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"VOICES OF RESISTANCE"

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INTERVIEWER: M NTSODI

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PLACE: DURBAN WESTVILLE

MN: Welcome back. Professor Sunny, welcome back you were just telling us about the vegetable garden.

SV: Oh ya there is a little story behind the vegetable garden and how we came about establishing one on the Island. Because up until then, there wasn't a single shrub in the section that we were held in. And prior to that what was happening on the Island was that the only people that were offered any kind of religious services were the mainstream Christian church. You know the Dutch Reformed, the Anglican, the Methodist, and those kind of people. When we got there, we thought, no we are going to be smart about this and demand that we want to have a Hindu priest coming to attend to our religious needs. The idea being, look I'm being quite frank here about it, we hoped that if they send us a Indian priest we will be able to talk to him in the vernacular and extract news of what's happening

outside. So eventually they agreed that we can have a Hindu priest coming to us, but the problem was to identify a Hindu priest. So we got hold of Trees, and that was my wife, to look around to find if there are any Hindu priests who are able to come over and talk to us. And she found one guy, I think he was 'Divine Life' or 'Ramakrishna', I don't know. I know his name was Mr Govender. A fairly elderly man, and he agreed to come over once a month and through him we also got him to organise Deepavali parcels for us. You know, sweetmeats, and nuts, and all that kind of, you know, all the traditional dishes they have for Deepavali, only for the people that attend his services. So suddenly we found that - there were only five Indians in single cells - suddenly we had about thirty people who were now following Hinduism very, very - including Nelson, and many others Toivo [Ya Toivo - SWAPO] and Eddie Daniels and everybody else. And we ended up collecting something like thirty parcels per year, there was Vino and Trees and everybody out here used to buy the stuff, pack it up into packets, and ship it down to Cape Town, and this old man would bring it to us. It was great. You know, we shared it equally although we didn't have enough each, a packet for each person, but we counted the nuts and sev and everything shared very, very equally. And during that time I think the first visit that he [Mr Govender, the priest] made to Robben Island - he was a

Tamilian you see, and the only Tamilian in our section at that time was Billy Nair, so we told Billy, "Billy you better talk to this guy in Tamil. You know, whilst you are praying try and ask him what is going on and then we will know." So it went on, went on so Billy was saying something and after the service was over we said Billy, we all gathered around Billy "what did he say, what did he say?" Billy was bullshitting us [laughs] because Billy had forgotten his Tamil and didn't approach this old man for news, you see. Until one day after many visits I think we got him, and I knew that people coming to the Island usually carry a newspaper, and they came on a Sunday. So quietly I think I took him away to my cell to show him something photographs of the children, and other guys came and carried his bag. He used to come with a briefcase, they walked into the diningroom opened his bag stole the newspaper. So we did some terrible things. But that old man didn't complain. He kept quiet about it and it was during one of these visits that we told him "Look Mr Govender, please bring us some dried chillies. So he asked us why we wanted it. I said, "We want to plant chillies", so he brought us three dried chillies. And with that we started a chillie garden. We got permission to do it from the Officer Commanding. By then, there was almost, we could get almost anything within reason, you know what I mean, and they would give it to us. Because we began

developing a relationship and proving to them that this would be useful for your administration because you are going to have a more contented prison population and they bought that idea. And slowly also, I think, the type of prison officials we got after the interdict were different. They were sending people who were more intelligent people, who were thinking type of prison official. Not like the old guys we used to call the Bongolos and all of that, who were just stupid, raw idiots. But this type of people were more amenable to discussion, you know, within reason they would agree to a lot of things. I know, at one stage, they even allowed me to buy a clock. Because I was studying I was doing B.Com Accounting and some of my exercises I had, I had to do in a certain time you know, ten minutes or twenty minutes and I said "look how do I do this? I don't have a clock" and clocks were banned on Robben Island. And I was able to get a clock and then subsequently Kader got one, and then Billy got one we had three clocks, eventually ,in the cells so that was great. And I think slowly we got a garden going, and the problem is that Robben Island is just plain white sea sand. When we went out to the lime quarry, we had to pick up the droppings, dry droppings of ostriches. Pick that up, try and collect compost from under the trees nearby, carry it in our pockets and slowly we changed the texture of that sea sand and grew chillies. And I had never seen chillies grow

and flourish the way they did. It was Chiba, Kader and I were the people that were in charge of the garden. Eventually, Nelson joined us when we started planting tomatoes and other vegetables in the garden. And we had so much chillies, you know, those apple boxes - we used to pick about three apple boxes full per week. And we used to supply it to the general section and everywhere. Tomatoes we used to, eventually planted and we planted them and experimented doing this long stem tomatoes. We had time on our hands, and we had all this ostrich muck that we collected and they really flourished and it was great. I remember once looking at these tomatoes, you know, we would inspect every leaf and all of that. We found a small, what do you call it, chameleon. We saw this chameleon, used to visit it every morning, and then suddenly after a month or so we found about thirty little chameleons that size. And the guys used to actually catch flies, kill flies and come and feed the chameleons. It was wonderful you know, how close we got to nature and that kind of thing. Ya, I think that being in the single cells really brought people very, very much together. It was across political lines you know. We all had the same uniforms, same clothes if I showed it to you, you wouldn't know the one from the other. But when people hung their clothes on the line to dry, we were able to say whose pants those were, whose shirts they were. There were no

identification just by the form that the pants took we were able to say this belongs to Nelson, that belongs to Neville or whatever. Similarly with our eating dishes they were all aluminium Dixie's, right, no markings on them, but when we were serving our food, we were able to say this belongs to A B or C. I don't know how, but it happened. But that's how close one gets when you are in prison together for a long time. And I recall you know, I think everybody after they came out of a visit everybody were down, it depressed you. And people knew that you were depressed, and they would rally around you, talk to you and hang around you for a while and lift your spirits without being invited, without being ordered, you know, it wasn't even contrived. So those are some of the beautiful things I remember of about the comrades on the Island, that's across political lines.

MN: How many visits were you allowed?

SV: Sorry?

MN: How many visits were you allowed?

SV: You were allowed what, I think one visit a month - I can't remember. But my wife was here in Durban she wasn't even able to - not able to ya, afford to visit me twice a year, ya. It was very expensive and to travel all the way, it was -you had to fly down. And I think Trees did well she used set up some kind of a prison kind of committee in Durban, used to call it Monies for the Prisoners, especially

the Transkeins. Collect food for them; collect clothes for the families; and raise money for the families to visit the people on the Island. And only then we began to understand that the people that we were trying to teach to read and write on stone, by the time we left the prison they were able to send out letters to their families. And I could imagine the joy and things that the families must have had seeing a letter written by people who were totally illiterate, in terms of English, at least. And they were writing letters and they were writing letters now in Xhosa, not in English they were taught, eventually, in the general section to write in Xhosa. And old men 70/80-year- old men, now writing letters for the first time, clear letters apparently. I didn't see them but they were great, that was super.

MN: The contact wasn't allowed was it? I mean during the visit - the contact?

SV: No contact visit during visiting times. You know, the glass pigeonhole and there was a telephone on your side, telephone on the visitor's side, there were two telephones on the visitor's side. One, the what do you call the guy? the prison warder, right and if you were talking something out of turn, you were only allowed to speak in English or Zulu or Xhosa. In my case it would have been English. We couldn't speak any of the vernacular languages. If he heard you say anything about what's happening in prison he would just cut you off and cancel the visit. I think once

Trees took out a diary and was writing down something, they grabbed the diary and threatened to lock her up, and all of that. But those were small dramas, but otherwise you got used to the idea of talking to somebody you can see, you know this distance. You know talking through a telephone it was terrible. So I think that and the thing that really depressed you when the visit was over it was only a thirty minute visit, you know, that's it.

MN: Can we go back a bit that is one thing that you once mentioned that the perception that your parents had of African people were more emphasised - I mean they had this negative thing and they were more in when you were betrayed during your trial it was more instilled in them, did that feeling pass through to your I mean your immediate family, that is your wife?

SV: No I don't think so because my wife and my children - I don't think were racist at all. And in any event I think after we were arrested, the security police made sure that a lot of people that were close to us as friends, my relatives didn't come anywhere near me. Even when I was out of prison you know. Before I went to prison I didn't have a close relationship with my family. My brothers and sisters would pop in once in six months or something but it was never a close relationship that was a relative totally no. But after we were arrested, I think the security police, and this is what disappointed me a lot, is that a lot of my

friends, close friends, who were visiting friends, you know, once a week twice a week, go twice a month kind of visitors, stopped coming to visit Trees. And that really made it very lonely, left out. There were a handful of people like Navi and Gaby and the Vino's and [there were] people that really were terribly, terribly afraid to be even associated with anybody that was recognised as a political person. And it became really difficult and I think this is where I need to mention that when I was on the Island I also noticed a perceptible change towards prison authorities towards me. But I couldn't quite work out why. At one stage I was worried whether they were not trying to buy me off or anything like that. But I had to rule it out because they wouldn't take those chances. But later on I think I need to tell you, I'll come up with that thing later. That eventually I leave Robben Island and six weeks before my release date they drive me up to Leeukop Prison, the same place where we started off again, put me into a single cell for six weeks alone, but no harassment. The food was just as bad, and all those conditions were bad. And fortunately it was warmer this time it was April. And so it wasn't freezing waters so I think about four days before date of release, I was driven down by a lieutenant they gave me civvie clothes. And I wasn't handcuffed this time. I sat with this lieutenant somebody, I don't know, drove down from Pretoria down to Durban. On the way I think,

we stopped somewhere in Greytown or somewhere and they saw me in civilians and walking with this guy and a lot of warders there, black warders, in the admin department they saw me they saluted me they thought I was a big prison official. They eventually brought me coffee; milk coffee; cup and saucer; sugar separate; oh, oh I drank it. Then they realised that no man this guy is just a bloody prisoner, a bandiet. [laughs] But their attitude changed so quickly, they gave me filthy looks after that. But anyway I had my coffee and you know it was the first time I had decent coffee, with milk and sugar and all of that. And we drove down to Durban Central, put into a cell. It was great. Now you can shower even in cold water in Durban. And I could see outside from my prison cell I could see BP Centre that big sign, and after three days I was released. I was sent clothes from home, dressed like a civilian. But before I stepped out of prison, the security police came in and served me with five years banning and house arrest orders. So that when I arrived home I wasn't able to receive all the people that were waiting to receive me, because that would have been an infringement of the banning orders. So the only people that I was able to sit and have lunch with that day was my mum and dad and Trees and my children. And there were lots of people outside, standing. I should have brought pictures of that, but I've got it - you can have them I'll show it to you, newspaper photographs, of all of that.

MN: What do think was the idea was the reason behind the idea of not releasing you direct but having to spend some time in Leeukop? Even though it was the procedure but what do you think was the reason?

SV: I don't know. Look, ninety percent of the things that the prison administration did didn't make sense. I think it was some of this Aucamp's sense of, you know, to punish you because it was painful to be separated from your comrades that you spent many years with. And then put into six weeks of isolation, and then the anxiety of coming back home you needed to have company around it. I would have felt so much nicer if they took me straight from Cape Town and drove me back to Durban or something like that. It was a very painful six weeks because you had nothing to do, you are sitting in your cell, and no smokes, nothing there you see. And I didn't even have this book with me because all my personal belongings they put in a bag and stored it away. And so I had nothing to do, just twiddle my toes the whole day. It was a long, long six weeks. There was nobody to talk with, nothing.

MN: Did the family expect you, did they now you were being released?

SV: Yes. One thing you are certain of when you are convicted as a political prisoner is that if it is ten years, you knew on x date you are coming out, to the date, there is no remission, nothing. They will release you on that date,

finished. So there was that certainty about being a prisoner, unlike being in detention, you see that's the difference. Okay, I think I need to talk to you about my feelings and things when I landed home. You know, I left home when my daughter was what? about eight years old or something like that and we were very close. And I come back home, I think, the biggest shock, surprise, I don't know what you want to call it was meeting my son for the first time - he was nine years old. And he just didn't understand this thing about father and all of that you know. He didn't grow up with a father in the house it was just Trees and the three kids. And of course, there was an old lady that worked for us at that time, Mrs Govender, who acted as a grandmother to them. She was a great source of support for the children. So I had a long lunch with my mother and dad and then they had to leave and then I saw my lounge full of greeting cards you know, strung across. Oh, the other big surprise for me was that when I was brought back I was brought back to a different home. When I was arrested, I was arrested in my home in Impala Drive, which I had sold during, just about the time that I was arrested. And this new home Trees built after I was in prison, so I come to this new home; new family; because everybody is new except Trees; even the children were different. They were grownup and all of that. So there was lots of excitement, lots of newness to me coming out. And

then I noticed these greeting cards. I kept quiet about it, then late in the evening talking with Trees, with a lot of envy and jealousy I asked her who were these cards from, because you know we were not greeting card people. You know if we received four greeting cards for Christmas or Deepavali it was great. And we were not in the habit of sending out these things, so where did all these friends come from? Then Trees began relating to me about Amnesty International. She says all these cards are from overseas, they are from the different chapters of Amnesty International who sent greeting welcome cards and all of that because they knew the date of my release and all of that. Look, I heard about Amnesty International in a very vague sense before I went to prison, and I think I knew that Amnesty International was a proscribed organisation and that's it. That is as much as I knew about Amnesty International. But then Trees tells me that soon after my arrest and conviction, Amnesty International adopted me as a prisoner of conscience. And they sent out thousands of letters to the Officer Commanding demanding my release, enquiring about my welfare and my health, and all of that, and these are the people she told me that sent these greeting cards. But more importantly for her, and for me I think that they were a source of immense support during my absence. Because as I said earlier, that most of my friends and everybody, not out of choice, but because of

the harassment from the security police kept away from Trees and she was terribly, terribly isolated. And Amnesty International gave her that reason to survive and exist and she did a lot of things through them. They sent I think clothing and all kinds of things, so ya, so Amnesty International is great in that sense. But I think I am grateful to them for having saved my family for me whilst I was away, that's how I look at it. So that when I eventually got to the [United] States I was able to repay a bit of that, but it's a long way from where we are.

MN: So now, when you got out, you got this five-year ban and how was - [interruption]

SV: And house arrest.

MN: and house arrest. How did you go through? Did you serve it all or was it lifted?

SV: I served my full five years. I served five years house arrest, banning order before I went to prison. So in other words with me, I spent 22-years in virtual imprisonment.

MN: You were released in 1978?

SV: 1979.

MN: 1979. So you served - less five years, so when the eighties started you were idle in the house, or were you?

SV: When? After I came back from prison? Well look the problem with the house arrest was that, you know, I think same system before I went into prison, I wasn't able to receive visitors. But I think the biggest and the most

onerous thing, was that you couldn't leave your magisterial district, and I wasn't allowed to even within the magisterial district to enter into any group area other than white, that was cruel. So what the hell am I going to do in a white group area? You know, I couldn't go to Indian Group areas; African; Coloured; even if it was within the magisterial district. And I couldn't leave Mobeni Heights and Mobeni Heights is a small township about 300 homes, 2 shops in there, that's about all. And if you wanted employment you had to get out of Mobeni Heights, which I couldn't. Until eventually I was able to travel into central Durban but not allowed to cross into the Indian group area, but Trees office's used to be in Albert Street. I was able to walk up to the centre line but not cross over. It was ridiculous, but that went on for a while until Navi Pillay applied to have me employed as a clerk in her office, and they granted me that. So I was allowed to go and work in their offices in Albert Street, but nowhere else. I walked right across Albert Street into the white area and back home and they were very strict they wouldn't relent on the hours because I had to be

indoors by six. In those days I used to use a bus. And the bus used to take an interminable time. You know if you finished office at five o'clock, there was a problem getting home by six because it was peak period. They wouldn't budge off that. They said, "No, you stick by your rules."

And it became painful for me - the second five years, because here I have two young kids that before my return home, Trees, over the weekend, was able to take them to the beach to the park and all of these places. But when I came back it meant that Trees won't leave me alone at home and which meant that they, too, sort of became house arrested with me. And I think one of the kids especially, the second child, Ravel, began to develop some kind of a resentment towards me. For two reasons I think (a) he was an outdoor guy - he wanted to go visiting; he wanted to go play ball in the street; and ride a bicycle; and do all kinds of things which I couldn't join them in, you see. And more importantly, I think when I was away he shared the bedroom with Trees, shared the bed with Trees, so when I returned home, he had to give up his Mummy's side, you see. But I began to sense some kind of reaction from him because of that, and it took him many years for him to get over that. And yet Nolan, on the other hand, the youngest one that I met for the first time, I remember the next morning after I got up from bed I was in the bathroom, shaving, he runs up to his mother and says "mummy, mummy, that man is cutting his face." I could have cried. When you know, when your child refers to you as "that man" because they didn't understand the concept idea of father. But as the months and years began to grow, Nolan would not leave me, he was sticking to me like a tick,

always hanging over me. You know sometimes I used to push him away, "Please Nolan, leave me alone, man." But up until now Nolan used to stick with me like a tick. A funny reaction from different people and that was it. So I was with Navi Pillay and Company for some years, and I did a lot of corporate work, I did a lot of work for Mobil, at that time. You know, doing lease agreements for them for their garages and all of that. And then there was one petrol station in Isipingo Beach that they were trying to flog for some years, and nobody was prepared to take it. And so Mobil asked me, "See if you can find a buyer for this thing, man." So one day I broke banning orders, drove into Isipingo Beach - it was an Indian group area. I looked at this thing. It was a rundown kind of gas station, but right across the gas station were playing fields and within a hundred yards, was the beach. And above the gas station there was a three-bedroom flat, so I gave it a lot of thought and I said, “Okay let me think about this and see whether I can’t take over this gas station.” Talked to Trees, she agreed but we needed to put up capital, you know,to buy the gas and all of that. So we sold our home for a song in Mobeni Heights and invested that money in the gas station. It was a very poor gas station in the sense that I think they were selling something like 60 000 litres a month, which is nothing. But the prospects of me having the kids playing in the field across me, I can see them, they can ride

bicycles there, so it was ideal. So we took over the gas station. The first year it was great; people knew me; it was the time of tricameral parliament. And it was just about time when my banning orders expired in 1984 and I became politically active again, every car that came in there said "don't vote" stuck on. And business improved three, fourfold, we were selling something like 250 000 litres a month now because the people in Isipingo beach really gave me support, and the workers in Prospecton, because they knew me now, you see. And it was great, and I would have loved being a petrol attendant for the rest of my life, you know, you are in the forecourt; talking to people; interacting with them. I felt it was great. But when the tricameral thing came in, I became active, posters all over the gas station, Mobil stepped in, they didn't like this. They gave me one month's notice to get out. It was only then that I understood that the General Manager of Mobil in Durban was part of the South African Army. They used to go into Namibia on shooting expeditions every month. Not shooting animals, shooting SWAPO people. And those are the type of people that I had to deal with. Gave me one month to get out. By then I had invested so much of my money in there, I couldn't recover any of it. Really I think I invested about 60 000. 60 000 in 1982 was a lot of rands. But I think I only recovered about 6/R7 000, when I had to close it up. That's all I could recover because all the

fixtures, fittings, and you know all of that, I just lost out. And I did up my apartment on top you know, fully carpeted and built in cupboards, and all of that. Anyway, I was down in the dumps both spiritually and economically, and I still remember my kids asking, "you know dad we don't have a home to live in, anymore." I could have killed myself that day. But anyway I rented out another house in Isipingo Hills. We moved in there and again, providentially, I was offered a fellowship at Columbia University. And they came down and spoke to me and, oh no, I think, before I sold the garage when I closed up the garage and I was unbanned, I then visited the United States. Navi was there and John Samuels was there, they invited me over. I stayed there for about four of five months and met a lot of people at Columbia University and all kinds of people and it was the height of the anti-South African campaign, you know, disinvestment campaign. So activity was very, very high at that time. I think it was largely as a result that's when we met Tom Karris and all of these people. And when I got home they didn't want me to come back home they said, "you must stay here" they will get me this and I said: "I don't know. I left my family behind there. I have a duty to them." So I came back said goodbye to America and got back I think within two weeks, no three weeks, somebody from the States came down and told me about this scholarship at Columbia University. I

said scholarship, you know it's ages since I've studied formally at a university, although I had just completed my B.Com on Robben Island and all of that. Anyway I said: "I agree providing you get schola-ships for my two children." By then my daughter was married so I had a responsibility to my two sons. they were in standard seven and eight, at that stage. They said "no problem." I was eventually informed that my children were granted scholarships to Riverdale Country School. That's the school where the Kennedys and all of these people attended, one of these posh bourgeois private schools in New York, you see. So I leave South Africa with just two suitcases, and I couldn't even afford to buy a regular suitcase, I got cardboard boxes. And I bought leather straps, and we had six of them, two for each. To the States you are allowed two bags, you see. So we dumped all our belongings in there, and off we went to the United States. And, but they were great, the people met us took us to their private home first and the next day we would go to Columbia University did all the preliminary affairs, and then they told me to go and look at some apartments that they offered me. So we chose one right opposite the University, across the street and that was great. Kids of course, had to travel by subway to Riverdale, which was just pretty far. But Columbia University was great for me. It was an experience - I became very actively involved on speaking campaigns

mainly for Amnesty International platforms. Because I did it because I felt I owed it to them, but I did it on South African politics, what's going on. I think when in the eighties we knew more of what's going on in South Africa than the South Africans themselves. Because the media here was terribly gagged, but the American press and the media were able to show what's going on, you know, the eighties were pretty volatile here, you see. And it helped us and it was tremendous especially from the younger generation the kind of support you got from them was really, really great. And it made me survive, you know, felt useful being out there in the States and all of that. Then towards this, I did a Masters programme there at Columbia University and finished that, and at the end of that period, Amnesty International invited me to co-produce a rock concert it was called Human Rights Now, which went around the world, to 28 cities. All the big names in rock I must tell you this crazy thing about rock music. Rock music and I were never friends, to me it was a bunch of noise. So once I was on the West Coast, I think it was San Francisco, Amnesty International called me - they fly me out from some backtown in San Francisco and say I'm required to attend a concert. Now to me a concert is like a philharmonic you know, orchestral kind of music, you know that was my idea of a concert. Then they drive me to this place and it is called Cow Palace I said "Cow Palace,

what an odd name." But as I walk in I see candles, everybody's holding candles. You know this is a symbol of Amnesty International you see. And I look around carefully, I see most of them were young people, you know normally the concerts that I attended here in City Hall and things there, all doddering old people, you know. And then I'm taken backstage I'm introduced to people called Sting, Ten Thousand Maniacs, Peter Paul and Mary, and all kinds, Peter Gabriel. Anyway, all kinds of people - didn't make sense to me, but they were very nice and all of that. And the concert started and my insides began to shake because it's so loud. It was rock music, but they were great musicians - Peter Gabriel and Sting and all of them. Only then, I began to take in, to listen the actual words that they began to sing. So I come back to New York and casually tell my sons "Hey, you know what, I went to a rock concert." They look at me said: "You went to a rock concert?" Because I am the one that's always turning the volume down at home. After a while they asked me "Who played there?" I remember that's the word they used, I said: "I don't know, somebody Bono and Sting and ya, Peter Gabriel and Ten Thousand Maniacs" and I rattled off some of the names. Both these guys, with the mouths open, eyes popped out, they looked at me. They couldn't believe that I had met these people, you see. They said: "Did you meet them?" I said "Ya I met them backstage." "Didn't you

take autographs?" I said: "No, I don't know who these creatures are." "Did you enjoy it?" I said "no I did not." So then they had, this was called Conspiracy of Hope Concerts that they were running in the United States, Amnesty International. Well the next one was going to be held at the Giants Stadium, in New Jersey. This was a 75 000-seater stadium. Of course, my whole family now is invited and we are sitting in the dignitaries box and we sit with all the artists. We met everybody you know, Mohammed Ali, and all the film stars, Sigourney Weaver and you name them we met them. And my kids were, they couldn't believe their eyes that they were going to go and get autographs and sitting at the same table having lunch and dinner and all of that. So in that sense I think, the kids really thought that this was payback time and Daddy did it for them, only that concert. But then when they finished their high school, they had choices in colleges to attend because they were offered a lot of scholarships, everything free, I didn't have to pay a penny because they were good soccerites, you see. And everybody wanted them because of their soccer. And these private colleges have got a lot of money, and they gave them, and each one of them, chose. One chose to go to Oberlon College, Ravel. Nolan left it to me to choose a college for him. So I chose a college in Minnesota called McAlister, and he was very happy with it, so happy that he didn't come back home. He

married a person from Minnesota and he is happily married and has a child there now. So he was very happy. But when these Human Rights Concerts started it went round the world. After it went round the continent it came to the United States. The first one was in Philadelphia, again the Giants Stadium in Philadelphia, another 80 000 seats. So I called the children to come and attend this.

MN: Can we pause Sir?

END OF TAPE

ON RESUMPTION B SIDE

MN: We are back.

SV: Well, these concerts started I think the first concert was in London. I was able to travel by then, all over the world, I was travelling. I remember, I used to travel to London twice a week. Because I was one of the producers. The head office of Amnesty International was in London. I used to travel to London, all over the world I travelled, overnight kind of things, before the actual concerts. But when the concerts started it started off in London. We had two Boeing 747's, one for the equipment and the gaffers and all of those, and the other for the artists and all of us. Some of the people that took part in that concert were I know, Sting, who else? Peter Gabriel, Bruce Springsteen what's that woman?

MN: Bono?

SV: Bono, a whole lot of them I forget them by now. But anyway there were whole wonderful bunch of people, Youssen D'or from Senegal.

MN: Harry Belefonté?

SV: Harry Belefonté came to a concert in New Jersey. He was invited too, there was, Miriam Makebe was there, but not on the tour, no these were rock, mainly rock people. But the only rock person, non-rock person who was Joan Baez, she is a country singer. And we spent many hours together because I think Joan Baez and I could relate a lot because of our age, I thin,k and not liking loud music, ya, so that was great. That concert was really super for us. We ended up in Los Angeles in the end. There were three concerts in the United States, two in Canada, so we did all that. But I must say that the concert experience wasn't a great experience because somehow (a) it's too noisy, too loud. And there is this huge ego thing that runs with these artists, not themselves personally but the security people around them, you know, they treat these people like Gods or Goddesses or whatever. And you couldn't get ten metres close to them except that people like us were okay we had our credentials and we could do it. But the way they treated other people. We had a huge problem in Delhi, where at one stage, Bruce Springsteen's security people were running the security system, right. In Delhi they became so rude to the public in the concert itself we had to

fire the whole lot of them. And said "no, in future we do security not Bruce Springsteen's security camp." They were really rude, you know. There was an occasion in London once, when the Chairperson of Amnesty International, coming to sit at the table, at the head table, Bruce Springsteen is there I am sitting there and others. And she came in a few minutes later and she walked up to the table - she knows it's her table and all that. The guy pushed her out, man, this was Bruce Springsteens security - they were big burly guys. And they had that ego; I think it was, Bruce is a simple guy, you know, but his men are real terrible guys they were like CIA type, you know. So that's it, I think. I finished my masters, did this and then the problem arose. Oh, eventually my wife and my daughter came up there, and she studied at the Fashion Institute of Technology and they were all hoping that I'm going to stay over. And the Americans were also putting a lot of pressure on me not to go back to South Africa and, but personal experience in America drove me back to South Africa apart from my political reasons to come back. You know, I knew a lot of people in America, on a personal level, and I recall once, one of the people that took care of us when we went there, were the Newetts. And I remember I was at Yale, for one summer, doing research and this girl called me from London to say Sunny, my grandma, ya my grandmother died. So I said, oh shit! you know I had to

come from Yale, drive down to New York. I phoned Trees, I told Trees this old lady died, you know, we got - we are Indians now, you see, and these were Jews, you know. Our customs says that when you hear somebody died you attend that funeral. You don't get invited to a funeral, for the African it is the same thing, alright. So I drive down six hours I think; from Yale to New York; pick up Trees; rush to this funeral. It was at a Chapel, we go in there, there are only the five members of the family there. The father, his wife, with whom he had separated, and his three children. All grownup, I mean adults. Nobody else. They were sitting there chatting away as if spending an afternoon together as a family anyway. So I said "Oh God, we made a mistake we are not supposed to be here." But anyway we sat through the service. It took fifteen minutes, everyone shook hands with one another and each of them buzzed off on there own. I'm driving back home, I tell Trees, "You know what, this is not acceptable, let's go and see this old man. You know his mother was just cremated let's go and drive up and see him." It was about an hour's drive. And we drove up there, and Americans don't leave doors open. They are so security conscious, the way we have become here now. That going to his apartment, the door is open, we walk in there, we see this guy with his hand on his table, head in his hands, and when he saw us he just jumped for joy and hugged us. You know his own children

didn’t turn up there to be with him. I remember telling Trees after we left there that "I don’t want to die in this country." You know. And a few months later I think, an old lady that we used to see in the same street that we lived in, for a while we didn’t see her. So what happened to this old lady? Because they have routines you know. At three o’clock she will be crossing her lawn with a walking stick. We didn’t see this old lady for some time, what happened? Then we learnt that she died in her apartment, rotted there for a week, until the stench alerted the neighbours. You know that convinced me I am not staying in this place, you know. The great thing in South Africa, both with Africans and Indians is that when there is a funeral people rally even if your neighbours are your enemies they come together and console you and there is some kind of solidarity. Not in the States, their culture is totally different. They carry their independence and space to the extreme. And I came back to South African again; with two empty bags; no place to stay; I stay with relatives. And Mala Singh persuaded me to come and teach on a part-time basis, in political science. And I’m still there, on that basis, that’s the end.

MN: What year was it when you came back?

SV: 1990.

MN: 1990.

SV: But I also sensed before 1990 that something is happening in South Africa. Because somewhere in 1986/87, I was doing international human rights. It was a seminar kind of thing run by a guy called Louis Henken, who is the guru in human rights and all of that kind of stuff. So there were about fourteen of us in that seminar group, and we had to choose, you don't write exams, you present a paper and all of that. So you had to go him and tell him right okay I want to write a paper on X Y and Z. Then he tells me in class, "Sunny, you don't have to decide what you are going to do. Come and see me in my office." I go there; he says; very nice you know; very patronisingly nice; and he tells me that he wants me to write a paper on the New Constitution for South Africa. So I said okay, let me think about it. So I went back the next week I go and tell him: "you know Prof, the New Constitution of South Africa mustn't be written outside South Africa, it must be written in South Africa, by the South Africans." I think for the first time he began to see me, of course - ya I think so that's what it did, and he became very cold toward me and he asked me "what do you want to write on?" I said I want to write on the United Nations instruments: the two conventions, and the dynamics of those two conventions. Because he, I think half his book on human rights is on those two conventions, you see. So I wrote a 40-page paper, I think, the first ten pages I went, I

lashed out against him, you see. I attacked him and he reluctantly gave me an A, ya.

MN: So you came back and what which month was it if you remember?

SV: I came back in January.

MN: In January. So you came back in January and in two months time political prisoners were being released, but in two months time Nelson Mandela was released, so what was going on?

SV: Well that confirmed my beliefs because you know by 1990, by the time I had left, I had been hearing these Groote Schuur minutes and all this. Nelson being released from Robben Island and taken to Pollsmoor, and the others eventually joined. And you know this is something that we openly debated on Robben Island when we were there, that how stupid the Afrikaner was, by putting all of us together, so that apart from giving moral sustenance to one another we also developed politically together. That if I was a ruler at that time; I would have put people in different places; isolate them; break down any kind of solidarity; and that's precisely what they did eventually. But they did it for a different reason because they released, took Nelson out of Robben Island, put him in Pollsmoor because they would have access to him and break Nelson down. And then get the others, but at the same time the international politics at the time ,was the collapse of the Soviet Union,

right. And the West were no longer obliged to support PW Botha, at that time. So deals were made outside South Africa for the release of Nelson and everybody else. 1994 did not take place because of what happened in Kempton Park. 1994 was decided by Washington. They decided that this is what is going to happen. The proposals put in 1992/93 at Kempton Park were proposals that both the IMF and Washington put forward. This is the deal: "you are going to have the TRC; you are going to compromise; you are going to throw your Freedom Charter down the toilet. You are going to share power; you know the GNU and all of that came in and of course, the ANC unashamedly accepted. And for that we feel terribly - look I wasn't ANC person but I didn't expect the depth of the sell out. That is my biggest problem.

MN: In the same breath I was going to ask you Prof, what do you think made the National Party relent?

SV: Because the West was no longer going to support them. Because the only people that supported the National Party at that time was the Western powers. They propped up, [then] they pulled the plug, after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

MN: What's your view or what was your view on the CODESA, the talks?

SV: We didn't participate. I think a lot of people who were involved in politics for a long, long time refused to

participate in CODESA because we saw the sell out that was taking place. The deals that were being struck and you know I don't know whether by design or what Kempton Park is a World Trade Centre, isn't it? So there was wheeling and dealing in the Trade Centre. They changed the name quickly to Kempton Park. It was Trade Centre.

MN: What is it specifically that you are against in the CODESA, was it the composition or was it?

SV: No, the whole idea that you are being offered liberation or whatever you want to call it, on totally different terms from what you were struggling for 2/300 years. You know, you wanted land; you wanted redistribution of wealth; you wanted free education; health and whatever, and whatever. These were the major pillars of all the movements. And none of these things were accepted and you embraced the yesterday's oppressors as your fellow brethren you know. That was, I am not saying that we must entertain revenge or anything, but I think they just went so far with the result that yesterday's Communist Party people are today's biggest capitalist. You know, your Cyril Ramaposas'; your Mac Maharaj's; your Terror Lekotas to an extent; the other big mining guy, what's his name.

MN: Sexwale?

SV: Tokyo. All of these people; all of them; have become big. Of course, they do all of this in the name of black

empowerment, you know, which is a lot of rubbish - it is just black elite, which switched ideologies just like that, just for money. And it's very, very sad.

MN: I know you are not in the ANC; but as a distant observer; what do think made them relent or made them give up all what they fought for considering the suffering they've endured?

SV: Two things: one is power. I think they were hungry for power. The other thing was that the guerilla war had no chance of succeeding, especially with the fall of the Soviet Union. So that option really wasn't there, and when this possibility of sharing power came up, they grabbed it with two hands, at whatever cost. They didn't kick and fight over a number of issues, they agreed to all of them virtually.

MN: The general opinion is that they got the political power but they don't have economic power, do you go along?

SV: Oh yes! it's what happened in the rest of Africa you know, they got flag independence, and that's it, no economic. Look, you can see what's happening today even in South Africa with the way they are spending money. The way they are moving. You know, South Africa I think, was the only country in the whole wide world that accepted and implemented structural adjustment programmes without the IMF/World Bank formally asking them to implement the first country. Only because it was IMF/World Bank that

drafted the RDP and GEAR, eventually. South Africa has every component of structural adjustment programme they have implemented. Therefore today, they have cut back on social spending. Social spending is health; housing; roads; schools; education; all of these. You know some of the things that the people want I mean these are the basic things for about 40 million of South African people, this is what they want. You know if you look at the statistics in South Africa, the per capita income and the GDP of the people is lower today than it was in 1972. The gap between the rich and the poor is like living in different continents. There are a handful of black people, the black elite who are way, way ahead, and in fact you know, I was talking to a bunch of people the other day. Even the white corporate world is embarrassed by the lifestyles of their fellow black brethren in the corporate world. The way these people are flaunting. Look, Tony Blair doesn't have his personal aeroplane. Govan Mbeki buys himself for five hundred...[interruption]

MN: Thabo.

SV: Thabo Mbeki. I'm sorry Thabo Mbeki - for 500-odd million. Why? People are starving; they don't have any money to eat; there is famine in South Africa they are not talking about it. You go to the Northern Provinces and all of these people are starving. People at UDW can't afford fees to attend lectures. And you get a Ramashala

who pays herself 1½-million a year as a salary, almost. I mean these are the black elite that are unscrupulous you know. They think that they are entitled because for 300-years they have been deprived of access to luxury and money and all of that. They are grabbing it any which way they can, and they are doing it unashamedly you know. And the white corporate world is embarrassed by this. Although they were the ones who seduced them you know, they, the white corporate world doesn't flaunt its wealth, you know, but these guys flaunt it. So that's where we are.

MN: How do you see, do you see any remedy?

SV: I think the only solution is that the struggle hasn't started yet. We have to start virtually from the beginnings again. I think the only difference now is that possibly we have space, that's the only difference. I feel free that I can get up and go where I want to go. I can say what I am saying here today, but I wasn't able to say this ten, twenty years ago that's the only difference. But you know okay, we've got the right to vote, we've got the right to free speech blah, blah, blah. But we don't have the right to free education; no free medicine; no free housing or anything like that; which is the crux of democracy. If you don't have that, to have the right to vote is meaningless. You can't eat a vote; you can't shelter under a vote, you see. Freedom means the basic conditions of life need to be addressed, and I'm not saying that everybody must live in

beautiful homes, but you know the other day; oh I constantly drive up and down the country these days, and I see these RDP homes. We always derided the Boers for the matchboxes that they built for us in the townships, if you look at those matchboxes they are palaces compared to the RDP homes. These are little things with a small window and that's all. And people have to pay for these. The Boers didn't make them pay, they charged them rent, but this is a shame - the little hovel that they built for the people. You know, you don't have to go far - you go past the Marianhill Toll; if you stop there one day, just stop and look on the right, look at these RDP homes. The window is not bigger that those block photographs, nothing, that's all it has; and a door in the front; and a round toilet in the back somewhere. And I don't think that was what we struggled for. I don't think so.

MN: The voice from the poor, some of the poor people, is that it was better during the apartheid than it is now, and the only difference is that back then they didn't have a voice, they didn't have a platform to voice their concerns on.

SV: You see, there the answer has to be yes and no. You know, in the old days people carried the dompass; and if you don't know what dompass was and the problems; that people went through with the dompass; it's a different experience. Ya, now they don't have that. So the change, it's better now that you don't have that because look, I

grew up during that period when people by the thousand used to be snatched from the streets; thrown into the back of a police van shunted off to prisons. And eventually, into work forces on the farms, and all over like that. It was just slavery in a different name. So in that sense it's great, but in many other ways it's really terrible because today you have got to pay for your education. Right? You have got to pay for your health; transport costs are exorbitant; a whole host of things are different. You can't save; people starve; you look at all - I don't call them informal housing, that's an euphemism for slums. You look at people living under cardboard and plastic, and then you begin to understand why the levels of crime are so high. I mean nobody condones crime. But I think one needs to understand what drives many people to commit - I'm not talking about the big syndicates; the people that hold up banks and the people that hold up SVB; and all of those the white-collar crime and all of that. You know, in fact white-collar crime is greater now than it has ever been before. And people involved in white-collar crime are not black people. Only now, slowly black people are getting in, stupidly, but it's conducted by mainly the white people. And there you are talking about billions not the 2/3 000 that the common law criminals catch you for, steal, you know, mug you, and all that. The only difference I think now is that crime in South Africa has a taken a qualitative

change. I'm probably being very subjective about this because my brother was shot two weeks ago, and after taking his money. But that seems to be the pattern these days, that people are being robbed and then shot and killed - that seems to be a pattern more and more theses days, which didn't exist previously. If it's plain robbery I can relate that to socioeconomic conditions, but the killing of people after they have taken the money is something that I can't explain really.

MN: Can you paint a picture of the South Africa you were struggling for, and how different it is from now because you have just described what it is now. But can you paint a picture of the South Africa you pictured?

SV: Well the South Africa that we struggled for I think is embodied mainly in the Freedom Charter; the Ten Point Programme; the PAC documents; it's everything, but what it is at the moment. It is a country, a freedom where there had to be some kind of an egalitarianism, although a lot of us began to argue whether a socialist society could be built immediately after a revolution. The problem was that revolution - can it happen in South Africa? When would it take place? But I think everybody, across the political spectrum, the minimum they expected to have was some kind of an egalitarian society, no extremes of the conditions and that is what was missing.

MN: Coming back, personally when you were reunited with you daughter did you - [interruption]

SV: Sorry?

MN: I'm saying when you came back after your imprisonment did you ever tell you daughter about the incident where she saved your life in prison, when you were about to commit suicide?

SV: No I don't talk about my torture, all of that. I think the only time she heard about it when she saw these tapes that I made for UDW 300. I didn't even tell Trees. We don't, you know look: in all my years on Robben Island almost everybody were tortured right. There was only one political prisoner, a SWAPO guy who would just drop his pants and show us how he was shot and disfigured, nobody else talked about it. It's not easy, it's not comfortable, we didn't do it, nobody.

MN: Looking back at your life your political life and all, is there anything you can pinpoint and say if you had a chance you could do it again right, that you feel you have done wrong, is there anything at all which you feel you have done wrong?

SV: No. I think whatever I did, even during my student movement days, I think it's difficult to say whether you can do that again, whether it was wrong. But I think given the period, given the time, I think I did absolutely correctly. Similarly, during my time with APDUSA and all

of that. I don't think I would have done anything differently within that context, within that period and all of that. Now you can't transpose times, right, given those times and I think, but I think for me the best thing that I ever did was when I refused to become a state witness. To me, I think that saved me; it wasn't a big debate that I put up with; but the point is that the temptation was there; the offer was made. And I could have easily, you know, through some quirk of my thinking to say that look I'll have my family and forget about prison and come back home. But sometimes, I sigh in relief that I didn't make that decision you know. I don't know what would have happened to me if I became a state witness, you know. Because I am telling you, in those days, and you can ask Vino, that people's attitude towards state witnesses was really one of ostracism. They became totally ostracized. Some people were even eliminated, like these two close comrades of mine, Armstrong and Madoda. They are out; we don't know where they are; what they are doing; they are nowhere near the people that they were associated with previously. These guys were in their thirties - for thirty years of your life you had a relationship with a bunch of people, or more than a bunch of people. And suddenly you become a state witness you: are rejected by your close comrades. But, what about society around you? They also reject you because people had a very strong sense of

integrity and morality in those days. Now it's different but in those days it was very, very strong. Because I know when I came back from prison the security police went around to my neighbourhood and asked them to keep an eye on me; who is coming in; do I go out and all of that. But you know what, each one of them in their own quiet way, would come and tell me "look this is what the cops have come and told me to do", and all of that, you know. You really felt great those days that you had the people behind you, the people supported you, you see. But things have changed since, you know, in the eighties there were lots of sell outs, and you know, with comrades or freedom fighters became torturers you know. The people that killed the Griffiths [couple] were in the political movement, you know. That kind of thing never happened in the, up until the seventies and things like that. Very, very seldom would you have a impimpi, there was a kind of morality. I think I was telling you about you know, when I was teaching at the M.L. Sultan Technical College, I used to live at the Himalaya House. And in the bottom there was this, not Salot gang, Crimson League operators. And these guys were the criminals of the day, but very posh, I mean and all of that, but they supported you and helped you along. So you had a different kind of relationship with people. Because they too, saw their salvation in the

political struggle and wherever they could help, they would help you. But today's crime gangs will kill you off.

MN: Professor can you briefly tell me about your opinions on the TRC, very briefly if you can?

SV: I did not support the TRC - I was asked to come and do it. Tell them what happened and all of that, but I objected to it in principle. That you cannot get truth from your oppressor; and two, I will not reconcile with my oppressor. I am not asking for revenge, but I will not reconcile. So those two things, just truth and reconciliation were part of the deal, so that black people won't kill off the whites in South Africa, that's it. That's the long and crude way of putting it. Because if people were given half the chance they would attack whites on a racial - I'm not saying it would have been right, but that was the mood of the people. Because if you remember during the CODESA talks, there was Boipatong, do you think the people in Boipatong today will say "come on brothers let's embrace one another?" Let's say forget about the children that are lost; and mothers that are lost; and all of that, you think? They are human beings. They won't forget it, so in principle and otherwise, I reject TRC. It's part of the machinations of Washington; and the churches: they used Tutu. You know, the other very significant thing is that when Nelson was released from prison, he stayed with Tutu the first day, not with his [family]. Tutu was never his

political comrade, right? Then he leaves to the Transvaal - it wasn't Gauteng then - he flies in a plane provided for by Anglo-American. And he stayed in the Transvaal, in Johannesburg, with Bobby Godsell and that crowd, not even with Winnie, not even with his people. So what I am saying is that before Nelson was released there was a whole network of people that were working on them and arranged his life and that's how he behaved, subsequently. You know, he didn't even go to his comrades, can you believe that? You normally, when you come out at least you come back to your comrades, you know these are your people that you would want to embrace. And come out; and because Wally was released before him he wouldn't go to Wally; he wouldn't go to Soweto. Goes and stays with his - they were not his friends. But those were the people that got him out of prison and made the deal. These were the dealmakers of South Africa.

MN: Professor, are you bitter?

SV: I am bitter, I am bitter. I don't deny that. I think I'm bitter that so many years of struggle seem to have gone down the drain; and we only hope that we can start it again. But it is going to be such a slow process because I think by the eighties we had reached such a great momentum in the struggle. And if we carried on at that pace we would have had - wouldn't have to trade our souls the way we did in Kempton Park. We wouldn't have had to spawn this

creature GNU, you know, and the people would have been in power, not the whole motley crowd of people.

MN: Professor, in your spare time now, on a lighter note, besides being a Professor and a head of a department, what do you do to relax, what are your hobbies?

SV: I love gardening, rose gardening, so I spend a lot of my time rose gardening.

MN: And music-wise?

SV: No.

MN: You don't listen to music?

SV: I listen to music, but I don't play music, I can't play music.

MN: I mean your favourite music, what kind of music?

SV: I like Indian classical, mainly, and I like country music, western style.

MN: And who is your favourite author or writer?

SV: Something with Shakespeare.

MN: You are not reading anything else, there is nothing?

SV: I mean, if you ask me the greatest, I still think I love Shakespeare. But I still like a lot of things that Arundhati Roy is writing these days, so I read a lot of hers.

MN: If somebody could ask you and say what would you recommend, what do you recommend?

SV: To read?

MN: The authors, yes.

SV: Well, I think I would first need to know what the person's interest is. And you see this is what happens when you become an academic, that you become too precise about what you recommend and all of that.

MN: Can you briefly tell me something that I almost forgot. What is your opinion about this African Unity thing?

SV: African Union?

MN: Yes, African Union.

SV: I think it's just a useless, futile self-serving exercise.

MN: And the NEPAD?

SV: Well NEPAD is just the same, NEPAD is nothing but a structural adjustment programme. NEPAD was not planned, discussed, devised by South Africans or the Africans, it was done in Washington.

MN: And what's your opinion about, or what was your reaction to the Ngema song?

SV: It was sad that Ngema had to come out with that song at this point in time. Look a lot of things Ngema is singing about in that song are true, a lot, not absolutely, not a hundred percent, but a lot of the things are true. A lot of it has to do with perceptions, you know. You can't say all Indians are shopkeepers and all of that. You know oppressors. But at the same time, Ngema needs to understand, and realize, and admit that there are racists amongst the Africans themselves; there are racists amongst Indians; whites; all over. So there isn't - racism is not the

monopoly of any one particular racial group. And my disappointment with the Ngemas is that they have a role to play if they want to contribute to the development and improvement of society, they should do something positive. His song was a negative thing, really, it has negative repercussions, that's the problem with that. I'm not denying that a lot of what he is saying is true because

there is still a whole lot of racism. You talk to students; you talk to ordinary people; there's lots of racism, none of them - and I don't blame a lot of people because the positions they take up is as a result of their own experiences in life, you see. How did they come in contact with other races. You know, for three hundred years we have been separated from one another? You walk on this campus for the past ten-odd years - this is supposed to be an open campus, right, you guys have been here on this campus for five, six years now. Do you see Africans and Indian students arm in arm; walking and sitting together; and talking? You don't. You see now this is a problem that I have with management and all of that. What are they doing to bring people together? You know sometimes you've got to do this: you've got to engineer these things with a purpose in mind. Because although we have had our freedom now almost ten years, people still live in their [townships] : Lamontville, the Kwa Masahus, the Chatsworths and Reservoir Hills, there

is very little interaction amongst people. They go to segregated schools; they come here; still not knowing their fellow brethren; so the function is do something about that.

MN: Professor, I thank you very much for coming, and thank you again.

SV: Thank you. You are welcome.

INTERVIEW ENDS

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