident from a note at the end of her account that her testimony was not written for Horak in 1904, but much later, and directly for Mrs. Neethling herself. Her testimony is dated 31 January 1916 (the year before *Vergeten?* appeared) and the note at the end from Els reads, 'Mrs. Neethling may our beloved father give you strength to complete your work. Forgive me that I could not send you the history sooner. So have my hearty thanks for inclusion. Your loving grateful friend Mimmie Els. Give heartfelt greetings from me to your mother and daughter.'

*Stemme Uit Die Verlede*.<sup>18</sup> This was followed by the account in Mrs. Le Clus' 1920 *Lief en Leed*,<sup>19</sup> and then by a description of the protest in Bettie Venter's unpublished 'diary' of her experiences in Brandfort camp, written in 1938 around the 'Great Trek' centenary celebrations, and thus not a diary.<sup>20</sup> Hendrina Rabie-Van der Merwe's 1940 published *Onthou! In die Skaduwee van die Galg* also refers Els and her activities.<sup>21</sup> Els' own final account, the provenance of which is not clear, consists of two typed sheets dated 1944, and is now archived at the War Museum in Bloemfontein.<sup>22</sup> The final account of the protest is Mrs. Lombard's archived but unpublished 1949 testimony.<sup>23</sup> In what follows, I examine how the story of the Brandfort protest was re/told over time, tracing the different stages of the protest as narrated across the various extant versions of the story in women's accounts. In doing so I hope to demonstrate that the Brandfort protest was imbued with political meaning from its first 'telling', and that this politicisation increased over time, with subsequent retellings.

### **Fulfilling the 'horizon of expectation': the testimonies as rehearsed narratives**

When the women went to the Commandant to ask for better meat he said that the meat was good enough, because it was good enough for the women in the Transvaal camps. The women replied that they could not eat such meat. The Commandant, Captain Jacobs, said that he could not give them better, that it was war-time and impossible to obtain better ... Then the commandant said that they must go back to their tents otherwise he should throw them into the solitary prisoners camp.<sup>24</sup>

Very early on the morning of 25 Nov. 1901, just as it was getting light, a few of the suffering mothers went through the camp to tell everyone to appear at nine o'clock in front of the office of the commandant. At the appointed time hundreds of women and girls had gathered there. They asked commandant Jacobs to make his appearance. He refused to do so, but asked of them what they wanted. Mrs Van Tonder was appointed to speak to him. She began: "Mr. Jacobs, we see no chance of living any longer on half a pound of meagre meat which is sometimes full of maggots, and acorn coffee mixed with vitriol. We cannot cook our food with this grass green, wet wood. You must make another plan; we are dying of hunger." He

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<sup>18</sup> M.M. Postma, *Stemme Uit Die Vrouekampe* (Potchefstroom, South Africa: no publisher given, 1925), 13-15; M.M. Postma, *Stemme Uit Die Verlede* (Johannesburg and Pretoria: Voortrekkerspers Beperk, 1939), 30-32.

<sup>19</sup> S.L. Le Clus, *Lief en Leed: 'n Verhaal van Huis- en Kampelewe Gedurende die Anlgo-Boereoorlog, van 1899 tot 1902* (Bloemfontein: Nasionale Pers, no date but 1920).

<sup>20</sup> A248, Mrs. Bettie Venter, *Dagboek*, Free State Archives Repository.

<sup>21</sup> H. Rabie-Van der Merwe, *Onthou! In Die Skaduwee van die Galg* (Bloemfontein, South Africa: Nasionale Pers, 1940).

<sup>22</sup> WM 4128/29, Mrs. Miemie Ras (nee Els), *Herinneringe*, War Museum of the Boer Republics.

<sup>23</sup> A119, Renier Collection, Free State Archives Repository.

<sup>24</sup> Els in *War Without Glamour*, 141.

answered: "You can just be happy to get a bit of food; in other camps they are already eating horsemeat and dying of hunger. Go back to your tents immediately or I will make you go".<sup>25</sup>

When the women asked to see the Commandant, this man sent the English doctor to them to ask what they wanted. The women answered that they wanted better meat, because they could not eat the 'dead meat' any longer. The doctor then called in English: "Go to your tents and wash your dirty faces, then you will not die any longer, because you are dying from dirtiness".<sup>26</sup>

On a certain day in October a group of women requested the commandant for better and more food. He swore at them and told them off.<sup>27</sup>

We appointed Mrs Van Tonder to speak to the Commandant; he was an uncouth colonial Boer. He was asked to come out. He refused, the coward. He sent the head doctor, Dr Martinius, to talk to us and ask us what we wanted. We want to talk to the Commandant was the answer. Mrs Van Tonder spoke so that he could hear, although he stayed inside. She said: "Mr Jacobs, we no longer [see] a chance of living on half a pound of meagre meat, which is sometimes full of worms, and acorn coffee which is mixed with vitriol, and flour which is also mixed with vitriol. We cannot cook our food with green wood that is so wet."<sup>28</sup>

Then another day 9 o'clock in the morning, then all the women trekked to the commandant to complain about the bad meat and requested them to give us better food and also marquee tents and also doctors for our sick people ... the commandant chased us away and said to us it is good enough for you to eat, that meat.<sup>29</sup>

Each of the quoted extracts above describe the first phase of the Brandfort meat protest and rehearse broadly the same crucial narrative components that provide the central plot concerning British mistreatment of Boer women, although there are also some differences between the testimonies. The key elements of the story are remarkably consistent, although related in slightly varying terms: large numbers of dissatisfied women are described as 'hundreds of women', 'all the women', 'a group of women'; while Mr. Jacobs dismisses the women's complaints by saying the meat was 'good enough', 'You can just be happy to get a bit of food' or simply, 'he swore at them and told them off'; and his order for them to return to their tents was followed by the threat that he would 'make you go' or 'throw them into the solitary prisoner's camp'. Els' testimony and the account by Bettie Venter reveal very

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<sup>25</sup> Els in *Mag Ons Vergeet?*, 35. All quotes from testimonies originally published in Afrikaans (or its earlier forms) have been translated into English by the author.

<sup>26</sup> Le Clus, *Lief en Leed*, 63.

<sup>27</sup> Le Roux in *Stemme Uit Die Verlede*, 32.

<sup>28</sup> Venter, *Dagboek*, 53.

<sup>29</sup> Els, *Herinneringe*.

strong repetitions and similarities. Both structure the sequence of unfolding events in much the same way, and Mrs. Van Tonder's speech to Mr. Jacobs is virtually identical in both accounts. Although it is impossible to 'prove', it is likely that Bettie Venter, writing her diary in 1938, had already read the earlier 1917 incarnation of Els' account. In this sense, each testimony about the Brandfort protest appears to imitate aspects of the 'successful tellings' aspects of the others, and thereby fulfils what Elizabeth Tonkin refers to as the 'horizon of expectation' by formulaically rehearsing the most powerful and meaningful elements of this story, and framing these in a way that would be recognisable to a 'knowing audience.'<sup>30</sup> This would have been other Boer or Afrikaner women, importantly including the women's organisations, parties and congresses that proliferated post-war, all associated with the emphasis on written as well as spoken Afrikaans as a key aspect of nationalist practices and purposes.<sup>31</sup>

One of the significant differences between the retellings of the protest concerns the statement in Bettie Venter's testimony that it was the doctor (rather than the superintendent, as in Els' and Le Roux's accounts) who was sent to deal with the women. According to Venter, Mr. Jacobs was 'an uncouth colonial Boer'<sup>32</sup> and was too cowardly to come out of his tent, with his agentic and authoritative role in the other testimonies as an angry and determined opponent absent from Venter's version. In Mrs. Le Clus' account it is also the doctor rather than the superintendent who addresses the women, and she describes the doctor suggesting to the women that it was not poor meat but lack of

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<sup>30</sup> E. Tonkin, 'History and the Myth of Realism', in R. Samuel and P. Thompson, Paul, eds, *The Myths We Live By* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 25-35.

<sup>31</sup> On Afrikaans women's organisations see for example M. Du Toit, 'Women, Welfare and the Nurturing of Afrikaner Nationalism: A Social History of the *Afrikaanse Christelike Vroue Vereniging*, c. 1870-1939' (DPhil Dissertation, University of Cape Town, 1996) and L. Vincent, 'The Power Behind the Scenes: The Afrikaner Nationalist Women's Parties, 1915 to 1931', *South African Historical Journal*, 40 (1999) 51-73. On the development of the Afrikaans language as a crucial component Afrikaner nationalism see I. Hofmeyr, 'Building a Nation From Words: Afrikaans Language, Literature and Ethnic Identity, 1902-1924', in S. Marks and S. Trapido, eds, *The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism in Twentieth Century South Africa* (London & New York: Longman, 1987), 95-123.

<sup>32</sup> Mr. Jacobs was likely to have been one of the men who had been magistrates or other government officials in the Boer Republics, some of whom were later appointed by the British as camp superintendents. He was thus a 'joiner' who had 'changed sides' and these men were often subject to contempt, recrimination and even abuse by those who remained 'loyal' to the Republics. Grundlingh describes the relationship between Republican women in the camps and the 'hendsoppers' and 'joiners' as 'extremely bad', and notes that the women often treated such men unsympathetically and abusively. See A. Grundlingh, *Die 'Hendsoppers' en 'Joiners': Die Rasionaal en Verskynsel van Verraad* (Kaapstad en Pretoria: Hollandsch Afrikaansche Uitgevers Maatschappij, 1979).



personal hygiene that was causing the deaths in camp.<sup>33</sup> The addition of the doctor to the story is significant, in that the large majority of women's testimonies depict the camp doctors as at best inept, and at worst as murderers who starved and poisoned Boer women and children in the camp hospitals.<sup>34</sup> However, comparisons between the extracts indicate that the testimonies are consistent in their emphasis on two fundamental elements which give meaning to the story: the wronged, mistreated Boer women who made a reasonable request; and the unjust, unsympathetic camp authorities who refused this. Thus, as versions of a political myth, the 'uniformity' of the stories concerns the shared meaning made of the protest around a dichotomised depiction of 'us', the 'good' Boer women, and 'them', the morally 'bad' British authorities. In this regard, Samuel and Thompson comment that, in the context of national myths, 'it is often persecution and common grievance which defines belonging'<sup>35</sup>; and, in spite of the differences in detail between the Brandfort testimonies, they all evince this sense of belonging through shared grievance.

### **I, Us, They, We: Women locating themselves in the political tale**

After this the Commandant sent for the two leaders, that is to say, Mrs. Nicholas Viviers and myself, Maria Els, aged 16, in order to have us punished; but the women would not allow it and went forth with us two, all singing, and I, Maria Els, carrying the Free State Flag ... The commandant then said he advised the women to go back to their tents and he would endeavour to provide them with better meat, but if he was not able to do so then they must be content. Then the women went back, but they had hardly been half an hour in their tents when armed soldiers came from four sides into the camp and demanded that I, Maria Els, and Mrs. Viviers should at once come out. The women again offered to rise, but I, Maria Els, said they should refrain because it was my desire that if they took me prisoner they should do it properly

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<sup>33</sup> The assertion that poor hygiene and cleanliness on the part of Boer women contributed to sickness and death in the camp was often made during the war; the British government's Ladies Commission of Inquiry isolated this as one of the causes of the spread of illness in the camps, although this was contested by Emily Hobhouse and others. Mrs. Le Clus introduces this element here through the doctor's words, which she depicts as both unfeeling and unreasonable. Her remarks imply that the British claim about Boer women 'dying from dirtiness' was not merely untrue, but was a cover to deflect the blame for deaths that were really caused by the British plan attempt to starve Boer women and children by providing them with inferior and deficient rations.

<sup>34</sup> Thus for instance, contentions about the camp hospitals as places of deliberate murder can be found in testimonies contained in Hobhouse, *War Without Glamour*, 63, 126; Neethling, *Mag Ons Vergeet?*, 22, 31, 195; and Postma, *Stemme Uit Die Verlede*, 29, 92.

<sup>35</sup> R. Samuel and P. Thompson, Paul, 'Introduction', *The Myths We Live By* (London and New York: Routledge, (1990), 19.

armed, even as the burghers were always captured. They took me and Mrs. Viviers away [to prison in Bloemfontein] immediately ...<sup>36</sup>

Almost 4,000 of us women moved out of the camp to the Boers. To stop us armed troops were sent after us and they dragged us back ... a month later inspector Barret went through the camp to do a report and from then on it went a bit better.<sup>37</sup>

The group of women became angry and stormed the Superintendent's tent and found him in his marquee tent, at his writing table. They asked him if this was meat he issued to decent white women? And the first woman was ready and threw a piece of meat at him, whereupon all the other women followed suit, and the rotten meat rained down on him. He crept out the back under the tent to the outside. The women also went outside and pelted him there too. When he had run away a good distance he shouted back: "I'll give you better meat for the future." One woman then asked: "Can we trust you?" "Sure you can!" he answered. After that we received After that we received tinned meat, which also smelled very musty, but was better.<sup>38</sup>

These extracts all describe the second phase of the protest, after the women had made their initial complaint about the meat to Mr. Jacobs. A striking feature of the Brandfort testimonies is the degree of political meaning that is insistently attributed to the protest, interestingly with this political meaning inscribed into even the earliest account of the event by Els written in 1903, with its emphasis on the Free State flag, the unity of the women and the claimed political motivation for the arrest of the ringleaders. This is interesting because much South African historiography dates Afrikaner nationalism as a "very recent phenomenon"<sup>39</sup> that evolved primarily in the interwar years, although I suggest there are clear signs of women expressing proto-nationalist sentiments before this. In Els' 1903/1927 testimony, the protest is certainly portrayed as political and republican, perhaps also as proto-nationalist, with the old Free State being carried and Els herself at the centre of the uprising as a *volk* hero. There are repeated references to her as 'I, Maria Els', emphasising both the formal testamentary character of this piece of writing and also her role in the unfolding events as key, with Mrs. Viviers 'there' but not so central. Els underlines her patriotic sense of responsibility and also her political commitment, as shown for example,

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<sup>36</sup> Els in *War Without Glamour*, 141-142. Els variously recalls herself as 14, 15 and 16 at the time of the protest, the kind of difference that the passing of time most likely accounts for. According to the official camp register, she was 17 at the time of the protest.

<sup>37</sup> Le Roux in *Stemme Uit Die Verlede*, 32.

<sup>38</sup> Lombard, A119, 7.

<sup>39</sup> S. Marks and S. Trapido, eds, *The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism in Twentieth Century South Africa* (London & New York: Longman, 1987), 12.

by her comments about the necessity of the British using armed guards to subdue her, and seeing this as parallel to using armed soldiers to capture Boer commandos. Mrs. Le Roux's rather triumphalist testimony credits the protest with inspiring 4,000 women to desert the camp and attempt to join the commandos, and she includes herself in this through her phrase 'to stop us'. In addition, the visit by Inspector Barret (one of the travelling inspectors) and the consequent changes made are attributed to the women's actions, rather than to the camp authorities themselves.

Mrs. Lombard's even more triumphantly celebratory description of the day, from which any mention of Els being punished is absent, ends with the unmitigated victory of the protesting women over the weak, cowardly superintendent cowed by the feistiness of the Boer women, and it makes no mention of the arrival of armed soldiers or the arrest of the ringleaders. This version of the protest in which the women involved were unqualified *volk* heroes fitted with later nationalist constructions of the Afrikaner people as boldly victorious, which certainly by the end of the 1930s was the dominant view (Mrs. Lombard was writing in 1949). Vincent Perez's observation that 'The nostalgic impulse ... constructs a "master" narrative designed to suppress most of what does not conform to the author's idealized projection of the past'<sup>40</sup> suggests that Mrs. Lombard's account might usefully be interpreted in this way, as an idealisation of the past to fit present circumstances and views. Precise, unambiguous us/them moral distinctions are central to the construction of a national identity and certainly appear as sharp and polarised in Mrs. Lombard's account – Mr. Jacobs, for instance, is rendered ridiculous and ineffectual, while Boer women appear in complete possession of the moral highground. In Mrs. Lombard's testimony, 'race' is also overtly introduced as a factor in the Brandfort women's dissatisfaction. For her, the meat ration was not merely inadequate in itself, but was particularly inappropriate for the needs of 'decent white women', whose privileged racial position automatically qualified them, in her view, for better treatment.

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<sup>40</sup> V. Perez, 'Heroes and Orphans: Testimonial Memory as Resistance and Repression in Francisco Robles Perez's "Memorias"', *Biography*, 20, 1 (1997), 26.

### Further politicising the protest: flags and *volksleide*<sup>41</sup>

The Commandant heard us coming and came out with his police and took away the flag. He wished to take away the little flags which we two and other women were wearing, but we threatened to kill him if he did so.<sup>42</sup>

Mrs Bella Vivier and I, Miemie Els, a girl of fifteen years, were dressed in the Free State colours. In rows of four we walked back [to our tents] while we sang the national anthem.<sup>43</sup>

Then the women became furious and they produced a small Transvaal flag and everyone sang the national anthem as loudly as they could.<sup>44</sup>

It was a big crowd [with] Miemie Els and Mrs Viviers in the centre with a Free State flag.<sup>45</sup>

... then I Minnie Els (I was just 14 years old) and Mrs Viviers and Mrs Van Biljoen went forward. I carried the flag and we sang the Free State anthem and the commandant chased us away...<sup>46</sup>

Accounts of the Brandfort protest accord varying degrees of political importance to the women's actions, but all the extant testimonies imply or overtly state that the actions of the women on that day were not merely an expression of dissatisfaction with their rations. The emphasis by the testimony-writers on the waving of Free State and/or Transvaal flags and the singing of *volksliede* are important in the depiction of this event as a demonstration of proto-nationalism. The flags and *volksliede* in the women's testimonies are a striking early symbol of *volkseenheid* <sup>47</sup>, and over time loyalty to the Boer Republics changed, to become Boer proto-nationalism and then Afrikaner nationalism. The emphasis at the start of each of the testimonies concerning the Brandfort protest is on poor rations, starvation and dying children, with later shifts in representing the second phase of the protest presenting the women protagonists as no longer the downtrodden victims of British mistreatment, but glorious heroes of the Boer Republics. The buoyant tone of 'flags and *volksliede*' proto-nationalism and the depiction of Boer women as heroic patriots resonates with other later

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<sup>41</sup> Folk songs, national songs, or anthems

<sup>42</sup> Els in *War Without Glamour*, 141.

<sup>43</sup> Els in *Mag Ons Vergeet?*, 36.

<sup>44</sup> Le Clus, *Lief en Leed*, 63-64.

<sup>45</sup> Venter, *Dagboek*, 54.

<sup>46</sup> Els, *Herinneringe*.

<sup>47</sup> Unity of the people, national unity

women's accounts, particularly Hendrina Rabie-Van der Merwe's *Onthou! In Die Skaduwee Van Die Galg*.

Els' statement in *War Without Glamour* about threatening to kill the camp superintendent also points to the ways in which women testimony-writers sought to represent the protest as violent and dangerous, as a political protest rather than a protest about meat, thus 'proving' their political importance and commitment.

The Commandant then gave orders that the police must seize the women forcibly, and so the police began to strike with sticks; then the women seized pieces of wood and bottles and struck back at the police with these. The women succeeded in beating back the police. Mrs. Maree was so seriously struck that blood streamed from the wound and she fainted.<sup>48</sup>

The police tried to fight a path through; they struck open the jugular vein of a Mrs. Maree and in a moment she was full of blood.<sup>49</sup>

Then one of the police began to hit the women with a stick. With the first blow he struck a woman on her head, so that the blood was streaming over her face. In an instant the women grabbed bricks, bottles and pieces of firewood and defended themselves, so that the police had to flee to their commandant.<sup>50</sup>

The camp police came to intervene, but the women fell upon them so that more than one [of the policemen] had to be taken to a doctor.<sup>51</sup>

Then Commandant Jacobs showed up with 8 soldiers (Boer camp police) with their short sticks. He gave the order, "Go and get those 2 with the flags". Together we all shouted, "Do not allow them to be taken." "Take them all", he shouted, "Beat a path through and take them!" After that Boer boys struck the women left and right – a scandal – the biggest scandal I have ever seen ... then they [the women] struck back; one woman fought with a bottle, fists, kicks any sort [of defence].<sup>52</sup>

... then we stormed towards them and I took the whip that the commandant had in his hand, that he certainly wanted to drive us away with: he gave it to me too: because the three that were there surely saw that the women were now very angry, and while Aunt Driena Le Roux beat Van Eeden [camp official] on his head with an upside-down bottle (she asked, "Is he dead now?") the other men fled through the tents and I chased that same commandant with his own whip...<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Els in *War Without Glamour*, 141.

<sup>49</sup> Els in *Mag Ons Vergeet?*, 36.

<sup>50</sup> Le Clus, *Lief en Leed*, 64.

<sup>51</sup> Le Roux in *Stemme Uit Die Verlede*, 32.

<sup>52</sup> Venter, *Dagboek*, 54-55.

<sup>53</sup> Els, *Herinneringe*.

When these depictions of the violent climax of the protest are examined in the chronological order of their writing, interesting things come into sight. The earlier accounts tend to emphasise the harm done to women protestors by the camp police, while later accounts highlight the injuries inflicted on the police by the women. Els' first two accounts stress Mrs. Maree's injuries and the blood streaming from this woman's wounds, and make only passing reference to the women's self-defence. In her last account, written in 1944, Els makes no mention of Mrs. Maree at all and instead describes a camp official being beaten over the head with a bottle, with Els herself chasing the superintendent through the camp while brandishing his whip at him. In this 1944 account, Boer women are no longer victims, but have taken matters into their own hands and have defeated their enemies by fighting back determinedly against injustice. Such changes in emphasis reflect (and in turn surely influenced) developments in the conception of Afrikaner (proto-) nationalism as active and victorious, rather than muted, passive and defeated.

In tracing representations of the Brandfort incident over time, the most marked change that occurs is the degree of political *intent* that later testimonies attribute to the women participants. Early accounts depict the events of the day unfolding in a rather chaotic way, with each side suffering setbacks and victories, culminating in the quashing of the protest and the arrest of Els and Viviers. Later accounts invest the incident with a greater degree of political intent, and imply that the protest was a co-ordinated and successful attack on the ineffectual camp authorities, in effect an uprising or even rebellion, with authority yielding to the formidable determination, staunch patriotism, militancy and even violence of the Boer women. The later accounts of the protest fit with the objectives of post-1938 Afrikaner nationalism that encouraged the celebration of the bravery and heroism of Afrikaner ancestors, and looked forward to a future free of British domination.<sup>54</sup>

That Maria Els aligned herself closely with the post-1938 nationalist project is evident from her comments in 1944, projecting nationalist sentiments back onto her 1901 self: 'but I felt, let our dear Lord just spare me further for the good of my people and the salvation of our

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<sup>54</sup> 1938 was a pivotal year in consolidating the Afrikaner nationalist project; it saw the centenary celebrations of the so-called Great Trek, and the opening of the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria. 1938 was thus a crucial moment marking the onset of an ebullient and increasingly militant Afrikaner nationalism.

souls and our land.<sup>55</sup> Here Els represents her life as central to the good of the *volk*, and her wartime ambitions as entirely patriotic and political – the restoration of 'our land' to the Boer/Afrikaner people. Her description of her imprisonment further serves to strengthen her self-identification as a political hero. Like Hendrina Rabie-Van der Merwe, Els' imprisonment buttresses her credentials as a martyr of the *volk*, and in her accounts of her time in Bloemfontein jail (two weeks in all) in *Mag Ons Vergeet?* and her 1944 testimony, Els portrays herself as part of a select group of true Boer women patriots, as 'sisters':

There [in the prison] we heard women's voices that called, "Sisters, sisters!" We thought at first that it was the voices of people who wanted to mock us, but Mrs Viviers said, "Miemie, the English have thrown us in jail, and there are surely more women here." Then we answered: "Sisters", and a whole lot of voices asked: "Sisters, where have you come from? What have you done?" We told them the whole story. They all called out: "Hurray for Nation and Fatherland! Be courageous and satisfied, sisters".<sup>56</sup>

Then the jail warder took us and locked us in and then Mrs. Beljon prayed and after the prayer we sang Psalm 146's first verse, after we were finished singing we heard a woman call to us, sisters yes she said who are you, we are sister Beljon and girl Minnie Els aged 14 years, where are you from, from Brandfort camp ... O then they clapped their hands, then we heard how they prayed and cried.<sup>57</sup>

Els' status as a nationalist figure is given much credibility here by the recognition and acknowledgement afforded her by other imprisoned (and by implication, politically-minded) Boer women, particularly given the repetitions of 'sisters' and the use of Els' personal name. In Els' earlier testimony, Mrs. Viviers is imprisoned and named with her, whereas in her later 1944 account no mention is made of Mrs. Viviers and instead it is Mrs. Beljon who is her fellow-prisoner. In re/telling the tale, individuals and specificities are lost or changed over time apart from the centrality of Els herself, but the general meaning of the story remains clear and consistent. The scene Els describes in both of the above accounts conveys a sense of common suffering and patriotic camaraderie shared by the women prisoners, and positions Els herself as a key member of an in-group of stalwart Boer proto-nationalists. The second extract, in which stoical sisterly patriotism is expressed in prayer and psalm singing, once again underscores the Boer women's moral authority and also connects with aspects

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<sup>55</sup> Els, *Herinneringe*.

<sup>56</sup> Els in *Mag Ons Vergeet?*, 37. One of the women Els conversed with in this way was Hendrina Rabie-Van der Merwe, and so she is present indirectly in Els account, while Rabie-Van der Merwe specifically mentions Els' name. Both women are focal points of their own stories but appear as bit-players in each other's.

<sup>57</sup> Els, *Herinneringe*.

of Afrikaner nationalism in which the *volk* hold an 'apocalyptic vision of themselves as a chosen people'.<sup>58</sup>

### Universalising the tale: producing 'the history'

So one morning the meat was again inedible. I was just in front of the hospital and then saw a gathering of women proceeding to the camp commandant's tent the dr was also there and he is the man who had the say, he investigated the meat, and found it first class, ever-cheeky he came out, and gave the report But it was too good for words. before he was finished speaking, the first woman was finished. hit him with a thin shoulder [of meat] next to his cheek and then a second, and third, he ran to his tent not far from there, the women followed, and they threw the meat inside his tent. That was the last day of his reign he left the same night away, away, for ever away.<sup>59</sup>

The next day the camp was in chaos ... The main street was packed, and then all went singing and waving the slimy meat to the camp commandant's tent. Angrily this mule-stupid venerable officer began to abuse the women. "If they are not satisfied with the food that Her Majesty's troops themselves must eat, they can do without it!" "Then rather without it and you under it", it sounded. In the blink of an eye the decaying meat rained down on the unfortunate official. Those who did not throw [meat], walked around him and mauled him with a mutton shoulder, leg or rib. A few of the ringleaders were arrested and taken to the "wired in camp". The uprising was not without consequences and better food did not stay away for long.<sup>60</sup>

'[T]he commandant was almost torn to pieces by furious women', with the result that '[t]he meat immediately improved and the old mother was even offered a supplementary ration'.<sup>61</sup>

When the *hendsopper* gave my mother a shoulder of meat with a "smell", my mother screamed: "They are giving us rotten meat." She then hit the man with the meat and the other women followed her example.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> A. Sparks, *The Mind of South Africa: The Story of the Rise and Fall of Apartheid* (London: Arrow Books, 1990, reprinted 1997), 126. On the Afrikaner myth of divine election see for instance B. Cauten, 'The Myth of Divine Election and Afrikaner Ethnogenesis', in G. Hosking and G. Schopflin, eds, *Myth and Nationhood* (London: Hurst & Company, 1997), 107-131.

<sup>59</sup> WM 6455/1, Susara Johanna Roos, *Dagboek* (Bethulie), War Museum of the Boer Republics.

<sup>60</sup> D.H. Van Zyl, *In Die Konsentrasiekamp: Jeugherinneringe* (Bloemfontein: Nasionale Pers, 1944), 23-24.

<sup>61</sup> Mrs. J. van Aardt in M.C.E. Van Schoor, compiler, in co-operation with Dr. C.G. Coetzee and the Rapportryerskorps, Pretoria Gardens, *Kamp Kinders 1900 – 1902: 'n Gedenkboek* (Bloemfontein: Rapportryerskorps en Die Oorlogsmuseum van die Boererepublieke, 1982), 13.

<sup>62</sup> I.W. de Jager in *Kamp Kinders*, 18.



As part of stripping the temporal and historical specificities from this event, and its generalising in symbolic and mythic terms, the tale of the Brandfort protest has been told as one about other camps, where no such events are documented in any official sources, as they are for Brandfort. The story of the Brandfort protest and what it came to signify – Boer women’s defiant rejection of British authority and proud assertion of their independence – eventually become generalised and severed from the originating events. Thus there are other extant testimonies in which ‘meat protests’ highly similar to that which occurred at Brandfort are described, one of them in the post-hoc ‘diary’ of Susara Roos, a young Boer woman who worked as a probationer nursing assistant in Bethulie camp, as in the first quote above. Roos’ description of the crowd of protesting women attacking camp officials, in this case the doctor, with the meat they found so objectionable bears strong similarity to Mrs. Lombard’s testimony, with the man concerned also removed as the result of this woman’s actions. Her account of this incident re/works the events to make a political point about Boer women as defiant *volk* heroes who took on the British authorities and triumphed. Roos’ testimony about Bethulie resonates strongly with women’s testimonies about the protest at Brandfort, and its similarity in content and tone points to the canonisation or mythologising of this incident across women’s testimonies as a general one that ‘fitted’ events that occurred in many places, revealing or rather articulating the ‘real’ meaning of these.

In the preface to *War Without Glamour*, Hobhouse wrote about Boer women’s testimonies more generally that, 'The universality and similarity of experience is striking. Had every woman of the two Boer Republics (apart from the few big towns) recorded her experience, the result would have been but a general repetition of these statements with minor variations of detail'.<sup>63</sup> Thus Hobhouse seemingly interpreted the strong parallels and repetitiveness in women’s testimonies as a sign of their veracity, although she was also careful to distinguish their facts from their opinions in relatedly commenting, 'I take no responsibility for any opinions expressed in these records'.<sup>64</sup> Instead it seems that there is something more complex and less one-dimensionally referential about these testimonies and their repetitions. This is that, as stories about the camps passed from individuals into

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<sup>63</sup> Hobhouse, *War Without Glamour*, 5.

<sup>64</sup> Hobhouse, *War Without Glamour*, 5.

the public domain, both by oral means and through publication of testimonies in books, magazines and other forums, they were in turn repeated by individuals. These stories were re/told and re/read beyond the original teller and published writer, until aspects of them became reproduced and absorbed as actual 'memory', even by those women who had not necessarily participated in the specific 'remembered' incident. The meanings of these rehearsed, repeated ritualised and powerfully symbolic stories became 'agreed' upon over time as they were repeated, and it is frequently these ritualised stories, rather than the messy complicated realities of private, individual experience, that are represented in women's camp testimonies. As indicated in the quotes above, repetition of the camp meat protest story occurred again in 1944 in Van Zyl's *In Die Konsentrasiekamp*, and then again in 1982, in Van Schoor's *Kampkinders* collection, with many key features of the earlier narratives repeated in these later accounts. Here too angry Boer women beat camp officials with joints of meat and triumph over the cowed British authorities, and the key elements are almost certainly drawn from the Brandfort events and are repeated well away from the original circumstances. Unlike at Brandfort, there is no direct or even circumstantial evidence to indicate a protest of this kind having actually occurred at Aliwal-North, Bethulie or Belfast; but certainly there are strong similarities in these stories of with those concerning Brandfort, which underscores the mythical, rehearsed aspects of this tale.

The central message of the Brandfort protest testimonies, as well as the more generalised accounts by Roos, Van Zyl and others, is a political one that stresses that Boer/Afrikaner women have always been a political force to be reckoned with. The Brandfort testimonies must be understood as part of what became over time a deliberately orchestrated proto-nationalist and then nationalist campaign to create 'the history' of the Afrikaner nation. As Van Heyningen has shown, '[b]y the 1930s, the mythology of the camps was so firmly established that any attempt to offer an alternative perspective was ignored, at best.'<sup>65</sup> The construction of the Brandfort protest, certainly up to 1944, was repeatedly re-produced in the public domain of Afrikaner 'cultural' and political organisations and emphasised Boer women as active political agents. Given that the Brandfort testimonies were produced at the very time that Afrikaner women were supposedly fulfilling their idealised and mainly

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<sup>65</sup> Van Heyningen, 'Costly Mythologies', 509.

domestic role as *volksmoeders*, it is surely necessary to reconceptualise the role of women within the Afrikaner nationalist project, recognising they were agents within and not just recipients of this. As Charl Blynnaut has recently argued, the central role played by women in this regard continues to be overlooked in much mainstream historiography, in spite of some groundbreaking work undertaken in the last two decades.<sup>66</sup> For example, Louise Vincent has explored the Women's National Parties as 'the power behind the scenes', and contextualises their origins around the 1914 Rebellion.<sup>67</sup> Helen Bradford argues that while nineteenth-century republicanism and Boer proto-nationalism gendered the *volk* as male, after the 1899-1902 war, in which many Boer men surrendered or 'joined', 'women ... gatecrashed into a homosocial *volk*'.<sup>68</sup> The vigorous and significant political work done by women in the development of Afrikaner nationalism as outlined by Bradford and Vincent, as well as women's representations of their roles in the Bradford protest as political and agentic, shows up the invisibility of women from 'malestream' analyses of Afrikaner nationalism as historically inadequate, clearly demonstrating also the inadequacy of subsuming women's activities under the *volksmoeder* rubric. Certainly the evidence of women's published and unpublished testimonies suggests that women were the primary agitators behind much proto-nationalism during and immediately after the war, and then in the development of a more cohesive nationalist ideology, particularly through their writings about the war and camps. And it also points up the key importance of 'settled' and agreed upon stories in these writings as central to the construction of this nationalist ideology.

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<sup>66</sup> C. Blynnaut, 'Untold History with a Historiography: A Review of Scholarship on Afrikaner Women in South African History', *South African Historical Journal*, 65, 4 (2013), 596-617.

<sup>67</sup> L. Vincent, 'The Power Behind the Scenes: The Afrikaner Nationalist Women's Parties, 1915 to 1931', *South African Historical Journal*, 40 (1999), 51-73.

<sup>68</sup> Bradford, 'Regendering Afrikanerdom', 207.