

UNIVERSITY OF DURBAN–WESTVILLE

DOCUMENTATION CENTRE

ANC ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEWEE: DR NELSON MANDELA

INTERVIEWERS: ZANELLE RIBA & MOSES HADEBE

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R: ...and other institutions through the ANC project, so the three interviewers here today represent University of Natal, University of Durban – Westville and the ANC. So they will ask you a few questions of which they have an interest in.

NM: Good.

MH: So, this is our interview with Comrade Tata Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela for ANC Oral History Project by Mrs Zanelle Riba and Moses Hadebe, 28th October 2002. In attendance are two comrades, Mrs [Nelisa Radami and Mr Molele - names unclear].

ZR: Tata, what individual forces influenced you most in your life time?

NM: I have dealt with this in my autobiography, A Long Walk to Freedom. Firstly, it was the elders of the Thembu tribe who related stories of the acts of violence which

were committed when Africans came into conflict with whites in the earlier days of that conflict.

NR: Sorry Tata, before you continue you need, they need to put this on for you so that it records the sound.

NM: Okay.

NR: Ja.

NM: Where do they put it?

NR: Do you want to come and help me?

NM: I don't want them to see my dirty underwear. [general laughter] I keep this dirty underwear for dignity.

NR: Is it good there?

NM: Now, those were my first influences. Then I went to college firstly to the college in my district Clarkebury. There was not much political influence there except just education. Then in 1937 I went to Healdtown in the Ciskei. I now met students from various parts of the country and from various national groups, and I then knew that there was so many [unclear] groups amongst us. But one day the poet Mqhayi, who was a very important poet those days, we were told he was going to visit the college on a particular day and the principal Dr Wellington announced that there would be a holiday that day. Now Wellington used to boast that he was the descendant of the Great Duke of Wellington, the man

who crushed Napoleon and he would say he saved civilisation for the world and for you the natives. Now those days you know, when we were mentioned even though they said the natives, we clapped. [claps his hands]. Such a great man you know, he actually saved civilisation for us as well. But on this day there was a door which he used when entering the hall, this time and for the first time a black man was the first to enter and Dr Wellington followed him. This man was wearing a leopard-skin blanket and carrying two assegais and he had gear also made of an animal skin. Then he started his praises and he mentioned all the various population groups, their characteristics and so on, and at the end he said, "now come you House of Xhosa because you're more important than all the other tribes."

Now as he was warming up one of his assegai hit the stage wire which was a wire and it hit it. Now that was a confirmation, he said that this is a clash between African culture and foreign culture. Today is just a clash but the times are coming when the African culture will dominate, will win and dominate.

Now Dr Wellington was there, we have never heard a black man speak like this that a white culture is going to be crushed and there were other whites who were our

teachers, were for some time, and we wanted to dig a hole and what you call, get into the hole and close ourselves because we didn't feel happy about the black man talking like this in the presence of Dr Wellington. But, what he said about the Xhosas was very inspiring and when he went out, we said, "we didn't know that we are so important, we the Xhosas are above everybody else."

But that was short-lived because when I came to Johannesburg - firstly, I went to Fort Hare, and from Fort Hare I came to Johannesburg, I found a totally different picture there. Men, firstly like Walter Sisulu, he had an office and we waited in the front office and there was an African lady typing, it was my first time to see an African typing so fast because in the old days if you went to the Magistrate Court in Umtata you found men who used two fingers, you know. This here you know, she was as if she was playing the piano and so on, and this was remarkable to me. Then we were called in and I saw this man, Mr Sisulu, and the friend of mine, a relative who was accompanying me introduced Sisulu but he spoke such good English when we went out I said, "What has he passed?" And this fellow said, "Passed? I don't think he has passed Standard 5." I said, "That's

impossible. This chap must have a degree because that's what we were taught at Fort Hare." If you get your degree you will automatically become a leader. But here I had to unlearn all that because I met a number of people, Africans, from all population groups who spoke English better than I did and this changed my perception.

Then I was articled, I went to a firm, Sisulu took me to a firm of lawyers to article me and the way he spoke to these whites, again he says, "this man is going to be articulated here." And "alright" they said, "we will." Now Gaur Radebe was a clerk in this firm, so a young white lady came and said, "Nelson, come here." And she took me to the General Office. "We have no colour bar in this firm, when the tea-boy brings tea then all of us have to come and fetch our tea but we've bought two new cups for you and Gaur Radebe, you must use these two cups."

Well, I knew what that meant but I was concerned with being articulated, so then she said ominously, "Tell Gaur Radebe this." So I went back to our office and I told Gaur Radebe. Gaur Radebe was cool and he says, "Alright, I'll show you." I got worried. So this young lady when the tea came, came and said, "Nelson the tea has arrived." Then I got up of course because she is a

white lady, I immediately got up, Gaur Radebe says, "no, no, just stay here." Then I was worried. He took some time, he got up then he started taking one of the old cups and put the sugar, stirred and started drinking, he said, "there are rights in the General Office." He started drinking, I didn't want to fight with this young lady at the same time I feared Gaur Radebe, and for a long time I drank tea in the kitchen. And now Gaur Radebe was one of the most important influences I had and he would talk to my bosses, it was one of the bigger firms in Johannesburg and he would say, "Do you chaps know that this is a member of royalty? You are sending him with pieces of papers to deliver them all over the town. One day he will collect all of you and dump you into the sea." Now I wanted to run away, talking like that you know to my bosses. Then he was a member of the Communist Party and he then said, "Look Nelson, these people are not particularly wholesome here, I'm going to leave. I don't know what I'm going to do." I admired Gaur Radebe for taking that step and for his bravery.

But then I met, when I went to University, I met two Indian students, Ismail Meer and JN Singh, both from Durban. We became very good friends, they wanted me at first to be a member of the Communist Party and we

kept on arguing about this, but they were very good. They were the people who taught me how to eat Samoosas and Breyani and that type of thing. But they were very intelligent chaps and we fought together at University against racism and I admired them a great deal and, then we had people like Walter Sisulu, like Moses Kotane, the Secretary-General of the Communist Party. J B Marks, a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party but also a member of the National Executive of the ANC, he and Kotane. Then people like Dr Yusuf Dadoo, like Braam Fischer, and these are people who influenced me. These are organisations and individuals that influenced my political attitude.

MH: Tata, if you lived your life over again, what if any, would you change, particularly with regard to ANC activity?

NM: Well, that's a futile question because I'll never live again - [laughs] - and it's no use wasting time on something that will never happen. But the last portion of your question, what would I change in the ANC is quite relevant. I don't think at the present moment there's anything I would want to change in the ANC because the ANC is doing very well. We have to be guided by what the masses of the people think of ANC.

In 1994 we won the vote by 62%. Then in 1999 we won by 66%. And from the point of view of local government, in December 1999 we won by 72%. So we have been increasing our support ever since 1994 and in the meeting of the National Executive Committee of the ANC, I said:

"In the history of South Africa, no President, no Prime Minister or President can boast of having done better than Thabo Mbeki. Both nationally and internationally."

I made that statement and because I believe that he is one of the outstanding Presidents the ANC has produced.

So there is nothing I would change because the alliance is still there, notwithstanding the tensions that have arisen, all of them ANC, Communist Party and COSATU say:

"In spite of our differences this alliance is going to continue."

So there's nothing I would change.

ZR: Tata, how did your thinking of the US and Russia evolve during the '70's and the '80's given the news shutdown on the Island and the '70's and the access of certain publications in the '80's?

NM: The duty of political prisoners when they get into jail is to make sure from the first day that they are in contact with the outside. Outside jail in the country, and abroad, and we did that. And we were aware of what was going on. The excellent work the African National Congress was embarking upon and the support that we got from the Soviet Union and other Socialist Countries and of course from Europe, from Asia and Anti-apartheid organisations were very strong. This encouraged us a great deal. We knew that we relied on countries like the Netherlands, the Scandinavian countries, the Soviet Union, the Eastern Block.

The Netherlands and Scandinavian countries gave us resources like money where we established schools and also where our people were able to buy food and so on. They were very good but the Soviet Union and the Eastern Block went further, they actually in addition

gave us resources and were working through the South African Communist Party. They gave us arms which enabled us to fight against the South African Government as Umkhonto weSizwe.

And of course Asia was very good, the Middle East they were supporting us.

So we knew that these were our friends, we also knew that United States was supporting our enemy, the Apartheid Regime, we knew that. And, but we were very - what you call - inspired by the support of the Soviet Union and the Socialist Countries which gave us arms in addition to resources like money and so on.

MH: Madiba, what do you envision South Africa will be like in 2025? What would you like it to be?

NM: Well I don't know because a young lady, a princess of KwaZulu, the daughter of [name-unclear] came here. She had a little problem, it was really no problem - this thing has slipped - [Pause] - it was really no problem but because she's young

she's in early twenties, they were problems to her. So we sorted them out, when we did so she got up and embraced me and she said, "I wish you live for another ten years."

That was about three years ago so according to her calculation I'm now left with seven years, so I won't be there in 2025, but I'm confident that the ANC has the best Constitution in the world and it has got a Bill of Rights which is not just a piece of paper, it's a living document. Because we took precautions that it should be a document which guarantees the safety of all South Africans, irrespective of their ethnic background and we

have created structures to make sure that that Bill of Rights is a living document.

Anybody whose rights are threatened can come to the Organisation, use that Bill of Rights to ensure that his or her rights are protected. We have the Public Protector; we have the Human Rights Commission; we had the Truth and Reconciliation Commission; we have the Constitutional Court. All these are there to protect our rights in the Bill of Rights.

And we have therefore, a Constitution which is likely to remain for a very, very long time even beyond 2025.

That's why we are confident that South Africa will remain a miracle, will be continued to be hailed by the world as a miracle because we were able to confound the predictions of the prophets of doom who had said that there will never be a transformation in this country without bloodshed. We were able to reconcile our

feelings which hated the Apartheid Regime, and our brains which said, "if you don't speak to these people, this country will go up in smoke." We did that and were able to have a transformation peaceful. It was the ANC, the PAC and AZAPO that destroyed white supremacy. But the transformation, we could not do it alone we had to get the support of the whites and that is why we

admire De Klerk because he was an Afrikaner leader who came forward and said:

"The time for apartheid has gone. I am going to unban political organisations, I'm going to allow our exiles and our political prisoners to come out of jail."

So that is why we are hailed as a miracle nation, we will continue to be hailed as such.

MH: Can we ask you one more question? As a young cadre -
[interruption]

NM: As long as you know that you are a young man, you're not going to ask me about my relations with my wife.

MH: [laughs] Baba, as young cadres, South Africans, you have taught us so much yet we believe there are things that we do not know about you. What do you think the media is not telling us about you that is very important to you?

NM: What do I think is?

MH: What do you think the media is not telling us about you, that is very important?

NM: Oh I see. No, no I think it would be unfair for me to say that the media is keeping back things about me because the South African media has been very exemplary. They have been vigorous, they have criticised the actions of

individuals including the President, they criticised me when I was President and insofar as I'm concerned, they highlighted our achievements and so I respect the South African media. I don't think they're hiding anything about my achievements.

MH: Well, thank you very much. This is the end of our interview with Tata Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela. Thank you.

NM: Good. Thank you. Now you are generous.

NR: Madiba they were very intimidated, I mean I don't think they slept last night. [general laughter]

NM: Oh no, they're very generous.

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